Remembering Karbala in the diaspora: religious rituals among Iraqi Shii women in Ireland

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Memory studies have gained much popularity in the humanities and social sciences since the 1980s. Particularly after the seminal work of Danièle Hervieu-Léger on ‘religion as a chain of memory’, discussions arose around how theories of memory can be applied in the Study of Religions. Few scholars, however, have discussed the intersection between religion, particularly Islam, and memory. In this article, the focus lies on Shii Muslim communities in Ireland, for whom remembering constitutes an important part of their identity and legitimises their particular sectarian existence within Islam in general. This article discusses Iraqi Shii women’s engagement in ‘collective remembering’ (Paul Connerton, How Societies Remember, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989; J.V. Wertsch, Voices of Collective Remembering, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) expressed through constantly performed religious rituals and practices.

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which produces a general sense of a homogenous unified group providing communities with a sense of oneness and unity (see Lambert et al. 2009). In the case of Shii Muslims, they remember the events of Karbala in 680 CE when Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, was murdered together with almost his entire family on the plains of Karbala in Southern Iraq by the then ruling Muslim dynasty. Michael Fischer (1980, 19–26) terms this master narrative around the murder of Husayn ‘the Karbala paradigm’. Shiis deconstruct this master narrative into several subnarratives (Wertsch 2002, 2008, Wertsch and Roediger 2008) in which subjective understandings of historical events are connected to personal individual life circumstances today. These subnarratives reflect various understandings and representations of historical events dependent on different socio-political and religious orientations as well as on the national, ethnic, generational and educational differences between individuals.

This production of various subnarratives is particularly evident in Ireland, where Shii Muslims are few in number (around 6000)², mainly living in the capital Dublin, and highly diverse in terms of their national, ethnic, socio-political background and religious affiliations.³ The major Shii centre in Ireland is the Ahlul-Bayt Islamic Centre (husayniyya) in South Dublin that is shared by people coming from a variety of countries such as Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Lebanon and other Gulf countries (Scharbrodt 2011, 525). The centre, particularly the women’s section, is mainly but not exclusively used by Iraqi and other Gulf Arab Shiis and acts as both a religious and a cultural centre. The women I interviewed in Dublin attend the husayniyya twice a week, on Thursdays and Saturdays, and on other days when other activities, such as celebrations or commemorations, are taking place. Since Shiis were oppressed in Iraq during Saddam’s regime, and were actively persecuted whenever religious Shii activities took place, Shiis in general but Iraqi Shiis in particular feel liberated in their religious and cultural identity in Ireland; participation in religious Shii rituals is now permissible without the constant fear of arrest and punishment. The women celebrate this liberty by regularly visiting the husayniyya and actively participating in religious rituals and practices which have become a symbol of their liberation from autocratic regimes.

Shii women of diverse backgrounds in Ireland share therefore a small diasporic space in which they regularly gather to engage in collective remembering that constitutes their identity of being Shiis and legitimises their particular sectarian existence within Islam in general and in Ireland in particular. Besides the general master narrative of the ‘Karbala paradigm’ (Fischer 1980, 19–26) the women engage in

²This number is only an estimate as it is not possible to state the exact number of Shiis in Ireland. For detailed information on figures for Muslim asylum seekers and migrants, see Scharbrodt (2012).
³Until the early 1990s, the majority of Iraqis came to Ireland for educational purposes. They were mainly Shii students from Iraq, but also from Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, who came to study at the Royal College of Surgeons in Dublin. During Ireland’s economic boom, the so-called ‘Celtic Tiger’ years (1995–2007), Muslims from other socio-economic backgrounds migrated to Ireland for various reasons as it had become a destination for economic migrants and refugees. After the fall of Saddam Husayn in 2003 and as a consequence of the sectarian tensions and violence in Iraq since then, both Shiis and Sunnis have left Iraq, some of whom came to Ireland. As with other Muslim communities in Ireland, the Shii community is diverse in terms of its socio-economic status, educational status and ethnic/national background. Whereas the first group of migrants – those arriving prior to the 1990s – were mainly from well-educated and middle- to upper-class backgrounds, the second group – which arrived more recently – are mainly economic migrants, refugees or asylum seekers (Scharbrodt 2011, 518–533).
various individual acts of remembering the past that are influenced by their diverse backgrounds. Iraqi Shii women in Ireland provide an excellent case study for examining the relationship between collective and individual remembering, as various individual traditions and approaches meet in a small diasporic space, causing intra-communal tensions and conflicts. Nevertheless, such meetings provide these women with a space to find meaning to their lives and situations in both the Middle East and the European diaspora.

The process of remembering past events among Shiis is constantly (re)negotiated through performed religious rituals and practices. Rituals are useful instrumental tools for remembering the past as ‘events are most likely to be consolidated in memory if they are verbally rehearsed’ (Pennebaker and Gonzales 2009, 174) and bodily performed (Connerton 1989). Narrative, language and forms of expression are additional important tools forming a ‘cultural tool kit’ (Bruner 1990, 21; Wertsch 2008, 139, Wertsch and Roediger 2008, 322) for remembering the past as they play a major role in evoking and producing emotions, particularly in commemorative rituals. In this article, I will focus on one ritual called majlis al-qiraya (pl. majalis), which is practised among women in particular and is a meeting or gathering (majlis) at which reading (qiraya) takes place. It consists of readings from the Quran, saying prayers but also retelling or remembering particular historical Shii events, either in prose or verse. The latter is described as ‘lamentation poetry’ (nudba) and it has a particular effect on the listener as it evokes emotions to the extent of weeping and ritual self-beating (latam) as an expression of sorrow for the maltreatment and ultimate murder of Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and the third leader (imam) of Shii Islam. Memory communities are not homogeneous (Wertsch 2009) but rather complex entities distinguished by the various religious, economic, political, historical and gender dynamics that influence how particular historical events are remembered. This remembering of historical events is, as Halbwachs argues, ‘[…] reconstructed on the basis of the present’ (Halbwachs 1992, 40) and is related to people’s own life stories, experiences and personal development (see also Boyer 2009; Pennebaker and Gonzales 2009). Individual engagement with particular historical events takes place and then subjective representations of the past are negotiated, reinterpreted and reconstructed according to one’s own religious, political and gendered context. Wertsch argues that memory is ‘distributed’ (Wertsch and Roediger 2008, 322) through individuals and cultural tools supported by the power of language that shapes the narrative of the past.

This article will examine when, how, why and by whom particular memories of Shii histories are recalled, as observed within the majalis al-qiraya in Ireland performed and discussed by Iraqi Shii women. The article is based on 27 in-depth interviews conducted with Iraqi Shii women living in the capital Dublin and in Cork, Ireland’s second largest city. The women’s ages range from 18 to 60 years. The interviews were conducted in Arabic between September 2009 and December 2013. I joined the religious gatherings of the Shii women in the Shii religious centre (husayniyya) in Dublin on different occasions, both celebrating the birth and mourning the death of Shii religious figures. I joined the ‘Ashura’ commemoration in 2011 at which a number of majalis took place, participated in the rituals and spent the

4The citations in this article are all the author’s own translations.
night with other Shii women in the husayniyya on the eve of the commemoration of the killing (maqtal) of Imam Husayn.

In what follows, I give a more detailed description and analysis of the remit and function of remembering history among Iraqi Shii women in Ireland, embedded within an examination of the majalis al-qiraya through which these memories are transmitted.

Remembering Karbala through majalis al-qiraya among Iraqi women in Ireland

Twelver Shiis believe that Ali, the Prophet’s cousin, companion and son-in-law, should have been the successor of the Prophet Muhammad after his death. However, Ali only became the fourth Caliph and he was assassinated during this reign. Mu’awiya (d. 680 CE) became the ruler, appointing his son Yazid (d. 683 CE) as his successor. Yazid converted the caliphate into a quasi-monarchic dynasty, an act that was rejected by many, including Ali’s son Husayn. Husayn was the most significant threat to this dynastic rule, since he was the only living grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. Yazid therefore demanded an official oath of loyalty from Husayn as he believed that such an oath would grant him religious legitimacy. However, Husayn refused. According to the Shii view, he received many letters from Kufa in Southern Iraq, a stronghold of opposition against the ruling dynasty, assuring him of support and asking him to come and lead them in revolt against Yazid. While making his way to Kufa, Yazid increased his pressure and forced the people of Kufa to transfer their loyalty to him from Husayn. Just before arriving at Kufa, in a place called Karbala, Husayn and his entourage of about 70, including women and children, were intercepted by Yazid’s army which, according to Shii sources, numbered thousands. Husayn’s party was surrounded and prevented from access to water for days. After ten days of battle, on the 10th of the Islamic month Muharram in 680 CE, Husayn was killed. He was decapitated and his head taken to Yazid in Damascus (Al-Haidari 1999; Momen 1985).

Majalis al-qiraya are religious gatherings for remembering and mourning the death of Imam Husayn, his family (referred to as ahl al-bayt) and his companions. The commemorations take place every year in the first ten days of Muharram (also called ‘Ashura) as well as in the mourning period for the following 40 days (arba’in). However, they are also performed outside of this period as in the celebration of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad or at the various other celebrations and commemorations of religious figures specific to Shii Islam. This ritual is also performed individually outside of the official religious calendar. Some women make a religious vow (nadhr) promising to organise a majlis and to feed the community and the poor, if they desire some particular outcome, such as marriage, pregnancy or a cure from illness. Some host a majlis in their homes to gain divine or spiritual blessing (baraka) for the house and its residents.

The majlis requires a reader, either a female qari’a or mullaya or a male qari’, who recalls the history of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn and of other members of the family of the Prophet Muhammad. In the husayniyya in Dublin this is done in a form of prose or of poetry (na’y), sometimes in Classical Arabic but more often in the Iraqi colloquial dialect. The reader recites from the Quran and gives a running interpretation of the text followed by a homiletic speech whose content
varies according to the type of event the women are celebrating or commemorating. The reader in the majlis, be it a woman or a man, needs to be eloquent in order to evoke in the women emotions that would lead to their weeping and expressive mourning for the ahl al-bayt. Weeping for the ahl al-bayt is believed by Shiis to be a source of salvation. As one of the women says: ‘Whoever wept or pretended to weep, Allah will reward him in heaven’. The role of the mullaya can be performed by any woman the community feels suitable. One of the women explains: ‘It is not necessary for the woman to have a particular qualification but it needs to be a woman who would be able to move the emotions of the women in the majlis’ (see also Sharif 2005, 139).5

The text in the na‘y poetry is very detailed and visual in its description of the torture of Imam Husayn and his family in Karbala. One of the long and emotional descriptions that constitutes a general narrative-template (Wertsch 2008) among Shiis concerns the torture and ultimate killing of Husayn’s son Ali Al-Asghar, who is often referred to as the breast-feeding infant (al-tifl al-radi’). The narrative states that because the baby’s mother’s breast milk had dried out he was nearly dying from thirst. Imam Husayn therefore took the baby to the enemy asking them to spare the baby from dying, saying: ‘If it is my fault punish me but what has the baby to do with all this?’ Harmala ibn Kahil al-Asadi, one of the Umayyad archers, is believed to have shot the infant with an arrow, cutting his throat from vein to vein. According to the narrative, when the infant felt the heat of the arrow piercing into his flesh, he reached out to hug his father while his body was shaking like a fluttering bird. The mullaya at this stage increases the dramatic narrative by relating this historical event to the present, saying:

You all have babies. Imagine one of your babies being killed in such a brutal way. Do you remember what happened in Iraq? We all lost our sons and daughters. Have you forgotten that? Have you forgotten your loss? So do not forget ahl al-bayt. Do not forget the sacrifice they made against injustice and tyranny. Do not forget the pain this mother felt when she received her baby with his neck severed.

At this stage the majority if not all the women in the room burst into tears hitting their breasts and/or faces.

One of the important parts of the ritual is to listen and understand the text itself since the text, as well as the reader’s emotional performance, is the driving force causing the emotional weeping. As the example above shows, historical events are made personal by the mullaya through making personal connections and addressing the women directly in the first person saying: ‘You all have babies. Imagine one of your babies being killed in such a brutal way.’ Mothers as well as others without children can relate to the text as it describes their own sufferings and loss and reminds them of recent experiences of persecution, war and displacement. One of the women at one of these gatherings was weeping extensively, crying out the name of her only son who was killed in Iraq a few years ago.

The text in the lamentation poetry in particular reminds women of their past which is connected through the majalis al-qiraya with historical Shii events and figures. There have been a number of studies dealing with Shii rituals in various

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5Sharif, however, states that the mullaya is usually a local woman who has had a traditional training.
Muslim as well as non-Muslim contexts. Lara Deeb’s research on Shiis in Lebanon, for example, highlights the transformation of the meaning of Shii ritual practices in the commemoration of Imam Husayn in ‘Ashura. She emphasises in particular the reinterpretation of the role of Husayn’s sister, Sayyida Zainab, as an active rather than a passive member of society. Deeb (2006) relates this transformation in the understanding of the ritual to current political discourse in Lebanon which seeks to inspire the active engagement of women in society in order to achieve social and political change. Paul Tabar examines ‘Ashura rituals as performed by Shii migrants in Sydney. Drawing on his ethnographic research, he argues that Shii’s religious identity, their understanding and their performance of rituals are not passively passed on from one generation to the other. Rather, the Shiis are actively involved in the reproduction of their religious understanding and they use Shii history as a tool to rationalise and explain their experiences of discrimination in Australia. Lamenting Imam Husayn, as Tabar argues, is to a certain degree transformed into lamenting Shii migrants’ social and political situation in Sydney in order to bear the hardship of living in a new society (Tabar 2002). Tayba Sharif investigates majalis al-qiraya among Iraqi Shii women in the Netherlands and argues that these religious rituals possess a quasi-psychotherapeutic function in which the women can express their range of feelings of sorrow and anger about the traumas caused by the two wars in Iraq: the political oppression and torture and their subsequent displacement. The extensive weeping in such rituals, she argues, is a healing process for the psychological and emotional wounds they experienced of wars and exile (Sharif 2005). My research adds to the existing research the aspect that Shii history is negotiated within a small diasporic space among Shiis of various traditions and approaches, all engaging in collective remembering. The Ahlul-Bayt Islamic Centre in South Dublin is the only major Shii centre in Ireland which hosts Shiis from a variety of Middle Eastern countries. This group of Shiis is part of a young migrant community most of whose members have arrived from Iraq since the 2003 toppling of Saddam Husayn and the ensuing sectarian violence and therefore possess a strong diasporic consciousness. The centre has become a diasporic space used for the recreation and articulation of Iraqi Shii communal identities in Ireland while being simultaneously a melting pot of the diverse currents of contemporary Twelver Shiism. The majalis al-qiraya rituals function in this regard as a tool for collective and individual remembering among women of various traditions and religious understandings. In the following, I will analyse in more detail the function and meaning of remembering Shii history as practised by these women in Ireland.

**Remembering as a source of identification**

As mentioned above, recalling Shii history as observed in Shii rituals in Ireland relies on collective as well as individual remembering by the community members. Here, the reciprocal relationship and influences between the individual and the collective are important. What to remember and how to remember is crucial, in particular for a community’s understanding of their identities. As
Assmann argues: ‘The past is not simply “received” by the present. The present is “haunted” by the past and the past is modelled, invented, reinvented, and reconstructed by the present’ (Assmann 1997, 9). Power relations within the community influence the process of remembering and depend on the various socio-political, religious and cultural contexts in which they are embedded. As Wertsch argues: ‘[…] the past is tied interpretatively to the present, and if necessary part of an account of the past may be deleted or distorted in the service of present needs’ (Wertsch and Roediger 2008, 320, see also Assmann 1997, 9).

In terms of the majalis I visited in Ireland, the topics covered reflect the women’s identities understood within an Iraqi nationalist as well as within a distinctive Shii identity. The nationalist tone is mainly highlighted when remembering the US-led invasion and the UN sanctions in the 1990s, and when emphasising the distinctiveness of the Iraqi people among other Arabs. The political instability, the sectarian and national fragmentation, and the migration and displacement all increase the importance of highlighting particular differences and recalling explicit memories that emphasise the particularity of a specific group. Shii women in the Irish diaspora construct a remembered past through religious rituals that highlights their particularity as Shiis. This is particularly visible in the ritual language characterised by the usage of personal pronouns. Liturgical language uses pronouns of polarisation ‘us’ and ‘them’, but also of unity, using ‘we’ and ‘us’ to express collectivity and community. However, the meaning of these pronouns is porous and changes according to the political context they refer to. As one of the women says: ‘For centuries we’ve been known for our high level of education and our contribution to a developed Arab civilisation.’ Here ‘we’ is not referring to a Shii identity but to a nationalist Iraqi identity. The woman made her comment after a talk delivered by a qari who made reference to the so-called Golden Age of the Abbasid period (750 CE to about 1257 CE); this was the time when present-day Iraq was the political, intellectual, religious and cultural centre of the Islamic world where sciences and arts flourished (Al-Haidari 1999, 331). The qari referred to the high intellectual level of that period and urged the community to take the achievements of that time as an example and maintain them in order to gain respect, recognition and acceptance within Irish society.

In other contexts the pronoun ‘we’ refers not to a nationalist but to a more distinctive Shii identity as one of the woman says: ‘We’ve been receiving maltreatment since our origins.’ By looking at the text in the majalis and the interpretation given by the mullaya or qari one can see the juxtaposition of past figures and events with present ones. The historical figure of Yazid of the clan of the Banu Umayya, who ordered the attack and killing of Imam Husayn and his family, is compared with Saddam Husayn; according to the Shii women, he tortured and murdered thousands of Shii women and men in Iraq (see on this topic Sharif 2005, 136). Yazid has become a prototype of an oppressive authoritarian figure. In one of the majalis George W. Bush was described as Yazid as, according to the women, he destroyed Iraq. Although the majority of Shiis supported the American invasion of Iraq in order to topple Saddam’s regime, they are distressed by developments

in the post-Saddam period. The women believe that the present chaos and sectarian violence in Iraq is caused by a group of militant Salafis who are anti-Shii and supporters of the terrorist attacks against Shii targets in Iraq. They regard the US government as responsible for the emergence and empowerment of Salafi groups in Iraq. As one woman says: ‘He [referring to George W. Bush] is another Yazid who allowed a new Banu Umayya to spread its evil on our people.’

Through the reconstruction of past memories and the recall of historical figures, meaning is given to current political situations. The individual’s construction of meaning is supported by collective confirmation expressed through the reconstruction of a shared past that mirrors similar circumstances. As Misztal (2003, 134) points out: ‘When groups […] compete for public recognition and legitimization, their claims are rooted in their common memory of the suffering, victimization or exclusion.’ The suffering of the ahl al-bayt by the Banu Umayya as described in the Shii narrative and as recalled by the women I interviewed represents for Shiis the apogee of suffering and injustice. Drawing analogies between past and present religious and political figures provides the women with a distinct Shii identity and confirms the Shii perception of Islamic history as one of continuous suffering. In other words, the creation of historical analogies serves the purpose of sustaining and legitimising Shii identity and historical experiences. Comparing George W. Bush or Saddam Husayn with Yazid, or the Salafis with the Banu Umayya, carries for Shiis a number of associations that are rooted within their collective memory. Similarly, the recall of the general narrative template of the battle of Karbala highlights the past and perpetuates the suffering of the ahl al-bayt. One of the women explained this process very succinctly: ‘History repeats itself. We shall never forget our suffering.’ The reality of this statement is instituted and confirmed by continuously connecting present with past events through regularly performed religious rituals. The power of resistance and of persistence is expressed through these historical analogies as the mullah or qari’ refers to the historical achievements and victories of the Shii community in the world in spite of the injustices they have experienced. The remembrance of the time of Imam Husayn’s killing is intended here to function as a reference to a particular collective Shii lineage that through history has shown its power to persist. This lineage refers at the same time to female religious authority figures who are regarded as role models for women of various socio-political, educational, economic and generational backgrounds.

**Remembering female Shii role models**

As has been highlighted, the general master narrative that gives Shii communities the feeling of oneness and unity lies in remembering the battle of Karbala and the suffering of the ahl al-bayt. Shii women deconstruct this collective remembering of a specific historical event into several subnarratives giving space for individual women of different generations to reconstruct their own understandings of the Shii past, influenced by their socio-economic, educational, religious and political backgrounds. Two major subnarratives that were repeatedly discussed and covered in the majalis rituals focus mainly on remembering two female Shii

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8 Al-Haidari makes similar observations in regards to the political situation in Iraq. See al-Haidari 1999, 364–390.
religious figures: Sayyida Fatima al-Zahra’, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad and the mother of Imam Husayn, who is the genealogical connection of the Shii Imams to the Prophet Muhammad, and Sayyida Zaynab, the daughter of Fatima and Husayn’s sister.

Remembering Fatima is a very controversial topic among the Iraqi Shii women I interviewed in Ireland. Generally she is remembered as being very knowledgeable in religious matters in addition to being a daughter who supported her father, a wife who served her husband, and a mother who lost her sons. This version of Fatima articulates a model of Shii womanhood that is subservient to patriarchal authority figures. The less educated and older generation of Shii women refer to Fatima as a source of inspiration to them to endure their own hardship, the loss of their sons, and the demand of their obedience and submission to societies’ constraints. They portray her as a victim of tyranny, being helpless and unable to protect herself. This is particularly supported through remembering the incident of the attack on her house. The narrative says that Umar ibn al-Khattab, another companion of the Prophet and second caliph, stormed Fatima’s house to attack her husband Ali. It is believed that Fatima was standing behind the door when Umar pushed it in order to enter. This led to her ribcage being crushed, to the miscarriage of her unborn child and eventually to her own death. Some women highlight the maltreatment Fatima experienced and the sacrifices she made in order to protect her family; as one of the women describes it: ‘She sacrificed herself in order to defend Ali against Abu Bakr.’ Another woman in a private gathering referred to a lamentation poem in which Fatima bemoans her tragic situation and addresses her father in a very emotional way calling for his help:

Oh my father, if you knew what happened to me. [...] I swear to God they crushed my ribs. They hit me so hard that I lost my unborn child. [...] Oh my father, if you knew what happened to me.

This narrative is highly controversial among the various members of the Shii communities. Middle, upper-class and educated women of the younger generation reject the remembering of Fatima in such a weak, disrespectful and helpless way. After all, as they argue, she is the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad who had a certain social and religious standing within the community and ‘would therefore have never been treated in such a way even not by the worst enemy’, as one of the women explains. In their opinion, remembering her in such a humiliating way dishonours her status as the daughter of the Prophet and the mother of Imam Husayn. The other group of women, however, reject this argument saying that Imam Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet, together with his family were humiliated, maltreated, tortured and eventually killed in Karbala. Treating Fatima in such a way would therefore, in their opinion, not be too unlikely and in line with the patterns of persecution the ahl al-bayt suffered.

The younger generation of Iraqi women reject seeing Fatima as a victim but instead see her as a very visible and active member of her community who fought for her rights and stood up against injustice. This argument is supported

9For an overview on the historical representation of Fatima see Clohessy 2009; Soufi 1997; Spellberg 1990, 1994.

10For a comparative study on the representation of Fatima and Zaynab as role models in Shii contexts see Aghaie 2005; Pierce 2012.
by numerous examples recalled from history, such as Fatima’s fight for her husband’s succession after the death of the Prophet. One woman explains: ‘[…] after the Prophet’s death, Sayyida Fatima courageously defended Ali’s cause and fiercely opposed the election of Abu Bakr, and had violent disputes with him.’ They also recall the battle of Khaybar at which the Prophet bequeathed to Fatima the date-palm orchard of Fadak, which she claimed as her inheritance after his death. Abu Bakr, who became the ruling caliph, rejected Fatima’s claim on the grounds that prophets do not give any inheritance but their property should be given away for charity (sadaqa) after their demise (See Ayoub 2005, 21). Sayyida Fatima is remembered as courageously speaking up against this injustice committed against her; as another woman says: ‘She laid claim to the property rights of her father and challenged Abu Bakr. She was a powerful woman.’

These variations in remembering Fatima depend on the difference in the generational remembering of past events and figures that are connected to the women’s social and educational backgrounds as well as to their personal religio-political contexts. As Misztal argues, memory is not merely reproduced but reconstructed as past events are recalled in a manner that is shaped by current political, ideological, social and religious contexts (see Misztal 2003, 140). Remembering the events in Karbala is not only associated with sorrow and loss but also with animosity, particularly because a number of women who now live in Ireland have themselves experienced torture, imprisonment, displacement or the killing of family members during Saddam Husayn’s regime. Analogies between the events in Karbala and personal experiences are therefore likely to prompt many poignant memories.

Not only Fatima but also the women of Karbala in general are portrayed differently among various Shi‘i women. One of the narratives portrays the women of Karbala as standing on a high rock wailing, crying and haplessly watching their family members being massacred in the battle scene. After the battle, the narrative continues, the women were left alone without any male support. This situation is compared to a house without foundations to support it, or to a tree that has been uprooted causing the leaves to fall and the tree to die. For women, remembering Karbala has always been very emotional, particularly in portraying their suffering and loss. Highlighting the women’s sacrifices and suffering emphasises the notion of martyrdom which is an important aspect of Shi‘i identity (see among others Aghaie 2005). The tone describing the women’s situations is pessimistic, but contains a soteriological message as they believe that this is God’s will and that they will be rewarded in the afterlife. When listening to the women’s portrayal of the women of Karbala one does not always know if they are referring to the women’s loss in Karbala or to their own loss in Iraq during Saddam Husayn’s reign. Talking about this matter is sensitive and emotional and causes much tension between the different generations of Iraqi Shi‘i women who have divergent views, particularly concerning the portrayal of female authority figures.

The women of Karbala are also remembered as key players in the battle, who supported the men psychologically, giving them strength to endure the hardship of combat, who nursed the injured but also who protected the weak. They frequently refer to Sayyida Zaynab, the granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad and the sister of Imam Husayn. She is the most important historical female figure among Shi‘is as they believe she actually witnessed the tragedy of Karbala in which her brother Imam Husayn and other family members and supporters
were martyred. The general narrative recounts how, after the massacre in Karbala, children and widows, among them Zaynab, were brought to Damascus as hostages in order to face Yazid (see also Haddad 2011). The younger educated women I interviewed in Ireland generally remember Zaynab as a woman who was strong in her faith and solid in her emotions; as one of the women says: ‘She resisted oppression visibly, she challenged authorities and wasn’t afraid to speak up to Yazid’ (similarly to this portrayal of Fatima see also Deeb 2006, 200–220). On the 9th day of Muharram 2011, the eve of the killing of Imam Husayn, some women stayed the night in the husayniyya talking about Zaynab and remembering her bravery at Yazid’s court.11 The narrative says that Husayn’s head was brought into Yazid’s court in Damascus in front of the few remaining members of ahl al-bayt, mainly the women, the children, the sick and the elderly. Yazid addressed Zaynab saying: ‘I thank God that he disgraced you [ahl al-bayt] and exposed your sayings as lies.’ Zaynab then answers: ‘He disgraces the immoral and exposes the libertine and this is not us.’ Yazid then says: ‘How did you see God treating your brother and your people?’ She answers with pride and courage: ‘I saw nothing but beauty’ (as heard in one of the majalis). The women remember Zaynab’s powerful speech and her leading role in being fully in control of the situation. They emphasise the social and religious role she played at the court in front of her enemies, for example in protecting Fatima, Husayn’s daughter, from being taken as a slave or Ali, Husayn’s son, of being killed in Yazid’s court. Unlike the way she is seen by the older generation, the younger generation does not perceive her as weak and helpless but rather as someone who walked in the footsteps of her brother and father in bravely defending the right cause and standing against injustice.

The majority of Shii women like to remember Zaynab because they can relate to her situation as a mother who lost her children and loved ones in the battle of Karbala. As one of the women I interviewed says: ‘When Sayyida Zaynab lost her brother and her two sons in the battle she said: “O my Lord! Accept our humble sacrifice to You.”’ Whereas some would portray her and the women of Karbala in general as victims, others would regard Zaynab as a role model of resistance and strength. These women remember Zaynab as an active member of her community, fighting for political and social changes. They emphasise her eloquence and courage when addressing her enemies. They believe that it is because of her courage in speaking up that the history of Karbala is still alive: in numerous sermons and in various commemorative mourning gatherings Zaynab herself disseminated the events of Karbala (see also Szanto 2012, 285–299), and promised Yazid: ‘[…] by Allah you will never eradicate our memory […] and your shame will not be forgotten […] your days are counted and your wealth will be squandered when the caller calls out saying “[...] the curse of Allah is upon wrongdoers”’ (Quran 11:18; as heard in one of the majalis).

By remembering the history of Karbala through female religious authority figures, the women in Ireland can give meaning to their own familial and socio-political situations. Sayyida Zaynab is described in the majalis as ‘um al-ahzan’ (‘epitome of sorrows’) referring to the degree of catastrophes and sorrows she

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11For an English version the women asked me to visit the following site: http://www.al-islam.org/victory-truth-life-zaynab-bint-ali/victory-truth-damascus%C2%A0[accessed 15 November 2012].
had to endure, but also highlighted in her patience in overcoming them, by referring to her as ‘jabal al-sabr’ (‘mountain of patience’). Like Sayyida Zaynab, many of the women I interviewed have lost loved ones, have been displaced and have lost the protection of their relatives. The majority of such women have been forced to leave their families, husbands or children, who were either killed in Iraq, imprisoned or received as refugees in another country, and came to Ireland on their own. Sayyida Zaynab has been for these women an archetype of a widow who lost everything in an atrocity as they themselves did. Making analogies with historical female figures like Fatima or Zaynab gives these women strength to deal with their situation in the diaspora. Some express this in an appeal to Shii notions of martyrdom, hoping to be rewarded for their patience in the afterlife; others use it as a source of strength to begin a new life in the diaspora (See also Shanneik 2013).

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored the intersection between religion and memory and its influence on the various identity understandings of Iraqi Shii women in Ireland. Shii communities can be regarded as memory communities who develop a collective memory that is based on a master narrative giving the community a sense of oneness and unity. Shii women deconstruct this master narrative into several subnarratives giving space for individual women of different generations to reconstruct their own understandings of Shii past influenced by their socio-economic, educational, religious, political and gendered contexts. This remembering of Shii history is transmitted through regularly performed religious rituals which allow for a wide degree of variations. In this article, I have focused on the majalis al-qiraya rituals that combine body performances, narrative, language and forms of expressions in order to reproduce and keep alive memory. This reproduction of memory is influenced by various individual engagements leading to a number of subjective representations of the past. Because of the diverse nature of the Shii communities in Ireland and the small collective space in which they meet, various viewpoints on Shii history converge. This provides Shii women with a space to renegotiate, reinterpret and reconstruct their collective memories. These individual engagements with the past may cause communal tensions within the Shii communities in the European diaspora but they also provide a space for women of various national, socio-political, economic and educational backgrounds to find meaning for their lives and situations in both the Middle East and Europe.

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