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Gendered Expressions of Grief

An Islamic Continuum[1]

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Abstract

Beliefs and customs surrounding death, funeral rites, and mourning provide a window into a society's most deeply held values. In the monotheistic faith of Islam, eschatology – belief in the Day of Judgment (*Yawm al-din*) and resurrection (*al-qiyama*) – underlies many practices. Public mourning rituals that commemorate the deaths of saints and martyrs are closely linked to the concept of salvation in Islam. The gendered discourse of Islam is particularly relevant to practices surrounding death, burial, mourning, and commemoration of the deaths of martyrs. This study attempts to provide a broad historical context against which to analyze the moral, spiritual, religious, aesthetic, and political factors affecting women's participation in or exclusion from funeral rites and mourning practices, from antiquity to contemporary times.

Introduction

[1] Beliefs and customs surrounding death, funeral rites, and mourning provide a window into a society's most deeply held values. In the ancient, monotheistic faith of Islam, eschatology – belief in the Day of Judgment (*Yawm al-din*) and resurrection (*al-qiyama*) – underlies a rich and textured tapestry of practices woven of Quranic scripture, later narrative traditions about the Prophet Muhammad and his companions (*hadiths*), and the cultural attitudes of early Muslim society that they depict (Smith and Haddad 1975). Throughout history and across the vast diversity of Islamic practices, these religious rituals have been reinforced, reinterpreted and, at times, even abandoned. Yet the underlying precept that

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one's behavior in this world, *al-dunya*, has a direct impact on one's fate in the next world, *al-akhira*, remains a basic tenet of Islamic faith and practice.

[2] Public mourning rituals that commemorate the deaths of saints and martyrs, as will be discussed later in this study, are closely linked to the concept of salvation in Islam (Aghaie). It is believed that one's readiness to fully participate in religious ritual largely determines whether, at death, one is destined for either Paradise or *Gehenna*. Beginning with the Prophet Muhammad's (d. 632) revelations of early Islam, attitudes regarding Muslim women's "deficiency" in intelligence and in their ability to maintain ritual purity (Smith and Haddad 1975; Smith 1980) continue both to shape and to challenge the ways in which contemporary Muslim women participate in and reinterpret religious ritual throughout the world. The gendered discourse of Islam is particularly relevant to practices surrounding death, burial, mourning, and commemoration of the deaths of martyrs (Aghai; Friedl; Hegland 2003). This study will attempt to provide a broad historical context against which to analyze the moral, spiritual, religious, aesthetic, and political factors affecting women's participation in or exclusion from funeral rites and mourning practices, from antiquity to contemporary times.

[3] With a worldwide population of 1.2 billion adherents, the Muslim world comprises a remarkable diversity of cultures and ethnicity (Bagby; CAIR; Kobeisy). The main sectarian designation in Islam is between Sunni and Shia, with Shiites comprising approximately fifteen percent of the world's Muslim population (Aghaie: xiii). Further divisions within sects account for a wide variety of religious practices (Friedl). One is cautioned, therefore, against assuming homogeneity of religious beliefs and customs from one Muslim community to another. With that in mind, this study will compare several Islamic communities, in the Middle East as well as in other parts of the world.

[4] Diversity in practices are evident, for example, in northwest Pakistan, where Shia women perform in elaborate women-only *Moharram* mourning rituals that commemorate the martyred Imam Hussein at Karbala (d. 680) (Hegland 2003). By contrast, in a rural Egyptian village, women's age-old practice of the "Little Tradition," encompassing mourning and funeral rites, are increasingly condemned as men impose fundamentalist Wahhabi Sunnism promulgated in urban Cairo (Brink). This study explores the continuum of tensions – from early Islam to contemporary times – in these gendered expressions of grief (Jonker).

[5] Beginning with an overview of traditional Islamic beliefs regarding death and the afterlife, Section One presents a common foundation for Muslim funeral rites and mourning practices. From this point of departure, the essay provides a brief study of how women are portrayed – concerns related to their "inferior" religiosity and likely punishment in *al-akhira* – in early Islamic traditions (Friedl; Smith and Haddad; Sweeney). This section also offers an historic perspective of women's roles in "Passion of Hussein" mourning ceremonies (Aghaie 2005; Halevi 2004; Hegland 2003). Finally, Section Three delves into several ethnographic, anthropological, and sociological studies conducted within the last forty-five years; these examples underscore the cross cultural diversity of Islam and explore differing expectations of men and women at funerals and at mourning ceremonies. In this context, women are presented as active bearers and interpreters of the Islamic faith (Aghaie; Sakaranahi and Jonker), as spiritual authorities in communal ritual settings (Pemberton), and as, sometimes, grudgingly submissive followers of restrictive, male-imposed dicta (Brink).

Muslim Funeral and Mourning Rites

Islamic Beliefs Regarding Death and the Afterlife

[6] "To study death rites and beliefs about the afterlife is in some sense to study religion at its very core," writes Leor Halevi (2002: 5). For Muslims, views of death (*mawt*), the afterlife (*al-akhira*), and resurrection (*al-qiyama*) are inextricably linked to one of the basic underpinnings of the Islamic faith: the belief that the purpose of the worldly life is to prepare for one's ultimate passage to eternity. Indeed, "There is a very clear and direct connection between this world (*al-dunya*) and the next world (*al-akhira*)" (Smith 1998: 134). The universal acceptance of bodily resurrection and the existence of heaven and hell can be traced to earliest Islam. These concepts are considered as articles of faith in both the Quran, revelations of the Prophet Muhammad beginning in the year 610, and in the *hadiths*, narrative traditions (Chittick).

[7] While burial practices are barely mentioned in the Quran, it is notable that numerous details of Islamic eschatology are substantively addressed here (Campo). William Chittick tells us that, in Arabic, the literal meaning of eschatology (*maad*), or "questions of the next world" is "return." As he explains, "The Quran tells us in many verses that all things come from God and return to him. More particularly, human beings have been created by God for a specific purpose. The degree to which they succeed in fulfilling this purpose shapes their own selves, and their own self-nature then determines the mode in which they return to God after death" (Chittick: 126). Writings by early Muslim scholars reveal exceptionally vibrant depictions of the *barzakh*, a realm described as a "time/place beyond the grave," commonly defined as a "barrier," between earthly existence, and either one's eternal reward in the Garden (*al-janna*) or perdition in *Gehenna*, after the Day of Resurrection (*yawm al-qiyama*) (Chittick; Smith 1998; Smith and Haddad 2002).

[8] Both classical and contemporary scholarship of Islamic eschatology is plentiful, yet it is beyond the scope of this study to explore fully this expansive body of thought. Rather, my purpose in addressing an Islamic understanding of the afterlife, albeit briefly, is to connect these seminal Islamic concepts to contemporary funerary and mourning rites, to link these complex ideas to a continuum of practices from early Islam, and to highlight incidences of their convergence when, based upon Islamic ideals of gender, some religious rituals have been contested. With this in mind, it is necessary to outline some of the basic precepts of Islamic eschatology. It is also important, as Hanna Kassis purports, to compare these views to the age that preceded Islam in the Arabian Peninsula, a time known as *al-jahiliya*, the age of ignorance. Funerary traditions played a special role in Muslim societies after Muhammad's death in 632. These rituals served to either reinforce practices that closely resembled an ideal ritual or to criticize those that did not (Halevi 2002). It was essential for early Islamic leaders to draw clear distinctions between the *umma*, the new Muslim community of faith, and the inhabitants of *al-jahiliya.*

[9] As Kassis explains, "the Islamic view on life, death, and the afterlife" diverged sharply from its polytheistic predecessors. In *al-jahiliya*, the cosmos comprised two distinct spheres: an inanimate physical world, impervious to aging, and an animate world where all was perishable. "Breath and blood were seen as vital elements that activated the animate world.

Death came as a result of the cessation of one or the other of these vital elements. Cessation of breath was the means of a natural death; death as a result of the shedding of blood was unnatural and required retribution, without which the dead soul wandered restlessly in the desert until avenged." Death, in this pre-Islamic conception, "marked the passage from one form of existence to another" (49). Yet in the Islamic view of the cosmos, Chittick proposes, the universe is "everything other than God." The two "basic worlds" are understood now as contrasts: visible or invisible, spiritual or corporeal, dark or light, with the soul, *nafs,*[2] occupying an intermediary or "imaginal" realm of mixed light and darkness, revealed only upon death. Proceeding with this perspective, death is no longer seen as a result of time and age; rather, it is replaced with the Muslim belief that God alone defines the life span of every living thing. In contrast to pre-Islamic conceptions, rather than being the end of life, death is merely a passageway from the transient and perishable "lower life" to a divinely determined eternal life. Islam now proclaimed, "God alone is sovereign of both realms" (Kassis: 51). Further, the apparent permanence of the physical world was deemed a fallacy, revealing the affirmation that only God is permanent (Chitttick; Kassis).

[10] As stated above, according to Islam, one's death is predetermined. This is a key factor in regulating Muslim funeral and mourning rites. As will be discussed in the following sections, Islamic tradition admonishes adherents – particularly women – for protesting "God's will" by overt and excessive lamentation over the deceased (Goldziher; Kassis; Lane; Smith 1980, 1998; Yasein-Esmael and Rubin). In the Islamic view, death is not a punishment, but a natural termination of life to be accepted unconditionally (Kassis). Death in this context is seen as "a natural part and process of life" (Gillanshah: 139). Death, however, is also understood as a rather complex process that includes an indeterminate time spent in the tomb. The nearly universal belief among Muslims of the "awareness" after death by the deceased is frequently cited by contemporary scholars as dictating many aspects of Islamic burial, funeral, and mourning rites (Smith and Haddad 2002). A number of Islamic traditions express the understanding that the dead – at least for some portion of time – maintain a "high degree of consciousness of the activities and emotions of those still on earth" (Smith and Haddad 2002: 51). For instance, the soul is said to hover near his former home for one month and near the grave for a year (Smith 1980; Smith and Haddad 2002: 50). Of particular significance is the sensitivity of the dead to preparations for burial. Smith and Haddad illustrate with an often quoted *hadith*: "The dead person knows who washes him and who wraps him [in his winding clothes], and who carries him, and who lowers him in his grave" (2002: 31). Simultaneously, traditional preparations for burial are widely viewed as the most advantageous means of readying the body for the Day of Resurrection (Gillanshah).

An Uncertain Chronology of Death, Judgment, and Resurrection

[11] As Peters contends, because the Quran provides no specifics about what happens between death and Judgment, "The events following an individual Muslim's death unfold in a somewhat confused fashion in the literature on the subject" (256-57). There is, however, consensus among the *hadiths* that the period just before and after death is "a painful and

[2] Peters notes that the terms "spirit" (*ruh*) and "soul" (*nafs*) are often used interchangeably in Islamic traditions (257).

troubled time" for the deceased. For the believer, the soul slips easily from the body. Then, accompanied by angels through the seven heavens, the soul is greeted by the angel Gabriel at the throne of God (Halevi 2002: 348). By some accounts, the souls of sinners are turned back, yet the souls of both believer and sinner must be returned to the body in the grave to undergo what is called the "Punishment of the Tomb" (Peters: 257).

[12] Once again, while the Quran is silent on this matter, the narrative traditions clearly describe two angels, Munkar and Nakir, who order the newly dead to "sit up" and answer questions of Islamic faith (Halevi 2004: 348; Kassis; Peters: 257). Kassis notes that the dirt in the grave is placed loosely to physically accommodate the corpse for this process of questioning. If indeed the deceased answers "correctly and unwaveringly, he or she is left alone until the Resurrection of the Dead and the Day of Judgment." If this is not the case, however, it is believed that the deceased is forced to suffer *adhab al-qabr*, "torment in the tomb" (54-55).

[13] There are no recognizable temporal markers in this realm between death and resurrection. Instead, the *barzakh*, what Halevi describes as "an eschatological barrier between those living on earth and those 'sleeping' beyond the horizon with the hereafter" (2002: 357), is a conception left to one's own metaphysical musings. As Peters explains, "'the End' (*al-akhira*) is understood in two related and sometimes confusing senses . . ." The first applies to the very human experience of each individual. In Peters' words, this is "a starkly personal and individual concern." Yet the "End Time" also reaches "beyond the end of history" and "stretches eternity, not the mere prolongation of time, but an entirely new dimension of being . . . a time of no beginning and end" (254). In this sense, the entire cosmos enters a new phase of existence, when the Angel Serapheil sounds his trumpet, causing "everyone in heaven and earth" to lose consciousness, then follows with a second blast that will awaken believer and sinner alike, each to face his or her punishment or reward (Chittick 1992). For each, the common step toward resurrection is earthly death.

Preparing the Muslim Body for the Next World

[14] In the absence of a Quranic guide to Muslim burial rites, scholars believe that, upon the death of Muhammad, a great deal of confusion ensued. Many questions remain as to the specifics of the rituals performed and the identities – particularly the gender – of those who performed them. Halevi proposes that early sectarian politics attributed to this confusion and, perhaps even falsification, within the story of how the Prophet's body was prepared for his journey to the next world (2002: 121). In a *hadith* reported by Ibn Ishaq (ca. 705-767), Muhammad's earliest biographer, and attributed to the Prophet's wife Aisha, the young widow reveals a divergence of opinion among the "company of men" charged with ritually washing (*ghusl*) the progenitor of Islam: "They said, 'By God! We do not know whether to strip (*anujarridu*) the Messenger of his garments (*thiyab*), just as we strip our dead, or should we wash him with his clothes on.'" In the *hadith*, Aisha goes on to describe how God intervenes with instructions to wash Muhammad's body with his garments on. The story continues: "So they rose toward the Messenger, and washed him with his long shirt (*qamis*) on, pouring water over the long shirt, rubbing him (*yadlukunahu*) and the long shirt without [applying] their hands [directly]" (Ibn Ishaq, II.662,, cited in Halevi 2002: 125).

[15] The Prophet's living example is often quoted in a *hadith* instructing a group of women in ritually washing his daughter when she died: "Wash her three times, or five, or more than this [if you deem it appropriate] with water and lotus; and at the end place camphor, or a small amount of camphor. When you have finished notify me" (Malik, KJ: 592, cited in Halevi 2002: 72). Halevi's analysis of such early reportage, and the eventual forging of what were believed to be a set of ideal rituals, focuses on *hadiths* promulgated by eighth- and ninth-century Islamic pietists; these jurisprudents advocated strict adherence to Muhammad's traditions and denounced pre-Islamic customs. In Halevi's view, this period is marked by "some of the most significant changes" in both public (such as funeral processions) and private (such as washing the corpse) rituals. These changes "took place in the process of Islamicizing death during the second century of the Islamic era" (2002: 6). As will be discussed in the forthcoming sections, Halevi argues more specifically that funerary laws in early Islam were fixated on changing the character of gender relations in the cities of Arabia, Mesopotamia, and the Eastern Mediterranean world (2002: 4).

[16] Before addressing this contention, however, I believe it is important to note that, although there is much variation in practice among present-day Muslim societies, the ritual of *ghusl*, as described above, remains one of the most important components of the funerary process (Smith 1998). Surveying a cross-section of contemporary views on this topic, one may reasonably imagine a ritual such as the following:

[17] Upon death, the body is placed supine, on a hard surface, and facing Mecca (Ross). The legs and arms are straightened, the eyes closed, and the jaw bound up with cloth. The clothes are removed and the body is covered with a sheet. All is to be done with great care, as it is widely believed the deceased is still sentient at this time (Jonker; Smith 1998). The body is washed an odd number of times (perhaps three, five, or seven), and the water for ablution might be mixed with perfume, herbs, rose water, lotus, or camphor. The corpse's nose, ears, and neck are cleaned, twice repeating the washing of the right forearm and hand, and following the same procedure for the left one. The feet always come last (Jonker). After the final washing, the body is dried and cotton plugs are placed in the body orifices (Smith 1998). Next the body is carefully wrapped in a shroud (*kafan*). The *kafan* has particular significance and may be prepared while alive and carried as a reminder that death may come at any moment (Sakr). As will be discussed in greater detail below, a menstruating woman is prohibited from washing or coming into contact with the deceased, as she is deemed ritually unclean (Granqvist: 63; Peters: 218). Further, only a "pure" or "praying" woman – a woman beyond menopause – is permitted to prepare and handle the *kafan* of the dead (Granqvist: 64).

[18] Beyond the sacred purpose of "dispatch[ing] the dead from this world (*al-dunya*) in the most perfect state of tidiness (*nazata*) and gracefulness (*nadara*), the Hanabalite book of Islamic law (*sharia*) describes washing of the dead as an act of pious devotion, earning the washer (*mughassil*) merit points (*quirat*) toward a better afterlife when his or her own death arrives (Halevi 2002: 97, 105). This concept of reward in the afterlife in exchange for pious actions will be important in discussing women's mourning rituals, and the ways in which they are excluded, in the following sections. In her ethnographic studies in the 1950s and 1960s of Muslim villagers in Jordan, Hilma Granqvist underscores a "dualism in religious tradition and practice." For instance, as Granqvist writes, in Islam bewailing the dead is both

"required and prohibited" (160), yet, echoing some of the underlying political tensions throughout Islamic history, she notes that showing sorrow to the enemy is discouraged – equating stoicism with the conscious act of deception (217).

[19] As Halevi posits, many of the oral traditions of eighth- and ninth-century Islam sought to dissuade women from participating in public funerary and mourning rituals that were once considered advantageous – for both the deceased and the mourner (2002: 301, 392). "Visitation of the dead in the cemetery," Smith reminds us, "has been seen as a virtue in Islam, advocated and encouraged by the Prophet" (1980: 230). Yet it is just this type of women's public gathering that Islamic pietists sought to repress, and one that women consistently defied (Halevi 2002: 412). "Pietists associated the public rites of women with temptation and blameworthy innovation," Halevi asserts (2002: 410). Why should this be so? In the following section, we will survey some of the more ominous views regarding the nature of Muslim women, their state of ritual impurity, their proclivity for sin, and their greater likelihood of consignment to the Fire.

Women and Islam

Into the Garden or the Fire: Gendered Views of Punishment and Pleasure

[20] In their 1975 article, Smith and Haddad note a *New York Times* article that declares, "According to Orthodox Islam, women do not have souls." This claim, as the authors posit, has been consistently refuted by "Muslim apologists" and "responsible Orientalists" alike; they conclude that this pronouncement "is specifically un-Quranic and has never been an accepted part of Muslim dogma" (1975: 39). Yet in Smith and Haddad's analysis, Quranic verses and *hadiths* clearly lay the basis for the characterization of women as inferior in both religiosity and intelligence to their male counterparts in the Muslim *umma*. This "deficiency" originates, according to Islamic traditions, with the female biological process of menstruation. During menstruation and after childbirth, women are deemed ritually unclean and thus prohibited from performing religious duties (Peters: 218). Indeed, women's biological "defect" is considered so polluting as to warrant their exclusion from ritually washing the dead or attending funerals. Menstruating women, the traditions warn, could defile a corpse indefinitely (Halevi 2002: 104). According to one account, the Prophet explained women's inferior nature in this way:

> O you woman, I have not seen anyone more deficient in intelligence and religion [*din*] than you . . . What is this deficiency? As for the deficiency of your religion, it is your menstruation which befalls you and remains with you as long as God wills, so that you stay without prayer or fasting – that is a deficiency in your religion. As for what I said about the deficiency in your intelligence, it is because your witness is but half a witness (Ibn Hanbal, II.373, cited in Smith and Haddad 1975: 45).

[21] In Smith and Haddad's exegesis of similar traditions, this dual deficiency is linked to the additional theme of a woman's submission to her spouse; several *hadiths* explain that a woman may only fast or pray with the permission of her husband. In this sense, according to Smith and Haddad, early Islamic tradition seemingly places a wife's fate in the afterlife within the hands of her spouse. From among a then-fledgling body of feminist works on these

intersecting themes, the authors note A. Perron's *Femmes arabes a vant et dupuis l' islamisme* (Paris, 1858), as a study that "underscores the function of social and personal control played by traditional legends in keeping the Muslim wife in a position of complete subservience to her husband" (1975: 46).

[22] In accordance with Perron, Halevi describes the oral traditions – particularly those admonishing women from engaging in rituals such as wailing – as "prescriptive and idealized," a discourse reflective of the "male elite" that contains "an overwhelming number of misogynistic sayings" (2002: 13). Held in tension in early Islam are the religious expectations placed upon the Muslim *umma* – both male and female – and the proposed inherent inability of women to live up to ritual standards imposed by the pietists. Yet in the *hadiths* related to women's wailing at funeral processions, Halevi broadens the scope to look beyond a solely gender-driven impetus; he argues that "this ritual was offensive to the pietists because they were interested in imposing a ritual order which would inculcate the value of submission before God's judgment" (2002: 19), certainly a gender-neutral tenet of Islam.

[23] However, Halevi also notes the pietists' unyielding focus on *women's* "uncivilized" response to death (2002: 219). Pietists could go so far as to refuse to enter a home to ritually wash the dead if wailing women were present (2004). Completely absent from Islamic law is any mention of prohibitions on male behavior regarding mourning (2002: 268). Concurrently, the concept of "submission" in early Islam seems to acquire a double meaning, as Smith and Haddad contend; from a composite of traditions one may draw the conclusion that just as Muslim men are urged to submit wholly and willingly to God as a means of ensuring a felicitous afterlife, Muslim women are urged to submit wholly and willingly to their husbands (in addition to God), requisite to hopes of a similar outcome (Smith and Haddad 1975).

[24] We turn now to the question of how women's religious and intellectual shortcomings, as viewed by early Islamic jurisprudents, are purported to bring about dire consequences in *al-akhira*. As Erika Friedl proposes, there is much to be gleaned from surveying the specificity of punishments awaiting women in the Fire. While there are numerous traditions in which women are depicted in *Gehennna*, very few describe women in *al-janna*. Drawing upon Smith and Haddad's exegesis of this theme, Friedl notes the inverse relationship to the many specific and detailed accounts of men enjoying the rewards of Paradise, with only vague mention of perdition in the Fire. Of particular note are the numerous and fantastical descriptions of men divinely united with the dark-eyed *hur*, "chaste maidens," who share none of the biological deficiencies of earthly Muslim women, *mu minati* (Smith and Haddad 1975). In general, afterlife expectations for men and women are starkly different. In the following frequently quoted *hadith*, an explanation for the preponderance of women in the Fire is attributed to the Prophet:

> I saw the fire and I have not to this day seen a more terrible sight. Most of the inhabitants are women. They (those to whom the Prophet was talking) said, O Messenger of God, Why? He said, because of their ingratitude [*kufr*]. They said, Are they not grateful to God? He said, No, but they are ungrateful to the companion [*al-ashir*, meaning husband] and ungrateful for the charity

> [*al-ishan*] (shown by their husbands to them). Even if you men continue to do good things for them and a woman sees one thing (bad) from you, she will say, I never saw anything at all good from you (Ahmas ibn Hanbal, I.359, cited in Smith and Haddad 1975: 44).

[25] Friedl proposes that, collectively, the disproportionate number of negative images of women in the Fire reflects the prevailing moral code of early Islam. ". . . Women are bad wives, evil forces, antagonists of the hero, or just ridiculous figures" (130) In religious traditions, folktales, and legends, women are presented as weak in a physical, intellectual and moral sense. For example, Friedl retells one *hadith* – a particularly graphic cautionary tale – of a Muslim woman who nursed another woman's baby without her husband's consent. In this case her punishment is quite specific: the woman is hung on a hook by her breast. Similarly, a gossiping woman has her tongue pierced with a hot iron and a woman who eavesdrops has her ear cut into tiny pieces.

[26] Just as we have seen how biological factors can have a negative impact on women's fate in the afterworld, there are also many versions of a story "linking motherhood with final reward." Smith and Haddad note the irony of the following tradition attributed to the Prophet: "The woman who has just given birth . . . her child shall drag her by the navel-cord into the garden" (Al-Tayalisi, *Musnad* [1904], no. 578, cited in Smith and Haddad 1975: 43). While the role of motherhood seemingly transcends death and assures women a rarely attained place in Paradise, the traditions are far less clear when it comes to women's conjugal relations. Numerous traditions elaborate on men enjoying the carnal pleasures of as many lovely *hur* as they please; women, however, may have, at the most, one (earthly) husband in the afterworld, with no mention of a male counterpart to the *hur* (Smith and Haddad 1975).

[27] On a related theme, it is useful to look a bit more closely at juridical response to marital status at death. Noting the shift in Islamic law from Medina to the garrison cities of Mesopotamia, Halevi proposes that eighth- and ninth-century pietists sought to create a sexual boundary between husband and wife at death (2002: 67, 108-14). With the pietists' stance against a spouse's right to ritually wash the corpse of his beloved – a previously uncontested practice – death now brought an abrupt end to marriage. In the midst of extended regional debate on this topic, one jurisprudent writes, "Upon dying, a woman leaves the jurisdiction of the living (*faraqat hukm al-hayah*) and becomes as if she had never been a wife (*lam takun zawjatan gattu*)" (2002: 109). As Smith and Haddad acknowledge, "many of the inferences drawn from the material of this period would be difficult for modern Muslims to accept . . ." and, in their view, range ". . . far from the Quranic perceptions of women or the contemporary attempts to assure the equality of all Muslims regardless of sex." They conclude nonetheless, "the traditions have been enormously influential in molding opinions and understandings of many centuries of Muslims" (Smith and Haddad 1975: 50).

[28] In the following sections, we will see how moral, spiritual, religious, aesthetic, and political factors have affected women's participation in or exclusion from funeral rites and mourning practices, from early Islam to current societies. Notably, we will examine the Shiite paradigm of martyrdom (Peters: 238, 267; Selim) and the emergence of women in a major, if not central, role in ceremonies to commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hussein (d. 680)

(Aghaie; Hegland). We will see how sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shiite Muslims continue to influence funeral rites and mourning practices throughout the Islamic world and, in particular, how they continue to transform gendered expressions of grief.

The Battle of Karbala, Proto-Shiites, and Women's Mourning Rituals

[29] Early Islam, according to Halevi, did not affect women's lives in the same way everywhere. Indeed, the religion, in the aftermath of Muhammad's death and contested succession, had become "ideologically differentiated" (2004: 39). Halevi proposes that, in part, these differences rapidly incited Islamic pietists to impose a division of the sexes during religious ceremonies such as funerals. Far reaching in their scope, the juridical rulings of Sunnis tended to advance the most severe form of patriarchy, while Shiites favored a more permissive system. In the socialization process of early Islam, Halevi writes, "a deep, new anxiety about women congregating and mingling with men . . . targets not merely the ritual of wailing, but the very presence of women at funerals" (2004: 38). With the forging of orthodox standards in what Halevi calls "the new Islamic order," traditional acts of mourning such as "crying out loudly, throwing dust on one's head, and tearing one's hair appeared abhorrent and were proscribed" (2004: 13). Moral justification for these prohibitions underlies many traditions that describe how wailing women bring torment to the deceased and invite evil into the home (Halevi 2004: 13, 17; Smith 1980, 1998).

[30] Abu Hanafa (d. 767) and Ibn Hanbal (d. 855), founders of two of the main schools of Islamic jurisprudence, promulgated the concept of *sabr*, accepting death with patience and resignation, as an Islamic ideal. These Sunni jurisprudents were, in Halevi's estimation, "Uniquely interested in relating traditions portraying zealous actions against women wishing to join in funerals" (2004: 24) This collection of traditions includes descriptions of such drastic measures as beating wailing women and locking them indoors during funeral processions. It is not without merit to consider a political impetus to this campaign against wailing. In response to the ominous rumblings of proto-Shiites (those sympathetic to the family of Ali), following the Martyrdom of Hussein at Karbala in 680, pietists had begun to view cemeteries as "places of sedition and civil disorder." In the Mesopotamian city of Kufa, for instance, tribal cemeteries functioned not only as burial grounds, but as staging areas of revolt against the state. Rebels were now closely associated with wailing women, who often spurred acts of tribal revenge (Halevi 2004: 24-26). Aside from the political implications, this activity was seen as a horrifying remnant of *al-jahiliya* (Halevi 2002, 2004).

[31] In viewing women's roles in funeral rites and mourning customs throughout several modern Muslim societies, it is remarkably relevant to present an overview of the genesis of the sectarian split between Sunni and Shiite Muslims in early Islam. Indeed, we will see in the concluding section of this study, how sectarian differences have created diverse and sometimes contested practices throughout the world's Islamic communities. The origin of the Sunni-Shiite schism lies "in the crisis of succession that occurred upon the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632" (Aghaie: 1). Though it would take several centuries for this split to fully develop, the fledgling Muslim *umma* faced an immediate struggle in deciding who would succeed the Prophet and in what capacity. A system of government known as the caliphate emerged from this crisis. The ruling caliph "commanded both temporal and religious authority but did not possess any of the supernatural or metaphysical qualities of

the Prophet, such as infallibility, supernatural knowledge and ability, or the ability to receive revelation" (Aghaie: 1). While some Muslims supported the ruling caliphate (to be chosen by election) others believed that Ali Ibn-e Abi Taleb, the Prophet's son-in law and cousin, should be heir to the caliphate (Aghaie: 2; Selim). Later, they believed that Ali's descendants should be his successors, beginning with his two sons, Hassan (d.669) and Hussein (d.680). This group of Muslims, the proto-Shiites discussed above, believed that the Prophet had, on several occasions before his death, named Ali as his successor.

[32] All Muslims believe that the Quran is the revealed word of God, yet the proto-Shiites diverged in their contention that *imams* possess the "hidden meaning and personification of the revealed word" (Flaskerund: 65). These Muslims called for an *imamate*, as opposed to a caliphate, to succeed the Prophet and lead the *umma*. As Aghaie writes, "One of the most consistent and significant trends throughout the early centuries of Islamic history was that Shiite *imams*, who were descendents of the Prophet and who had varying degrees of popular support among the masses, were rivals of the Sunni caliphs, who actually ruled the empire" (3). For Shiites, Hussein occupies a uniquely revered place among *imams*. According to Flaskerud, "his martyrdom is regarded as the greatest suffering and redemptive act in history" (Flaskerud: 87).

[33] As will be discussed below, the paradigm of martyrdom becomes a central and unifying cultural force that is fostered among Shiites (Peters: 238). The intricate connection between martyrdom and mourning is of particular relevance in our discussion of Muslim women. We will see how women of diverse cultural and geographic regions have, in some cases, co-opted public mourning rituals once only accessible to men (Hegland 2003). Yet for all Shiites, the annual rituals (performed throughout the months of *Moharram* and *Safar*) to commemorate the martyrdom of Hussein and his followers, is of vast significance. It is believed that participation in these rituals "will be an aid to salvation on the Day of Judgment, as well as being a constant source for seeking help and protection in life" (Flaskerud: 87).

[34] The Battle of Karbala, fought in 680 during the reign of the second Umayyid caliph Yazid, is considered a pivotal moment in Islamic history. As Aghaie contends, "For Shiites the event [of the Karbala stand] is the axis around which all history revolves" (9). Here, on the Iranian plateau, Hussein and seventy-two of his supporters met their deaths at the hands of Yazid's troops. Numerous scholars have written many different accounts of this battle, and the story has been told and retold many times. According to Aghaie, no single authoritative version has emerged over the centuries to supplant all others (3). What follows is my paraphrase of Aghaie's retelling of the most commonly accepted Karbala account: The story begins with the discontent of Muslims under the rule of Yazid (r. 680-683). This caliph is portrayed as "politically oppressive and morally corrupt." After receiving several letters from Yazid's subjects in southern Iraq, Hussein agrees to travel there to lead an uprising. With some of his closest relatives, Hussein sets forth from Hejaz. Although their caravan is surrounded and vastly outnumbered by Yazid's forces, Hussein refuses to take an oath of allegiance to the Sunni caliph. After a ten-day stand-off, the battle at Karbala erupts. According to this account, Hussein and all of his male supporters and some of the women and children are brutally murdered. The survivors, including Hussein's son Ali (d. 712-713), who is too weakened to fight, are taken captive. With the heads of the martyrs carried aloft

on spears, the captives are paraded in chains through the public market places of the cities on the way to Yazid's court in Damascus (3-5).

[35] Hussein's sister Zaynab plays a significant role in publicly condemning these atrocities and in lamenting the deaths of Hussein and his followers. She composed elegies that remain popular throughout the centuries and constructed the Karbala narrative that would be retold and performed throughout the world. The poetry of lament, wailing, and flagellation would be legitimated in this public forum, initiated, in part, by women (Hegland 1997, 1998, 2003). It is here that the *Moharram* mourning rituals began and, from the preceding account, it is clear that women were involved in a quite significant sense, in both the birth and proliferation of these public ceremonies (Aghaie: 5). As will be discussed below, the political use of Karbala symbols, and the extent to which Shiite identity is strengthened through mourning ceremonies, is closely linked to the ways in which women take part in or are banned from these, and other, mourning rituals (Aghaie; Hegland 2003).

[36] While it is interesting to note the vast diversity in *Moharram* mourning practices among the world's Shiite population, Aghaie reminds us, as well, that some Sunnis – especially those oriented more toward popular culture and Sufism – also commemorated Hussein's martyrdom in similar observances (8). Addressing a broader context of religious ritual, even as Shiites are perceived as more sympathetic to wailing women, we will see in the following examples the immeasurable heterogeneity of Islamic views toward Muslim women – both Shiite and Sunni – and women's varying roles in funeral rites and mourning rituals. Dawn Selim's study of three Islamic societies (in Bali, Egypt, and Iran), is emblematic of the regional and ethnic diversity in Islam that "reveals class structure of great complexity and dichotomies between townsmen and countrymen, between nomads and settled people" (77). In Aghaie's words, "Practices may vary on the basis of personal preferences, religious interpretations, popular culture practices, ideals or norms of gender interaction/segregation, regional customs, education levels, or socioeconomic background" (15).

Wailing Women and Islamic Funerals

[37] In many early Islamic traditions, the Prophet Muhammad strictly forbids wailing, condemning these heartrending cries as an uncivilized, pagan ritual. The prophet was said to be particularly critical of women who tore their clothes, recited funeral dirges, and incited blood revenge and civil unrest. Yet in Ignac Goldziher's anthropological study of early Islam he writes, "We see how pagan customs continued to live quietly and unconsciously within the framework of Islam and have clad themselves in the form of Muslim religiousness and piety" (241). Lane meticulously describes mid-nineteenth-century Egyptian Muslims participating in a wide range of death, funeral, and mourning rites. Of note is the wide gap between the prescribed jurisprudence of this period (primarily Hanafi) and the varying degree of practice among the strata of Egyptian Muslim society. Lane writes, "It is astonishing to see how some of the precepts of the Prophet are everyday violated by all classes of modern Muslims; the [Arabian] Wahhabees alone excepted" (516). Indeed, Lane's study underscores the significance of gender and socioeconomic class in influencing ritual practices. Lane describes female peasants of Upper Egypt performing mourning dances and lamentations lasting for three days or more. These women cover their faces and bosoms in mud, dancing wildly with drawn swords and palm sticks. In contrast, Lane tells of women

attending the funeral of a devout sheikh (*welee*); in this case there is no common wailing (*welwelch*) but rather the more respectful ululations of *zaghareet*, performed by female professionals who expertly deliver the "shrill and quavering cries of joy" in a celebration of the sheikh's passage to *al-akhira*.

[38] In contemporary times, Selim notes a continuation of an intense Egyptian response to death, marked by "heart rending grief." In accord with Lane's depictions, Selim observes that gender and socio-economic strata significantly differentiate the emotional response of mourners. "For example," writes Selim, "among the poor, crying and frenzied behavior is intense. They cry as if they are pouring out their hearts: the women yell and scream, beating their breasts and at times are so overcome with emotion that they fall into a faint. These expressions of grief continue for days" (79). Selim reiterates that expressions of grief differ widely between men and women, in both their attitudes and actions: "Men are expected to exhibit more self-control by being less emotional, more rational and more religious by reciting the Quran. The women being more fearful of death lament emotionally by shrieking and wailing" (79). In Selim's observations, women are forbidden from attending funerals or reciting the Quran. They remain sequestered in the house of the deceased, while the men accompany the corpse for burial.

[39] Elements of this paradigm are contested by a 22-year-old informant living in Cairo (whom I designate as "N").[3] In N's experience, during the three-day mourning period (*al Azza*) that takes place at the mosque and/or the home of the deceased, both men and women: "family, friends, colleagues, and neighbors gather to listen and even sometimes read the Quran." N explains, however, that men and women must separate into two groups throughout the funeral and mourning rituals. Women wash the female dead and men wash the male dead in preparation for burial. However, unlike in Selim's account, "Women go to the grave and bury the dead." N clearly states that women are not forbidden to participate in the majority of funeral and mourning rituals. "The only thing that women cannot do in the funeral rituals is perform the funeral prayer (*Salat E Ganaza*) . . . Other than this prayer, women carry on all rituals." N explains that in her urban milieu, women express their grief by crying, dressing in black, and recounting the good deeds of the deceased. "However," she exhorts, "what is totally and completely forbidden is wailing aloud. It is as if they are protesting God's will. That is why it is forbidden." Yet in N's view, women are given "complete freedom" in expressing their grief. Underscoring distinctions in gender roles, N notes that while men "stand beside women and console them until they get over it . . . as we are Eastern people, men don't cry. They keep their grief and sadness deep inside them, and if it happens that they cry – as we are all human – they cry privately and sometimes not in front of their wives. But men can express their grief in any way rather than crying."

[40] Judy Brink argues that the spread of Wahhabi fundamentalism throughout the 1990s, from Cairo into rural Egyptian villages, created a stark divergence in religious experiences between urban and rural women. As women were increasingly encouraged by brothers and husbands to become *muhaggabat* (veiling as a symbol of their family's religious convictions),

[3] N is a 23-year-old, college-educated Muslim woman who lives with her parents and works as a teaching assistant at an International school in Cairo. N corresponded via e-mail with the author in November, 2006.

in Brink's view, for many illiterate women in rural Egypt – rather than encouraging their participation in religious rituals – fundamentalism prevented the *muhaggabat* from gaining religious knowledge. In Brink's analysis, these rural women, unlike their urban counterparts who hold Quranic study groups and gain support from other educated women,[4] are excluded from the formal, public rituals of Islam.

[41] Noting the practice of the "Little Traditions" by rural women, Brink describes how educated fundamentalist men actively condemn and in some cases "wholly forbid" women from carrying out these rituals. One example from what Brink fears will be "lost traditions" is the practice among small parties of women who travel to the cemetery each Thursday. Here they visit the graves, weep, pay for the reading of the Quran, and leave food at the graves of their loved ones. While the men disapprove of this ritual as "un-Islamic" because it shows an unwillingness to accept death, Brink claims that these women gain a great deal emotionally from this experience.

[42] In Friedl's anthropological study of tribal women in a remote village in Southwest Iran (between 1965 and 1976), her subjects "act independently" by embracing a set of parallel traditions, similar to those of the women mentioned above. Here Muslim women use religion "or magic" to alleviate hardships. They utilize special prayers, plants, and minerals to heal the sick. Mostly performed as private rituals, women also make vows and go on pilgrimages to the shrine-tombs of saints. This, according to Friedl, is one of the few religious rituals in which "a woman feels equal to a man" (128). This study underscores the claims of both Aghaie and Selim of vast disparities among Muslim women's ritual experiences. The villagers of Friedl's study have no access to the women-only *Moharram* ceremonies in which Iranian townswomen participate. "Tribal women are considered immoral in religiously conservative circles, which condemn the social setup that allows women such freedom," writes Friedl (125). Indeed, Friedl's fieldwork reveals the near exclusion of tribal women from Islamic instruction and ritual. While their female co-religionists in other parts of the world – and even in their own country – participate in ceremonies to commemorate Imam Hussein, "women watch, hidden on rooftops behind their veils" (127). In Friedl's observations, "the ceremonial side of Islam is largely closed to village women" (127), primarily because they are convinced of their ritual impurity, a concept reinforced through the exclusively male religious leadership. Friedl notes a strong undertone among these women of resentment and resignation. One of Friedl's informants puts it this way: "When we are young, we cannot help being unclean all the time from menstruation, childbirth, and the babies who soil us. When we are old, it is easier to keep [ritually] clean; but the older a woman gets, the worse her character becomes. So what can we do?" (131).

[43] In Peshawar, Pakistan Shiite Muslim women have undertaken a subtle form of resistance to this self-perception. In Hegland's 1991 ethnographic study, she found women's participation in *majales*, "Passion of Hussein" ceremonies, to be an "empowering" ritual experience. Through these women-only rituals, female *Mohajerin* (emigrants from India) have

[4] According to Heather J. Sharkey, "Currently, at least in Cairo, the process of taking the veil has become almost total among Muslim women, making Copts, who do not veil, stand out" (private communication).

"appropriated rituals for their own spiritual, religious, and social meaning" (Hegland 2003: 412). Throughout the months of *Moharram* and *Safar*, Hegland observed women in the performance of *marsia* (mourning hymns) and *noha* (mourning chants). The women beat their chests (and sometimes cheeks) in rhythm with the mourning couplets. The intensity of this performance is sometimes increased by a type of rigorous mourning dance.

[44] According to Hegland, these women are closely following the format of "Passion of Hussein" ceremonies originating in their native India. She further claims that these rituals provide Peshawar women a central role in "Shiite consolidation," begun in the 1980s, and aimed at opposing the Pakistani Sunni government (1997). Beyond their sectarian support, however, Hegland asserts that in appropriating and transforming the Hussein rituals as women-only forums, these women "practiced an oblique, undeclared contestation against their subordinate position in a harshly patriarchal society" (2003: 412). Even so, Hegland characterizes women's exposure to the martyrdom of Hussein messages as a "mixed blessing" (1997: 79). Hegland declares that the *majales* symbolism "forcefully confronted women with their inferior nature and ultimate spiritual, social, and economic dependence on males" (1997: 182).

[45] In comparison to the Hussein ceremonies of Pakistani males, Hegland offers the following: "Women spent far more time in ritual performances than men, yet the most dramatic and extreme demonstrations of anguish were denied them. At the conclusion of men's rituals, men stripped to the waist, swinging chains with knives attached to final links rapidly around their bodies, slashing their backs to a raw, red pulp. Women were not qualified to enact this self-mortification, or to offer themselves as martyrs, a readiness which male bloodletting, self-flagellation symbolized" (1997: 190). Aside from this gender-defined differentiation, Hegland also depicts a milieu in which the "success" of women, both as participants and as leaders in *majales*, depends upon such factors as "age, marital status, economic situation, and family connection with male leaders" (1997: 185). For female preachers, especially those who have never been married, Hegland touts their attainment of "ritual freedom, mobility, and prominence." At the same time, she notes that their position is undermined by domination by their male guardians, who deem them ineligible for marriage. Overall, however, Hegland feels that the benefits of women's greater ritual participation far outweigh the disadvantages for the Shiite women of Peshawar, allowing them increased mobility and opportunities for social interaction with other women.

[46] In Lila Abu-Lughod's *Veiled Sentiments*, mourning, revenge, and poetry merge as emblems of Islamic history. Abu-Lughod writes eloquently in her ethnographic study about a group of Awlad Ali Bedouin women who live in a village in the Western Egyptian desert. Here, she brings into focus the "cultural centrality of poetry and song" (25), both in the commemoration of death and in the joys and sorrow of daily life. At funerals and for a month after, Awlad Ali women emit a stylized high-pitched wordless wailing, *ajat*. Then they "cry" (*bka*). As Abu-Lughod explains, "Crying involves much more than weeping; it is a chanted lament in which the bereaved women and those who have come to console them express their grief . . . Like the singing of poems, the chant takes the form of a short verse of two parts, the words repeated in a set order following a single melodic pattern. The special pitch and quavering of the voice . . . along with the weeping and sobbing that often accompany it, make this heart rending" (198).

[47] This plaintive lament is an exclusively female response to death in this society; Bedouin men, according to Abu-Lughod's study, do not "cry," although sometimes they may "weep silently . . . though as a rule men offer condolences with a somber embrace out of which others must pull them" (198). Men counsel bereaved relatives to "pull yourself together (*shidd helak*)" and console others with references to God's will and God's goodness. The only exception men make is in the ritual lamentation of "crying" for saints and holy men during annual festivals (198). As discussed above, these gendered expressions of grief draw upon many of the early Islamic traditions of death and mourning, underscoring their historic origins and continued import.

[48] In Abu-Lughod's view, mourning rituals take on particular relevance in this Bedouin community; villagers emphasize an inherent "sense of us versus them" in their perceptions of how "others" adhere to or diverge from traditional Islamic funeral rites and mourning rituals that they hold as ideals (20). The Bedouin identity is articulated through "a distinction from or in opposition to non-Bedouins . . . an opposition to Egyptians and those lacking in moral character" (43). In a first-hand account, Abu-Lughod captures in the Awlad Ali's mourning rituals what she characterizes as "manifest anger and desire for revenge," in the case of a funeral for a village man who had been murdered (200). Abu-Lughod links this incident and the response it invokes to a broader continuum of Islamic sectarian strife. "In everyday language and behavior, people react to death with anger and blame, sentiments closely associated with the impulse to avenge deaths, mirrored in or buttressed by the institutionalized complex of feuding . . . However in poetry and in 'crying,' the same angry individuals communicate sorrow and the devastating effects of the loss on their personal well-being" (97).

Conclusion

[49] From early Islam to contemporary Muslim societies, funeral rites and mourning rituals reflect ideals of religion, gender, politics, and aesthetics. They portray broad societal values and individual responses to human grief. In a global context, these rituals reflect the impact of migration and assimilation into both Muslim and non-Muslim societies throughout the world (Jonker; Sakaranaho and Jonker). As we have seen, the gendered discourse of Islam is particularly relevant to our understanding of the many ways in which Muslims express grief for the deceased and in the commemoration of martyrs.

[50] While modern scholarship of "women and Islam" is now beginning to find its footing (Sakaranaho and Jonker), this area of study will be particularly relevant to continued exploration of gendered expressions of grief and mourning, a topic sorely underdeveloped (Aghaie). Hilda Granqvist's anthropological studies of Jordanian Muslims, beginning in 1925 and spanning the first half of the twentieth century, may be viewed as a starting point. Granqvist's writings portray the pivotal role of women in preparing the dead for burial, showing their grief through ritualized wailing, and visiting the graves of the deceased. Just as Granqvist's studies reveal the gendered nuances of these rituals, one is ever cognizant of the broader political environment during the time of her scholarship; she writes in the periods preceding and following the partitioning of Palestine and the formation of the State of Israel. In this mid-twentieth century study, Granqvist captures the admonitions of early Islamic traditions to quell women's wailing. As relayed by her respondents, one reason for this

prohibition is "to deceive the enemy . . . so they shall not rejoice in our misfortune" (217). In contemporary times, as well, these words are eerily resonant.

[51] In their research on bereavement, Hend Yasien-Esmael and Simon Shimshon Rubin study the mourning rituals of Sunni Muslims in Israel. They chronicle the details of ritual traditions preserved by women, such as the ceremonial washing of the dead, the application of henna to the body, and the singing of dirges and mourning songs. They chronicle, as well the vast gap between Sunni orthodoxy and the actual practice of their respondents. "Women may shout, wail, tear out their hair, and tear their clothes at the time of the announcement of the death," the authors write (Yasien-Esmael and Rubin: 498). In this minority Muslim community, women are forbidden to take part in the funeral procession of a loved one, a prohibition with which they wholly comply. Yet in this same study, we read about a young woman who reads the Quran in memory of her deceased father, an action strictly forbidden in her community. She has reinterpreted this ritual as her own in order to bestow merit upon her father in *al-akhira* (512-13).

[52] Unni Wikan's study comparing grief reactions of Egyptian and Balinese Muslims, as well as Selim's study of Muslim funeral and mourning rites in Egypt, Iran, and Bali, underscore the plurality of Islam, particularly in the rituals of burial and mourning. Wikan argues that "culture, more than religion, shapes and organizes responses to loss," calling for bereavement research that focuses "more on emotional experience in loss than on ritualized mourning" (451). Within this vast plurality of Islamic culture, ethnicity, and practice, Muslim women – now more than ever – may have the opportunity to play a significant role, particularly in preserving, reconstituting, and reinterpreting rituals of death and mourning. John Sakaranaho and Gerdien Jonker describe contemporary Muslim women as "active bearers and interpreters of Islamic faith" (7). We have seen how Muslim women have used mourning rituals as a subtle form of resistance and as a means of gaining religious knowledge and mobility, otherwise inaccessible to them (Aghaie; Hegland 1997, 2003). There remain, as well, societies in which the "ceremonial side of Islam is largely closed" to Muslim women (Fried). Yet in the "Little Traditions," exclusively preserved and transmitted by Muslim women, we see gendered expressions of grief that are both uniquely feminine and remarkably resistant to the condemnation of orthodoxy (Brink).

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