

'ASHURA IN BAHRAIN

Analyses of an Analytical Event

Thomas Fibiger

Abstract: 'Ashura is an annual Shi'i ritual commemorating the death of Imam Husayn at the Battle of Karbala in AD 680. In Bahrain, the ritual runs for two weeks and involves processions with more than 100,000 participants. Bahrain is a small but ethno-sectarian heterogeneous island state, where a Sunni minority dominates a Shi'i majority. The religious ritual of 'Ashura therefore has deep political connotations, and a variety of analyses, aspirations, and actions are played out in the context of the ceremonies. This article discusses 'Ashura from the various viewpoints of participants and observers, thereby raising the question of the relationship between analysis and event. I argue that the ritual itself includes an interpretation of the relationship between the Sunni and Shi'i sects, and that this leads to a variety of reflections among Bahrainis on what 'Ashura is and should be.

Keywords: Bahrain, event analysis, Islam, politics, rituals, Shi'a, Sunni

'Ashura, an annual event in the Shi'i Muslim world, is devoted to commemorating the early Shi'i leader Imam Husayn and his death in the Battle of Karbala. This crucial event in the history of Islam took place on 10 Muharram (the first month in the Islamic Hijri calendar) in the year AH 61 (AD 680 in the Gregorian calendar). 'Ashura is therefore a double event: an event in the past and an event in the present. In this article I will discuss its contemporary manifestation and significance in the Arab Persian Gulf state of Bahrain, where 'Ashura continues to play an important role—socially, religiously, and politically. It was a key event during my fieldwork there in 2004 and 2008, when I discussed it with the many people who are involved in this annual remembrance.

This article examines the different ways in which various parties and participants view 'Ashura and how they perceive its significance in today's society. 'Ashura is a matter of ongoing debate in modern Bahrain, much of which is



concerned with the trichotomy above: whether it is primarily a religious, political, or social event. This analysis presents various local viewpoints—especially shedding light on the discussion of religious and political issues—in order to discuss the broader significance of the event. As a contested interpretation of a crucial occurrence in Islamic history, ‘Ashura brings into play established relationships between what counts as social, religious, or political participation and analysis (cf. Asad 2003). Rather than being solely a re-creation of a historical event, contemporary ‘Ashura commemorations have the potential to transform and create new orders and worldviews (Deleuze 1994; Hallward 2006). This is what makes the event so important to both academic and vernacular analyses.¹

This point of departure raises the question of where the analysis of the event takes place. I will argue that the anthropologist’s analysis is shaped in collaboration with informants in the field by discussing situations and events while observing these informants and speaking with them about the observations. The development and discussion of analyses with participants in the field is an important part of anthropology and one that deserves greater recognition. A more traditional view of anthropology as a field science suggests that what we do in the field is to record what goes on and to collect material and information for use in describing an ethnography. Then, after leaving the field, we return to our desks to analyze the data in order to come up with some sort of broader, theoretical, and therefore anthropological analysis. In his Radcliffe-Brown Lecture titled “Anthropology Is Not Ethnography,” Tim Ingold (2008) discusses the relationship between ethnography and anthropology, turning the traditional understanding upside down. Ingold’s argument, in brief, is that we ‘anthropologize’ with people in the field and then go home to write our ethnographies. He implies that what we, as anthropologists, see in the field—and *how* we see and understand it—depends on the people whom we meet, on the information that they share with us, and on the events that we experience together. Likewise, Bruce Kapferer (2003) notes how his own interpretation of the Suniyama ritual in Sri Lanka is based on “discussions with the specialists and lay participants” and how “[n]o description can stand outside interpretation” (ibid.: 110). I take my cue from them in this article, so that rather than aiming at a neutral description or analysis from the ethnographer’s desk, I shall include various analyses as they have been related to me by different field participants. The anthropologist is not alone in doing analyses; event analyses are being conducted constantly by, and with, our informants in the field.

As a contested event in a politically unstable society, the commemoration of ‘Ashura in Bahrain is a case in point. Entangled in all sorts of analyses, ‘Ashura itself is analytical, interpreting historically and dramatically the battle and its outcomes that occurred at Karbala over 1,300 years ago. For a period of two weeks at the beginning of each Islamic year, speeches by religious leaders, poetry recitals, flagellation rituals, weeping mourners, and many discussions about all of these activities demonstrate the importance that is attributed to ‘Ashura in modern Bahrain. The descriptions and analyses in this article will give an account of these many voices that are heard in the field. I will argue that the task of the ethnographer is to collect these various viewpoints, to listen to

them carefully, and then to 'undo' them—to resolve them in light of their social context—and to relate the multiplicity of analyses to the contested whole. This, I suggest, will provide a broader and more coherent perspective of the event and its potentiality.

Multiple Analyses in the Field

The modern event of 'Ashura reflects analyses of what happened at the Battle of Karbala, taken to be one of the decisive events in Islamic history leading up to the split between the Sunni and the Shi'i sects. After the death of the Prophet Muhammad in AH 10 (AD 632), a discussion began as to who was his rightful successor (caliph). One group supported Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet, but the majority opted for Abu Bakr, one of the Prophet's senior companions. Ali's faction came to be known as the Shi'a. They maintained that the leadership of the Muslims should remain within the Prophet's family, and they continued to support Ali and *ahl al-bayt*, the house of the Prophet.² In AD 656, Ali finally became the fourth caliph and, at the same time, was regarded as the first Imam of the Shi'a. However, he was killed as early as AD 661, and after his death the Umayyad caliphate, with its capital in Damascus, took over. The second Umayyad caliph, Yazid, was a harsh ruler and widely unpopular—at least, according to the Shi'i tradition—and in AD 680 Imam Ali's son Husayn decided to travel from Mecca to the Euphrates region to rally support against Yazid. When his small group reached Karbala, they were besieged by Yazid's impressive army and denied access to water and supplies. Rising up against their much stronger opponents, all 72 warriors and Imam Husayn were killed. Ever since then, the Arab Shi'a have felt oppressed by various Sunni regimes in the Arab world, and the split between the sects has been reified (Fuller and Francke 1999; Nasr 2006). This has created a tradition of commemoration and mourning among the Shi'a, and many hold the opinion that it is only due to the advance of the Islamic Republic in Iran in the latter part of the twentieth century that the Shi'i sect has once again achieved power in a sovereign state.

During the two Islamic months of Muharram and Safar, the streets of Shi'i areas in Bahrain are adorned with black flags and banners, and most participants wear black during the event, displaying their sorrow over Imam Husayn's death. The story of Karbala is recounted with deep emotion among the Shi'a, and even outside the sect itself Husayn is revered for his sacrifice in search of a more just Islamic world. There are many ways in which importance can be attributed to this story in modern life. Some people stress the political analogies between the situation of the Shi'a in early Islam and their circumstances under current regimes, calling for resistance against the oppressors in the spirit of Imam Husayn. Others focus on the implementation of Islamic values and on the moral, but less political, struggle of Imam Husayn for a true and sound Islam. Whereas most Sunni find the 'Ashura commemorations aggressive or backward and distance themselves from the whole event,

one Sunni religious *shaykh* in Bahrain was very active during ‘Ashura in 2008, preaching that Imam Husayn is not solely for the Shi’a. He maintained that the story is not about the antagonism between Sunni and Shi’a but about the struggle for a true Islam, advising that Imam Husayn should be commemorated by all as a good Muslim. Yet others, both Sunni and Shi’a of less strict religious or political devotion, view the ‘Ashura commemorations to be one of the few great cultural events in the country. It is a time when people have a chance to meet old friends in the lively streets or religious community halls, to express warm feelings in many different ways, and to join forces in distributing food and drink for their neighbors and for the poor in their society. Even though ‘Ashura is a sad occasion in religious terms, with much mourning and grief, and even though it is a potentially aggressive event in political terms, with many slogans and calls for political action, it also gives rise to a social atmosphere of warmth and happiness.

Observing the Event—Social Analyses

Social analyses are, by common definition, what ethnographers do. Here, however, I will use the term ‘social analyses’ in a slightly different way. I do not refer so much to the ethnographical observation of social aspects of events, since everything is social in the eyes of the ethnographer. Rather, I focus on vernacular analyses in the field that emphasize ‘Ashura as a social or cultural happening rather than a religious or political one. In this view, ‘Ashura is an annual festival that creates an opportunity to get out and about, to see the processions as cultural performances, to meet people, and to feel an attachment to one’s community. Other similar approaches show that people do observe the event and relate positively to it but do not see themselves as participants. In other words, people can observe ‘Ashura without any religious or political motivation.

One of my informants, a schoolteacher with a Shi’i background who had studied and married abroad, has stopped practicing religion. After returning to Bahrain, he does not normally go to *matam*, the religious community hall. Even so, during ‘Ashura, he visits his old village *matam* once or twice “to meet old friends,” as he explained to me. Other than that, he is critical toward the role of religion in Bahraini social life. Unlike many Shi’a, he is happy that the story of Imam Husayn has not been allowed to play a major role in the school curriculum, where the only information about the original event is that Imam Husayn was beheaded. At the same time, however, ‘Ashura is a good way to maintain social contacts, since it brings even infrequent visitors, such as this schoolteacher, to the *matam*.

Likewise, a Bahraini intellectual, who describes himself as “non-religious” but with a Sunni background, responds positively to ‘Ashura and regards it as a unique cultural festival. The only place in the Gulf to allow public processions, Bahrain is also the only place where ‘Ashura is designated as a national holiday, a practice initiated when Bahrain was under British administration during

the first half of the twentieth century. Today, many Bahraini Sunni prefer to be away when the streets are taken over by mourning Shi‘i processions, using the holidays to go abroad—some on pilgrimage to Mecca. Nevertheless, some Sunni also observe ‘Ashura in Bahrain for its social and cultural aspects.

In the capital city Manama, at the back of an exhibition hall that displayed contemporary art reflecting the events at Karbala, I met two men during the night of the largest processions. They sat there all evening, drinking tea and talking with each other and with passers-by. They were not actively participating in the processions, nor were they going to the *matam* for religious sermons. They just liked to observe what was happening and to experience the social atmosphere. When I met these men, both of whom were well-educated and held good jobs, they were discussing the character of one of Imam Husayn’s followers—Suher Ibn al-Kheyn—who plays only a minor role in the general narration of the event. He was the character in the story of Karbala whom they liked best and held up as a role model. Suher Ibn al-Kheyn had initially been against Imam Husayn, but by pure intuition he followed the Imam on his way to Karbala and ended up fighting by his side. To these men, this figure of Suher Ibn al-Kheyn showed that “no matter how far astray you go, you can still come to the absolute truth.” Like the Lebanese women portrayed by Lara Deeb (2006), these Shi‘i men find role models for their lives in the old story of Karbala, and they analyze their present-day social situation in relation to past events and ideals. They went on to discuss political problems in contemporary Bahrain, problems of discrimination between Sunni and Shi‘a, and issues touching on human rights and political participation. These reflections were not voiced in support of a particular political movement; rather, they were based on problems that the men had encountered in their own jobs and daily lives, such as discrimination against Shi‘a with regard to employment opportunities. Even for those who observe ‘Ashura as a social event and do not take part in its religious and political aspects, all three spheres easily blend together.

The various vernacular approaches indicate that today Bahrain is, in many ways, a heterogeneous society. The total population has recently reached one million, of whom around half are Bahraini citizens.³ The majority of this group are Shi‘i Muslims, although there are no official figures, and the numerical relationship between Sunni and Shi‘a is much debated. The Sunni, who control the government and administration, tend to say that it is almost 50/50, whereas Shi‘a proclaim that their majority is in the range of 70–85 percent. Many Shi‘a feel socially and economically marginalized and politically oppressed. They are generally dissatisfied with the so-called democratic reforms initiated in 2002, pointing to the limited powers of the new parliament and the apparent gerrymandering of constituencies, with votes in the 2006 elections giving only 17 of the lower house’s 40 seats to the Shi‘a. The Shi‘a form one parliamentary bloc, regarded as the main opposition to the government, which is appointed by the king and prime minister, both of the ruling Sunni Al Khalifa dynasty. On the other side, various Sunni groups form one pro-government bloc.⁴

As these divisions show, Bahraini politics is structured around a Sunni-Shi'a dichotomy, and religion and politics seem inseparably intertwined. This has been the case for decades, not least after the Iranian revolution in 1979 and the growing sectarian awareness that followed on both sides. This trend is especially palpable in the Gulf region, with the proponents of Sunni reformist Salafism in Saudi Arabia on one side of the coast and revolutionary Shi'ism on the other. However, political struggles in Bahrain throughout the twentieth century have often been interpreted as a Shi'i struggle against the Sunni regime, both among Bahrainis themselves and among international scholars (Fuller and Francke 1999; Nakash 2005; Nasr 2006). While such analyses do not account for important examples of non-sectarian or cross-sectarian political identifications in Bahrain, the established political system has certainly taken a sectarian turn. The first parliamentary assembly in Bahrain, which existed from 1973 to 1975, was remarkably non-sectarian, even though religious scholars were key members. The new parliamentary experiment, on the other hand, has seen Sunni and Shi'a uniting against each other, and there are no parliamentary groups outside this dichotomy. Secular political societies that advocate for a negation of sectarian and religious politics do in fact exist in Bahrain, but they have not won any parliamentary seats. While this may seem obvious in a religious political structure, many Bahrainis, also outside secular ranks, believe that this failure to win seats was due to government interference with the elections. The intention of the regime, according to this analysis, is to use the relative democratization to display a clear demarcation between Sunni and Shi'a, thereby strengthening national and regional Sunni alliances and consequently the position of the regime. In any case, this seems to be the situation that has developed since the political reforms in 2002, with the result that sectarian divisions and debates over the role of religious identity in politics are as prominent as ever.

The construction of a Sunni-Shi'a dichotomy, while certainly not novel and probably not a wholly conscious effort, may place itself within the rise of a 'Good Muslim/Bad Muslim' policy, as recently traced by Mahmood Mamdani (2004) in global politics, especially after 9/11. In this view, the Sunni government and its allies portray themselves as 'Good Muslims' and their Shi'i opponents as 'Bad Muslims'. To the outside world, the regime seems to balance Muslim faith with a relatively modern and secular way of governing, while the parliament, deadlocked in Sunni and Shi'i blocs, appears to be sectarian and backward, thus justifying the limited powers given to this elected council. Moreover, the parliamentary opposition is shown as being strictly Shi'i. As the most important public display of Shi'i Islam in Bahrain, 'Ashura may serve to underline the image of backwardness and religious fanaticism among this opposition and sectarian group. In the following, I hope to challenge this notion of Good Muslim/Bad Muslim by exploring vernacular analyses of the relationship between religion and politics as it is perceived through the 'Ashura commemoration. Analyzing what has become an important debate among Bahrainis may enhance an understanding of this contested and flexible relationship, both within and beyond Bahrain and 'Ashura itself.

Creating the Event—Religious Analyses

Despite their social and political grievances, Shi'a in Bahrain enjoy greater religious freedom than their sectarian peers in neighboring Arab countries. Bahrain is the only Arab Gulf country where 'Ashura is allowed to take place as a public event during which participants can carry out rituals in the streets. During 'Ashura, Bahrain almost seems to be an all-Shi'a community. Organizers estimate that up to 180,000 people gather in the center of Manama on the nights when commemorations culminate, around 10 Muharram. Moreover, this number is swelled by people gathering in villages and in the country's other few urban centers. While some groups, especially from Kuwait and the eastern province of Saudi Arabia (Shi'a dominated al-Ahsa), travel to Bahrain, the vast majority of participants are Bahraini Shi'a—old and young, women and men. 'Ashura is clearly the most important annual event in the Bahraini social calendar, and it requires large-scale organization.

The main public element of 'Ashura is the *mawkabs*, or processions, in which men from the various *matams* walk together through the streets while rhythmically beating their chests, accompanied by the recitation of poetry about Imam Husayn and Islam.⁵ These processions are organized by a committee representing the *matams*. The committee plans the route through the city center and decides the order in which *matams* follow each other; the largest *matams* with the most *mawkab* participants come last. This is the main task of the organizers, who must also handle the many general aspects of controlling an event with so many participants: security, medical assistance, stalls for food and drink, stands for selling or distributing religious merchandise, special areas for the women,⁶ negotiating agreements with the authorities, and so on.

After 'Ashura, I spoke to one of the organizers, a businessman from a reputable urban Shi'i family who is well aware that people take part in the event for different reasons. When we discussed the matter of the interrelation between the religious, social, and political aspects of the commemoration, his own main concern was that 'Ashura should be seen as a religious event, devoted to Imam Husayn, and must not be appropriated for political purposes. Prior to 'Ashura, he had met with the main religious leaders of the non-parliamentary opposition group al-Haq, who, in his understanding, had agreed not to include any political agendas in the event. However, activists from al-Haq did set up a stall in one of the main procession streets, which they used as a base to organize speeches and to distribute leaflets and a petition for constitutional changes (issues that I will discuss below). The organizer was clearly disappointed with this exploitation of 'Ashura for political purposes. He had had to negotiate the event with Bahraini ministries and authorities, and he was afraid that this politicization might compromise the freedom to have such public events in the future.

I am against mixing in the political issue during this period because it will affect the religious issue. We have our opposition here, but unfortunately in Bahrain, they use this occasion to put out their political agenda during 'Ashura, which is wrong ... I talk to all the opposition, [I say to them] leave the 10 days for Muharram, for

Imam Husayn. You have 355 days. Maybe before I would sympathize with that, because we did not have a method of expressing our needs in political issues. Now we have freedom of speech ... There is a level of communication. So why should I take advantage of this holy season, which is 10 days of the year, and inject it with a lot of political agendas? I am against it completely. I am in charge of this, [and] my worry is that tomorrow the authorities will come to say: "Look, you misuse this occasion. This is being done to celebrate Imam Husayn and his death, and your people have been using it as a political issue and all kind of issues." This is my worry—that in the future they will not allow it.

"Religion is pure, politics is dirty," he summarized, and the two should not be mixed. The message of Imam Husayn and the Battle of Karbala are too important to be corrupted by current political issues. Participants should focus instead on the story of Imam Husayn, which, according to this organizer, contains messages with a moral content that is removed from politics—issues such as family responsibility and education—and this is what he would like the commemorative event to focus on. Organizers urge religious *shaykhs* to take this approach in their *matam* speeches, in which they discuss 'Ashura each night during the two weeks of its duration.⁷ This would help to "implement the true Islamic way of living with others," the businessman concluded.

The *matams* are the primary centers of activity in relation to 'Ashura. *Matam* activities, which are separate for men and women, may be held in private homes, but larger and more public gatherings are held in specific community halls that are established either by individuals or by local residents. The *matams* are active all year, being the center for weekly sermons, for weddings and funerals in the community, and for commemorations of the other Imams and key Islamic figures. But their main purpose is to commemorate Imam Husayn—which is why they are also known as *husayniyya*. During 'Ashura, many *matams* invite special religious *shaykhs*, from Bahrain or abroad, as guest speakers. The speeches follow a special order in which the chronology of the Battle of Karbala is narrated day by day. After a speech on relevant contemporary issues, the last part of the sermon is devoted to mourning a special figure or issue from the battle. During this narration, both the *shaykh* and his audience weep and cry, touched by the emotions attached to the death of Imam Husayn and his companions. It is said that every tear shed for Imam Husayn opens the gates to Paradise. A young woman told me how she was moved to cry in the *matam*: "Every time I hear this story, it feels like a tragedy that has just happened, as if Husayn died only yesterday. I have heard this story more than twenty times ... but the way I cry is as if I am hearing it for the first time."

In virtually all *matams*, the first two nights in the month of Muharram are devoted to a general narration of what happened in the battle and how Imam Husayn went from his home in Mecca to Karbala near the Euphrates River to rise up against Yazid. The third night introduces the small army of 72 companions, all of whom fought for Imam Husayn in the battle and died at Karbala. After this night, the narration focuses on specific heroes in the course of events, rising in the order of importance until the tenth day, 'Ashura itself (the word '*ashara*' meaning 10 in Arabic). This was the day of the actual battle and the

death of the Imam. Before then, on the fourth night, the *shaykhs* speak of Hurr, originally a leader in Yazid’s army who switched sides and was killed next to Husayn. The fifth night is dedicated to Habib Ibn al-Madaha, known for his great knowledge of the Qur’an and for being a senior adviser to the Imam, and the sixth is for Husayn’s cousin Muslim Ibn al-Akeel, who had traveled to the city of Kufa near Karbala to raise support for Imam Husayn there. When Imam Husayn reached Kufa, he learned that his cousin had been killed and that he would get no support from the Kufans. On the seventh night, the intensity rises as the losses move closer to Imam Husayn’s immediate family. His brother Abbas died after both of his hands were cut off, following an attempt to fetch water for Imam Husayn’s besieged camp. The next two nights are devoted to the young warriors Ghasem, son of Imam Hassan, and Ali al-Akbar, son of Imam Husayn. The speech on the night before the tenth day (an Islamic calendar date begins at sunset) is about Husayn’s baby son Abdulla Radia. As the narrative goes, Husayn held his infant son in his arms and showed him to the opposing army to ask for water and relief for those besieged. In response, the baby boy was killed. This cruel act deepens the *matam* mourning prior to the day of ‘Ashura, when the speech is finally about Imam Husayn himself. During the following nights, the guest speakers relate stories about the women and children who were taken prisoner; the famous speech of the prisoner Zaynab, Husayn’s sister, who told the world about the event;⁸ and finally the funerals that took place three days after the battle.

The key individuals are also represented in a number of exhibits around the procession areas. Life-size figures of Husayn, Abdulla Radia, Abbas, Zaynab, and others are posed in crucial situations from the story. In many cases, the figures are added to the display one by one, as they appear in the *matam* narratives. Abbas is depicted with his hands cut off, the infant Abdulla Radia is impaled with arrows, and Husayn is on his knees. They are all covered in blood, which adds to the emotional atmosphere. The exhibits make visible the episodes recounted in the *matam* and in the procession poetry, and they help give the event a sense of immediacy, drawing it closer to the present, the here and now.⁹ Most Shi’a know the individual characters by heart. The annual narration serves to reinforce the collective memory of the event, and the ensemble of heroes makes way for a plurality of interpretations and analytical connections.

The organizer of ‘Ashura quoted above notes how the various stories of these mythological figures may be used by the preaching *shaykhs* and how this legend should be employed in the present time:

We have women, we have elderly, we have young people who believed in [Imam Husayn’s] mission and followed him. We focus on this in our new life. When we talk about the elderly, the priests reinforce how we should respect the elderly today. When it comes to the day about brotherhood, when Abbas sacrificed himself for his brother, we talk about the relations between brothers—how they should be united. When talking about Abdulla Radia, we talk about the relation between mother and son. We try to take advantage, during this period, [to make] the emotional things an educational thing. It is not simply mourning and mourning and mourning. There is a time for that, but this is a time when everybody

comes together. Like when you go to church, you know what I mean— you want to listen to what is being said to you. In the same way, we like to pass the message to the new generation to respect their religion. Because if a person does not have religion, [if] he does not have faith and belief in God, he does not have faith in others.

As this quote shows, while the organizer distances himself from the political uses of the event, in which Imam Husayn's suffering and battle against an unrighteous ruler is inspirational for current struggles against oppression, the events from the past may well be used in order to understand the present and the moral order of Islam. When regarded as exclusively concerned with *matam* speeches and official organization, 'Ashura may be seen as primarily religious rather than political. Nevertheless, the event takes place in the streets with a greater multitude of voices, and a more direct political agenda is involved.

After the *shaykh's* speech, the male audience gathers to do 'aza, the chest-beating ritual in which participants inflict the pain of Imam Husayn and his followers upon themselves. During the initial nights, 'aza takes place inside the *matam*. Each night more participants join the ritual, both young and old. Later, usually on the sixth night, the processions take to the streets. On the two nights of culmination, the processions last for hours, and the *mawkab* groups from the various *matams* follow each other closely, forming into one long line. In the capital city, these processions sometimes do not end until dawn, at the call for morning prayer.

Debates about Flagellation among Bahraini Shi'a

Chest beating is the primary way in which procession participants flagellate themselves in order to take part in the pain suffered by Imam Husayn and his companions. Some participants strike themselves very hard, whereas others perform the act more symbolically. Some groups in specific *mawkabs* take flagellation somewhat further, performing either *zanjil*, using chains, or *haydar*, using a sword. The *zanjil* chains are used to beat one's back, while the sword is used to make a small cut into one's forehead and then take part in the procession with raised sword and blood pouring over one's face and clothes. *Zanjil* represents the prisoners who were put in chains when taken from Karbala to the caliph in Damascus. *Haydar* represents the people of the city of Kufa, who are said to have carried out this ritual when they learned that their failure to help had contributed to the death of Imam Husayn.

Both rituals are carried out by only a minority of participants in contemporary Bahrain. While *zanjil* is generally accepted, *haydar* is widely disputed. The *zanjil mawkabs* take place at night, along with the general processions, while *haydar* takes place only on the morning of the tenth day.¹⁰ In 1993, the Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei issued a *fatwa* against *haydar*, stating that it was dangerous to one's health and would not benefit the image of Shi'i Islam around the world (see also Pinault 1999). While this *fatwa* has

prompted most Bahrainis to disapprove of *haydar*, the ritual has gained importance among others who do not follow Ayatollah Khamenei.

The antagonism between the groups for and against *haydar* was particularly strong in the neighborhood where I lived during my fieldwork, that is, in the urban part of the island Muharraq next to the capital area. During the last few years, a minority of Shi'a in Muharraq, known to follow the religious leader Muhammad Shirazi rather than Khamenei, have organized a *haydar* procession, an activity that has otherwise been confined to Manama. This initiative has been fiercely resisted by other Shi'a. Whereas the *haydar* supporters argue that this is acceptable due to their religious freedom as both Shi'a and Bahrainis, opponents have put banners at their *matams*, quoting Ayatollah Khamenei's arguments against *haydar* and insisting that all Shi'a should stand together on this issue. This group also filed a petition with the municipality to call for a ban on *haydar*. Despite this attempt to ally with the authorities, accusations were also voiced against the Bahraini government for deliberately supporting the *haydar* groups—both morally and in practice (by providing ambulances, security, etc.)—in order to split the Shi'i community. Once I even heard the American embassy being accused of supporting the *haydar* processions by furnishing new swords. The *haydar* ritual may seem, to the outside observer, to be an aggressive sectarian ritual, but it is apparently more aggressive when it comes to creating divisions within the Shi'i community, rather than against other sects or regimes. I asked whether the petition submitted to the municipality would be seen as a victory for the government's hidden agenda to divide the Shi'i community, if indeed such an agenda existed. This point had already been raised within the group, I was told, but the matter was deemed too important to shy away from on such strategic grounds. As long as *haydar* was there, an alliance between the Shi'i groups was impossible.

A good friend invited me to go with him from Muharraq to Manama on 9 and 10 Muharram, the nights when the 'Ashura commemorations would culminate. Like many Shi'a, he was named after one of the legends of early Shi'i Islam, so I will refer to him as Abbas. In his early forties, Abbas was from the Persian community in Muharraq and, like many Muharraquis, worked in Bahrain's international airport, which dominates the island. He was deeply involved with his religious community, and his primary interest in 'Ashura was religious devotion. Abbas used to perform *haydar* and also had beat himself with knives on his back (a ritual rarely observed in Bahrain today), but he turned against these practices completely when Khamenei issued his *fatwa*. Abbas now took part in the chest-beating '*aza* of his *matam* in Muharraq, and while in Manama he wanted to see the large-scale processions and visit some central *matams*. He had singled out one *matam* in particular because a certain religious *shaykh* was invited as the speaker that year. Abbas knew that this *shaykh* was very skilled in evoking emotions, and the mourning that night was indeed very intense. As the narration progressed, the *matam* audience increasingly hid their faces in their hands, and their shoulders shook with weeping. After the sermon—apparently past the phase of ritual mourning—Abbas and I went around Manama to see the processions. We passed the stand of al-Haq

society as they were calling for people to sign a petition for amendments to the constitution. Abbas had already signed, but he took no great interest in the matter. “We can sign all the petitions we want,” he told me in resignation, “but there is not going to be any change.” Abbas’s interest in ‘Ashura was religious not political. Therefore, it was only later that I found out about a major gathering that had taken place that night around al-Haq’s stall near the large *matams* of Manama. The charismatic leader of al-Haq had spoken to the crowd, conveying messages about the political side of ‘Ashura. While this was deeply important to some participants, others were more engaged in the social or religious activities that relate to ‘Ashura: going to *matam*, seeing processions, or meeting friends.

Using the Event—Political Analyses

I will, however, now focus my attention on the political aspects of the event. Historically, ‘Ashura has been the starting point for some of the most important social uprisings in the history of Bahrain, especially in the 1950s and 1990s. The reason for this is obvious: thousands of people are gathered, they are highly charged with emotions, and, as noted above, the story of Imam Husayn is often analyzed as a righteous struggle against oppression and against an unjust regime. In Bahrain, the Al Khalifa family and their Sunni allies are seen as invaders who, by force and through regional alliances, have come to dominate an island nation that was once exclusively Shi’a.¹¹ In the politico-religious climate of contemporary Bahrain, drawing analogies between the Shi’a situation at present and at the time of Imam Husayn is inevitable.

Thus, in his speech, the leader of al-Haq, mentioned above, likened the present regime to the regime of Yazid at the time of Imam Husayn. He urged people not to believe the government’s promises of democratic development and political participation in Bahrain, as it was exactly such unfulfilled promises that misled Muslims at the time of Husayn, causing them to turn their backs on him. In the speaker’s view, the fact that Bahrain’s ruler, King Hamad Al Khalifa, supported some *matams* with alms and food was simply an indication of the regime’s treacherous behavior and divide-and-rule motives. Such gifts were “poisoned by Yazid,” he asserted. By making an analogy between Yazid and the Al Khalifa government, the speaker aimed to spark an emotional uprising in his audience with the eventual aim of overthrowing the regime—the goal of Imam Husayn.¹²

While many other speeches and slogans during ‘Ashura were outright political, they were less radical than this. The petition, which was prepared just before ‘Ashura in order to take advantage of the many gatherings, called for specific changes to the constitution and especially for Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa to leave office. It was thus argued that when the crowd had shouted “Step aside Khalifa,” this call was directed solely at the prime minister and not at the Al Khalifa family as a whole. Politicians of the parliamentary Shi’i opposition, and especially the leader of the party, Ali Salman, were invited

to numerous events. Being an educated religious *shaykh* himself, Ali Salman spoke to the masses about both religious and political topics. The day after 'Ashura itself, a massive procession took place in the village of al-Deih, and Ali Salman was one of the people who recited poetry, narrated the story of Karbala, and contextualized the event for the participants, while walking along with them. He was clearly the speaker who received the most attention and gained the largest following during this procession. At the same time, political banners and slogans called for a new constitution.

The processions in al-Deih, with many thousands of participants, took place in the same streets that had been the site of demonstrations and clashes with security forces—and even the death of one demonstrator—just a few weeks earlier. Such violence and confrontations were remarkably absent during 'Ashura. While the commemoration is accepted by Bahraini authorities as a religious and popular procession, demonstrations held outside the framework of 'Ashura are often countered by security forces armed with rubber bullets and tear gas. Authorities know very well that any attempt to break up the 'Ashura processions would be hazardous, even uncontrollable, and for the same reason participants avoid violence and vandalism. Based on this implicit agreement, 'Ashura allows greater leeway for personal expression, and this is one reason that Shi'i political groups take advantage of the event to present political messages, contrary to the wishes of the organizer quoted above.

In 2008, the violent clashes in the month before 'Ashura had a great impact on the political atmosphere of the commemorative event. The unrest began at another religious-political event, known as Martyrs' Day, in which people killed during the uprising of the 1990s are remembered. When the outbreak of bloodshed on Martyrs' Day added yet another martyr to the list, the mood against the regime worsened. This prompted the petition that was distributed during 'Ashura and was later forwarded to the government, but received no response.

In Muharraḡ, one Sunni religious *shaykh* went against this antagonism between Sunni and Shi'a in his response to the Martyrs' Day violence and in his subsequent activities during 'Ashura. In mosque sermons and in the media, he argued in favor of commemorating martyrs, but stated that this should represent all Bahrainis, both Sunni and Shi'a. People from both sects, he pointed out, had died in the struggle for what they believed would be a better Bahrain. Opposition political societies have supported this idea, while the government has so far ignored the matter. The *shaykh* then continued this line of reasoning during the 'Ashura events. As he had done in previous years, he went to Shi'i *matams*, Sunni mosques, and religious and political societies to argue that Imam Husayn should be remembered not only for the Shi'a but for all Muslims, since his struggle was for the implementation of true Islam for them all against the unrighteous Umayyad caliphate. Moreover, Husayn was a grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. This message was not intended to unite Shi'a and Sunni politically against the present regime; rather, it was meant to bring the sects together religiously in the spirit of one peaceful Islam.

Most Sunni think differently about 'Ashura. Many fast during 9 and 10 Muharram, which have also long been national holidays in Bahrain. But to most

Sunni, the fast and the holiday are not in commemoration of Husayn but of the Prophet Musa (biblical Moses), who, according to Sunni tradition, fled the pharaoh on those dates, and the Prophet Muhammad fasted in remembrance of this. The increase of sectarian awareness and religious education in recent decades has strengthened this interpretation. A Sunni informant noted how he had to convince his mother that the fast was not in sympathy with Imam Husayn and the Shi'a, but with Musa and the Prophet Muhammad.¹³ Many also use the holidays to go to Mecca for *'umra* (the 'small pilgrimage', which can be done anytime outside the season of the main pilgrimage, or *hajj*), which is promoted by travel agencies now as 'Umra al-'Ashura. This gives the name 'Ashura a meaning outside the Shi'i ritual, creating an option to pay respect to both the Prophets Muhammad and Musa and also to leave Bahrain during the 'Ashura processions.

To the Sunni religious *shaykh*, all of these interpretations are good religious acts. One can commemorate Musa or Husayn and, in both circumstances, also the Prophet Muhammad. He uses this to stress the possibilities of peaceful co-existence, not only between Sunni and Shi'a, but also among the faiths of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism:

If somebody will fast for Musa, it is good, and if somebody is sad for Imam Husayn, it is also good. Between Musa and Imam Husayn is our Prophet Muhammad. Because our Prophet said about Husayn that he is my son, and he said about Musa that he is my brother—I must fast and you must fast. So you can enjoy three in one: Musa, and Muhammad, and Husayn. And so we can see that Islam and other religions can be one. Why are Muslims fighting with Christians or Jews? Our God is one. All of them are from the same family, the same tree, and all of them have Musa and Isa and Muhammad. Their father was Ibrahim. Christians believe in Ibrahim, right? And Jews also believe in Ibrahim. And Muslims also believe that Ibrahim is their father. So all of them can come in one way. It is not difficult.¹⁴

As these local analyses exemplify, there are various possibilities for interpreting the event—religiously, politically, and socially—in order to integrate the messages of what happened at Karbala over 1,300 years ago into contemporary Bahraini society. 'Ashura is a powerful event, one that is laden with emotions that have the potential both to gather and to split social groups, to be both political and non-political, depending on who is doing the analysis.

Conclusion: Undoing Analyses

Whether 'Ashura should be recognized as an opportunity for voicing Shi'i political aspirations or should be seen solely as a means of religious commemoration is an important and ongoing debate among Bahrainis. As one of the organizers quoted earlier put it, the message of the event gets muddled when politics is involved—and religion should stay pure. The desire to separate religion and politics is evidently not confined to Western politicians and intellectuals. From

a quite different perspective, Bahraini Muslims call for the purity of religion and the exclusion of politics from what they see as a religious event. However, this analysis of the significance of 'Ashura faces difficulties among other Bahrainis, who basically see the event in terms of Shi'i political aspirations, in both the past and the present. In this view, the annual commemoration is an ideal occasion for expressing political viewpoints. Others see it instead as a chance to socialize. They regard it as a key event in the Bahraini social calendar and a unique cultural festival. Thus, motivations of a social, religious, and political nature all come together in 'Ashura.

This trichotomy is important to bear in mind when analyzing an event like 'Ashura. In this article, I have focused primarily on my informants' religious and political analyses of the event, because this is an important debate, both within and outside of Bahrain. In the broader discussion of the relationship between religion and politics, these analyses of 'Ashura suggest that the potential of religion to form political ideas and motivations should be acknowledged without being dismissed as fanatical or backward. As the Bahraini debate reflected in this article demonstrates, this does not mean that 'Ashura is seen only, or even primarily, as a political event. What is important is to discuss how various positions in society relate to the event. 'Ashura shows how different interpretations and potentials of the relationship between religion and politics are debated in Bahrain. This point is based on event analyses done in, and working with, the field, and it can most probably be applied to many other fields and situations.

Seen in this way, 'Ashura is not entirely political or religious. It is neither a sectarian event nor a reflection of backward traditions in an otherwise modern society. Such analyses are often seen in the field, when situated participants prefer one interpretation over others. However, this is no less the case in academic research that is aimed at achieving unambiguous clarity. When such analytical reductionism attempts to extract the essence of a given event, as if the study was done in a laboratory, it fails to listen to the various voices in the field and does not pay sufficient attention to the potential and the analyses embodied in the event.

The importance of an event analysis of 'Ashura is, therefore, to reflect the significance of the event as it is carried out in contemporary society. In this article I have focused on how a variety of analyses of 'Ashura are created among its participants. These analyses, as seen in the event, are not one-sided and static, but may unfold in different ways at different times and in different places. Moreover, event analysis shows that a double event like 'Ashura, as a present commemoration of a past event, is not analytically fixed to the original happening. This, of course, calls for anthropological rather than historical analyses, but also for an understanding of contemporary Muslims rather than a search for some brand of 'true' or 'original' Islam. This argument in favor of event analysis challenges essentialist interpretations, which are frequently presented by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The statement "If you want to understand this, don't look at what Muslims do, but look at what Islam is" has often been encountered in the field, and it could easily be repeated by opponents of Islam

who believe that they can find the true agenda of contemporary Muslims hidden in the original Islamic scripts. As the French scholar Olivier Roy (2004: 10) notes: “The key question is not what the Koran actually says, but what Muslims say the Koran says.” Event analysis, I suggest, follows this attempt to reverse the relationship, with a focus on practices and the social situation itself rather than on a possible text or source that lies behind it. From the perspective of event analysis, Islam is what Muslims do and how contemporary Muslims analyze their own social situation.

In following this methodology, it is both possible and necessary to record multiple analyses in the field. There are various ways of using ‘Ashura as an analytical event. My hope is that, by including such various analyses from the field, anthropological analysis may come to represent more fully the perspectives and potentiality of the event.

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Thomas Fibiger obtained his PhD in 2010 from Aarhus University, Department of Anthropology and Ethnography, with the thesis “Engaging Pasts: Historicity and Political Imagination in Contemporary Bahrain.” The work focuses on the relationship between perceptions of the past, religious identities, and politics. Fibiger is co-editor (with Mads Daugbjerg) of the June 2011 issue of *History and Anthropology*, titled “Globalized Heritage.” This issue critically examines the ways in which certain kinds of heritage have come to be seen and practiced as transnational, cosmopolitan, or ‘world heritage’.

Notes

1. Here, the word ‘vernacular’ means informal, non-academic, or lay, rather than the linguistic meaning of the term, which signifies colloquial, local language. Interviews quoted in this article were actually carried out in English.
2. *Ahl al-bayt* includes the Prophet, his daughter Fatima, and the Imams, the early leaders of the Shi’i sect. The first Imam is Ali, Fatima’s husband, followed by their sons Hassan and Husayn. The title ‘Imam’ is given to a spiritual leader, whereas the title ‘caliph’ is given to a worldly leader only (Momen 1985: 11). According to the main Shi’i tradition, there are 12 Imams directly descended from the Prophet. The last of these, the Mahdi, went into occultation in AH 260 (AD 874) and is expected to return to save the world. For more on the history and beliefs of Shi’i Islam, see Momen (1985). For more on the history and theology of ‘Ashura in particular, see Ayoub (1978).

3. In 2007, Bahrain’s government adjusted the official figure of the total population upward from approximately 700,000 to 1,000,000 in order to account for naturalizations and new registrations of migrant workers. The updated number came as a shock to many Bahrainis, sparking a debate about the country’s demography. The non-Bahraini population mainly consists of South Asian workers.
4. For analyses of political developments in Bahrain, see Burke (2008), Khalaf (2000), Niethammer (2006), and Peterson (2009). For the development of Shi’i politics in the Gulf, see Louër (2008), and for a general regional perspective, see Dresch (2005).
5. *Matam*, *mawkab*, and other Arab words in this article are presented in the singular. To simplify, I have added the English suffix -s when such words are used in the plural. In general, the article follows a simplified version of the transcriptions suggested by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*.
6. Women and men are separated in the *matams* and in the processions, which women do not take part in, except for one special procession on 11 Muharram that commemorates the women and children taken into captivity after the Battle of Karbala. Rather, they watch the processions from certain designated areas. As a male, I had no access to these special areas for females, neither in the *matams* nor in the streets, and so this article primarily refers to male areas, activities, and viewpoints.
7. A *shaykh*, in religious terms, is educated in religious studies, one level above the *mulla*. A Shi’i *shaykh* is distinguished by his white or black turban, while a *mulla* wears a loose head scarf (*ghitrah*).
8. Both Zaynab and Husayn’s surviving son, the later fourth Imam Zain al-Abidin (who did not take part in the battle due to illness), are responsible for sharing their knowledge of what happened at Karbala. One informant referred to them as “the great myth-makers.”
9. Two other rituals are performed with the same intention of bringing the past into the present: *ziyara*, the symbolic ‘visiting’ at the graves of key figures, done by turning in their direction during *matam* sermons, and *shabih*, theatrical performances of certain parts of the Battle of Karbala. According to Momen (1985: 244), these rituals were not performed in Bahrain at the time of his study, but today they are an important element, especially in the large processions that gather all of Bahrain’s Shi’i villages and urban neighborhoods on 10 and 11 Muharram.
10. *Haydar* is now also carried out at *arba’in*, when the whole story and ritual is repeated during one night and day, 40 days after ‘Ashura, and during the similar three-night commemoration of the death of Imam Ali, Husayn’s father and the first Shi’i Imam, which takes place on 19–21 Ramadan. During the year, there are smaller processions with chest beating for all dead Imams.
11. The historical perception of the Al Khalifa family itself is that its ancestors did indeed come from mainland Arabia, but that they liberated Arab Bahrain from Persia, implemented true Islam, protected its inhabitants, and, during two centuries in power, have led the country into the modern age.
12. In 2009, this same al-Haq leader was arrested for his activities during ‘Ashura. Other leaders from the society were later arrested and charged with conspiring to carry out terrorist attacks in Bahrain. This happened again in a major crackdown in August 2010, and, as of the last edition of this article (early 2011), leaders and activists of al-Haq remained in prison, a total of several hundreds of people. In connection to political uprisings in the rest of the Arab world, this has increased political tension in Bahrain.
13. Hylén (2007) notes how Sunni Muslims in Pakistan serve water to ‘Ashura procession participants, in accordance with an Islamic tradition. While some Bahrainis recall that this tradition was observed in the past, it is apparently absent today.
14. In the biblical tradition, Isa is Jesus and Ibrahim is Abraham.

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