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# Who Could Marry at a Time like This? Debating the *Mehndi ki Majlis* in Hyderabad

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According to hagiographic traditions current throughout the Shi'i world, and particularly in the South Indian city of Hyderabad, eleven-year-old Fatimah Kubra, the daughter of the third Shi'i imam Husayn, was married to her thirteen-year-old cousin Qasem at the battle of Karbala, Iraq, in AH 61/680. This battlefield wedding is traditionally observed by Indian Shias on the seventh day of the Muslim month of Muharram. On this day, in the *majlis-e 'aza* (mourning assemblies), held in Hyderabad's Old City, the battlefield heroics of Qasem and the tragic fate of his young bride-widow, Fatimah Kubra, are recounted in *marsiyas* (laments) and in the speeches of the orators (*zakirs*; fem., *zakirahs*). The ritualized remembrance of this event in the mourning assembly depicts a scene of joy, followed almost immediately by the tragedy of Qasem's martyrdom and Fatimah Kubra's subsequent widowhood. This event resonates profoundly for the Shia of South Asia, who intensely mourn Fatimah Kubra's transformation from fortune-bearing wife to inauspicious widow—a particularly traumatizing change in status for women in India, where the Hindu taboo of widow remarriage has influenced the marriage practices of the Muslim community. What is most striking about the descriptions of the Karbala wedding and its aftermath is that a distinctively Indian worldview is expressed.

Despite the distinctly Indian flavor of this event, Shi'i communities in South Asia (and beyond) have been debating its authenticity and permissibility since at least the mid-nineteenth century. Why has an event that is so powerfully meaningful for so many Shia become a subject of intense debate? What is at stake for the Shi'i community as a global network of devotees of Imam Husayn and as localized communities in geographically and culturally distinct places such as India, Lebanon, and Iran? Whether or not to observe the *mehndi* (ceremony that takes place before a couple marries in which the hands and feet are decorated with henna) of Qasem is an emotionally charged decision for the Shia. In some places such as Lebanon, it is no longer observed as a means of demonstrating the progressiveness and modernity of the Shi'i community.<sup>1</sup> In Iran, Qasem's martyrdom continues to be observed on 7 Muharram, but it is now a

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1. According to Lara Deeb, in the Beirut suburb of al-Dahiyya, the Shi'i community has stopped observing the martyrdom of Qasem because it has been deemed "inauthentic." See Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 156–58.

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special day for the martyrs of the Iran-Iraq war (1980–88). In South Asia, the *mehndi* of Qasem is steadfastly observed by the majority of Shia in places such as Hyderabad, Mumbai, Chennai, the state of Bihar, and Lahore. In 2005, Tahera Jaffer, a Kenyan *zakirah* was expelled from Mumbai after declaring in a 7 Muharram *majlis* that the *mehndi* of Qasem should not be observed because it is not a historically authentic event. We must understand the nature of these debates, for there is much that we can understand about the dynamic tension that exists between the imaginary hegemony of the Shi'i cosmopolitan and the practical realities of vernacular Shi'i social and religious life as it is mediated through local cultural values and norms.

Using the events of the 7 Muharram performances in Hyderabad as a single snapshot of the much larger Karbala cycle, one can discern several theoretical insights with regard to the tensions between the universal story of Imam Husayn's martyrdom and its emplotment in local contexts. The "bones" of the Karbala narrative are universal and exist as part of a Shi'i cosmopolitan linking the global community together in remembrance of the sacrifice of Imam Husayn and his family. What is of particular interest is how local Shi'i communities emplot the frame narrative and make it meaningful through a process of vernacularization.<sup>2</sup> This is achieved through a dual process of equivalence, which ultimately links together the values of the global Shi'i community (the cosmopolitan) with the worldview and ethos of the Shia in myriad cultural contexts (the vernacular). The debates about the authenticity of the *mehndi* ceremonies of 7 Muharram illustrate how the practice of making equivalence mediates the interdependent relationship of the cosmopolitan and the vernacular in the transmission and performance of sacred phenomena.

2. Hayden White defines *emplotment* as "the encoding of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific kinds of plot structures." Put more simply, it is the placing of historical data (facts) into familiar plot structures, such as romance, tragedy, and irony. See Hayden White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," in *Critical Theory Since 1965*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986), 397.

3. Thomas A. Tweed, "On Moving Across: Translocative Religion and the Interpreter's Position," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 70 (2002): 262.

### Establishing Equivalence in the Shi'i Cosmopolitan and Vernacular

Thomas A. Tweed notes in his theoretical outline of the role of mappings and crossings in the interpretive positioning of the interpreter of religion that place is of critical importance. He observes that Miami, Florida, is a center for Cuban exiles "who were consumed with place or, more accurately, with being out of place."<sup>3</sup> Miami is a city of exiles, and the ethos of the city's inhabitants reflects a longing for some lost place. For the Shia, they, too, are obsessed with a place: Karbala. The nature of this geographical preoccupation is of an altogether different nature. Whereas Miami's exilic Cuban population yearns for the political restoration of their homeland with the death of Fidel Castro, the Shia do not long for Karbala as a lost land. Karbala is not only a physical, geographical location in Iraq that is host to the tombs of Imam Husayn, his half-brother 'Abbas, and a number of other heroes of the Ahl-e Bait, but it is perhaps, more significant, a place that occupies the hearts and minds of the Shia. There is a saying that is attributed to the sixth imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq, that indicates the Shi'i focus on the site of Imam Husayn's martyrdom: "Every place is Karbala, every day is 'Ashura." We can interpret a deeper meaning of this saying through the interrelation of the cosmopolitan (the site of Imam Husayn's martyrdom in Iraq) and the vernacular (every place, for every Shia). Karbala can be remembered, and must be remembered and mourned, by every Shia, and it is the performance of the memory of this event that is refracted from its universal source into vernacular expression (literary and ritual). Another feature of the Shi'i preoccupation with Karbala is eschatological. Karbala reminds the Shia of Imam Husayn's fight for justice (*'adalah*) and that on the Day of Judgment (*yawm-e hashr*) those who

Karen G. Ruffie

Who Could Marry at a Time like This?

Debating the *Mehndi ki Majlis* in Hyderabad

shed tears for the Ahl-e Bait will be rewarded with the intercession of Fatimah al-Zahra and the pleasures of paradise.

Karbala is a universal location, idea, and ideal for the global Shi'i population. Its heroes and heroines populate the Shi'i sacred landscape. Every place, whether in India, Iraq, or South Africa, can be Karbala, and its heroes and heroines are transformed linguistically, culturally, and morally into idealized citizens of these disparate locations. These transformations reflect the interdependent relationship of the universal Shi'i cosmopolitan and its infinite variety of vernacular expression. The cosmopolitan is not only linguistic, as so adeptly explained by Sheldon Pollock with regard to Sanskrit language and culture; the cosmopolitan is also locative. Edward Simpson and Kai Kresse's description of the cosmopolitan helps us to interpret the role of the universal narrative of Karbala in connecting the Shi'i community across geographical space and time: "Whatever else it may signify, the term clearly, and etymologically, refers to the idea of being part of a broad social project that exists outside the confines of kinship, ethnicity or nationality. Importantly, for us, 'cosmopolitanism' envelops a consciousness of human diversity. It refers to a sense of living beyond the mundane collective boundaries of everyday life and is suggestive of a trans-communal society."<sup>4</sup> As members of a sacred cosmopolitan, the global Shi'i community shares a kinship predicated on loyalty to the Ahl-e Bait. How this loyalty is expressed reflects the human diversity of living in different places where Shi'i values coalesce with those of the local environment. Tony K. Stewart observes that "Islam claims for itself a transnational and universal status . . . the sublime object of their religious world is transportable across all national and cultural boundaries," which is especially true in the case of Shi'i Islam: every place is Karbala.<sup>5</sup>

In much of scholarly discourse the cosmopolitan and vernacular are generally set up in a relationship of binary opposition, or set into a

hierarchy of inequality between the cosmopolitan, the classical source (of language), and the vernacular, its corrupted, common expression. Instead, it is more useful to understand the vernacular as the practice of making equivalence. In the context of the ritual commemoration of the *mehndi* of Qasem in Hyderabad, the practice of making equivalence is enacted in two different, yet intimately related, ways: one linguistic and the other locative.

The practice of making equivalence is deeply rooted in linguistics. As we shift linguistic codes, the words that we use to explain a particular concept or thing also effect a transformation in the process. In Stewart's analysis of the enculturation of Islam in Bengal, he significantly outlines a theory of linguistic equivalence that naturally encompasses religious language and ultimately transforms the cosmopolitan ideals of Islam into a vernacular Bengali form. According to Stewart, all forms of translation are a search for equivalence, which "when the 'translation' is successful, the new term becomes a part of the target culture's extended religious vocabulary."<sup>6</sup> All religious encounters are acts of translation and therefore become the practice of making equivalence. In the case of the observance of the *mehndi* of Qasem in India, the universal message of Karbala shared by the Shi'i cosmopolitan is translated in the encounter of the Shia with practitioners of Hindu traditions. Equivalences are made through the act of translating the event into a South Asian vernacular.

The practice of making equivalence through linguistic devices is best understood in its relationship to its locative practice. The economic historian K. N. Chaudhuri proposes a "theory of equivalence" that is consonant with the locative definition of the cosmopolitan presented by Simpson and Kresse:

In the way we understand his [Chaudhuri's] use of a theory of equivalence it means that sailors grow up on one littoral and when they travel somewhere else the new coast they encounter reminds them of their home; this creates visual and therefore emotional and psychological

4. Edward Simpson and Kai Kresse, eds., "Introduction: Cosmopolitanism Contested; Anthropology and History in the Western Indian Ocean," in *Struggling with History: Islam and Cosmopolitanism in the Western Indian Ocean* (London: Hurst, 2007), 2–3.

5. Tony K. Stewart, "In Search of Equivalence: Conceiving Muslim-Hindu Encounter through Translation Theory," *History of Religions* 40 (2001): 269.

6. *Ibid.*, 276.

bonds that people share, or, in the language we have been using, have in common. In our view, it might not only be the coastline however that creates the sense of an imagined community through the experience of equivalence.<sup>7</sup>

Simpson and Kresse offer the example of sailors from the Indian state of Gujarat who travel to East Africa and observe the same style of door and its decoration in use on the Swahili coast. For these sailors, the aesthetic similarity of the doors to their houses in Gujarat with those they see in East Africa brings about a sense of being at home. Although the Swahili coast of Tanzania and Kenya is geographically distant from India, a practice of equivalence is possible, generating among Africans and Indians of the Indian Ocean awareness that they are members of the same cosmopolitan.

Chaudhuri's theory of locative equivalence and Stewart's theory of linguistic equivalence show how equivalence mediates the Shi'i cosmopolitan and its myriad vernacular expressions. Although the Indic anxiety of widowhood and taboo against widow remarriage may be foreign to a Lebanese Shia, whose portrayal of Qasem's bride-widow may be entirely different, her presence in the universal narrative of Karbala roots her in the Shi'i cosmopolitan. In South Asia, the heroes and heroines of Karbala are portrayed as idealized Indian Shias, because through the dual praxis of linguistic and locative equivalence, the cosmopolitan is rooted in disparate local contexts and vernacularized, transforming these sacred figures into saints whose behavior is culturally, morally, and religiously meaningful.

In the following sections, the role of the dual praxis of equivalence as it mediates the cosmopolitan and vernacular in Shi'i religious life and the debates that have ensued in both South Asia and throughout the Shi'i world regarding the role of local practice vis-à-vis the expression of a unified, homogenous expression of loyalty to the heroes and heroines of Karbala is exam-

ined. The analysis focuses on the vernacularization of the canonical Shi'i Persian textual tradition commemorating the battle of Karbala and connects it to current debates taking place in the South Indian city of Hyderabad, where Shiism has had a deep cultural and religious presence since the establishment of the Qutb Shahi dynasty in the early sixteenth century.

**Localizing a Universal Story:  
The Indianization of the Heroes and  
Heroines of Karbala**

As early as the eighth to the fourteenth centuries, Iranians began to immigrate to the Deccan in large numbers to serve in the court (*darbar*) of the king of the Bahmani dynasty, Muhammad II (AH 780–99/1378–97). The Shi'i 'Adil Shahis of Bijapur were enthusiastic patrons of the *afaqi*, or "foreign," scholars and writers who filled their courts.<sup>8</sup> Most significant for the development of Shi'i devotionism in the Deccan was the appointment of the Iranian *afaqi* Mir Muhammad Mu'min Astarabadi to the court of Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah in 1585 CE. According to Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, Mir Mu'min endeavored to introduce and propagate Shiism in the Deccan:

As if the construction of Hyderabad itself was not enough, Mir Muhammad Mu'min founded many villages as centers of Shi'i and Islamic life. In them he constructed reservoirs, mosques, caravanserais, *Ashur-khanas* [ritual space where mourning assemblies are held and sacred objects are displayed] and planted gardens. The mosques and *Ashur-khanas* brought the Hindu villagers into contact with the Islamic and Shi'i way of life. The *'alams* [metal battle standards that symbolize various members of the Ahl-e Bait] and other symbols of the tragedy of Karbala were introduced by Mir Mu'min into these villages where they aroused Hindu curiosity and helped to convert them to Shiism.<sup>9</sup>

Mir Mu'min was Iranian, and he successfully introduced Iranian Shi'i devotional elements into Deccani religious life, thus contributing to the

7. Simpson and Kresse, "Cosmopolitanism Contested," 20.

8. In the medieval Deccan, *afaqi* referred to the foreigners who flocked to the courts of the 'Adil Shahi, Bahmani, and later Qutb Shahi dynasties. The word most generally refers to the Iranians who assumed many positions of power and influence in the Deccani kingdoms.

9. Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *A Socio-intellectual History of the Isna 'Ashari Shi'is in India* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1986), 1:311–12.

creation of a complex multicultural environment in which Hindu and Shi'i religious traditions and Persian, Telugu, and Deccani-Urdu literary forms were brought into contact.

With the movement of scholars, poets, and merchants between Iran and India, by the end of the sixteenth century Mullah Husayn Va'ez Kashefi's *Rowzat al-shohada* (*Garden of the Martyrs*) (composed in Herat, Afghanistan, in 1502) was being read in *majlis-e 'aza* at Golconda and Bijapur.<sup>10</sup> To make the recitation of the Karbala narrative understandable to those who knew only the local languages of Deccani and Telugu, the Persian writings of Kashefi were simultaneously translated and rendered to reflect the tragedy of Karbala through a distinctively Indic idiom and worldview. This does not mean that these writings experienced a brief moment of popularity and then faded into obscurity. In fact, quite the opposite occurred.

Within decades of the arrival of Kashefi's *Rowzat al-shohada* in the Deccan in the mid- to late sixteenth century, the Qutb Shahi kings commissioned vernacular Deccani-Urdu translations of Kashefi's Karbala narrative. With these translations two transformations in the telling of Karbala were effected. At the most basic level, translating *Rowzat al-shohada* from Persian to Urdu made the text linguistically understandable to the average Indian of the Deccan who may not have been fluent in the original language of composition. More specifically, the translation of *Rowzat al-shohada* transformed the ecology of Karbala and its heroes and heroines to reflect an Indic worldview. In short, *Rowzat al-shohada* was vernacularized, constructing a memory of Karbala that was refracted through the lens of India. The vernacular is often the site of the dynamic transformations and adaptations that Islam undergoes in order to perpetuate and remain relevant and meaningful for the average person. Thus for a Shia in Hyderabad there are several degrees of vernacularization that are enacted to make Islamic theology and spiritual practice meaningful in an Indic context.

One of the most visible markers of this vernacularizing impulse in the Indian Deccan can be seen in the ritual commemoration of Qasem and Fatimah Kubra's wedding in the 7 Muharram *mehndi ki majlis*. In the course of archival and ethnographic research in Hyderabad in 2005–6, it became obvious that the *mehndi* of Qasem is one of the most significant days of mourning during the ten days of Muharram leading up to 'Ashura, when Imam Husayn was killed in battle.<sup>11</sup> Not only are *mehndi* mourning assemblies held throughout the city of Hyderabad (some attracting several thousand devotees), but young men and women flock to these *majlis* mourning assemblies with the hope of being able to grab a small daub of the henna that is passed around at the height of the ritual performance, so that they can smear it on the palm of the right hand and ask for the intervention (*shafa'a*) of the members of Imam Husayn's family (Ahl-e Bait) in securing a good marriage alliance. The Indic articulation of elaborately constructed and defined rules of marriage and strict rules on the taboo of widow remarriage make marriage in any circumstance a partnership that is fraught with uncertainty and risk; the battlefield wedding of Qasem and Fatimah Kubra resonates. Like myriad sufferings of King Rama's wife Sita, Indians can relate to the tribulations Fatimah Kubra experiences as she permits her groom to rush from their wedding into battle, where he is mortally wounded and she is widowed before the marriage is even consummated. Fatimah Kubra's suffering, particularly her immediate widowhood, establishes a culturally relevant emotional bond that both men and women can forge with her.

Fatimah Kubra's translation in the Deccani-Urdu *maqtal* (martyrdom narrative) literature exemplifies the process of vernacularizing Karbala through the practice of linguistic equivalence. Kashefi's treatment of Fatimah Kubra's transformation from bride to widow is negligible in *Rowzat al-shohada*. Kashefi devotes approximately ten pages to his account of Qasem's martyrdom, yet

10. Sadiq Naqvi, *Qutb Shahi Ashur Khanas of Hyderabad City* (Hyderabad: Bab-ul-Ilm Society, 1982), 62.

11. The word *mehndi* is used by the Shia of South Asia to refer to the commemorative events of Qasem's martyrdom (*shahadat*) and marriage to Fatimah Kubra that take place on 7 Muharram (although according to Kashefi's account of this event in *Rowzat al-shohada*, the wedding happened on the night of 9 Muharram).

he concludes the chapter with this rather terse description of Fatimah Kubra’s experience:

The daughter of Imam Husayn (peace be upon him) rubbed her hand in Qasem’s blood and smeared it on her head and face, and she thus spoke, revealing her emotional state:

Those bereft ones, whose beloved is killed,  
 They have rouged their faces with the  
 blood of their beloved.

They are the new brides, who washed  
 the murdered saint,  
 They dye themselves like this from head  
 to foot.<sup>12</sup>

Fatimah Kubra laments her husband’s untimely death, but her transformation from bride to widow is not Kashefi’s focus, because in the context of sixteenth-century Iran, the taboo of widow remarriage was not socially and locative meaningful. In the practice of making linguistic equivalence, however, Fatimah Kubra’s role in the Deccani-Urdu Karbala cycle assumes much more significance.

This event resonates for the Shia of South Asia for two reasons. First, 7 Muharram is significant for the Shia because it was on this day that the army of the opposing ‘Umayyad caliph Yazid denied Imam Husayn’s entourage access to the waters of the Euphrates river, causing them to suffer from extreme thirst. The second reason situates the *mehndi* in a distinctively South Asian or Indic context, which is based on the universality of marriage for men and women, the arrangement of marriages, and the cultural taboo against widow remarriage. In one poem of lament recited in Hyderabad, the trauma of widowhood and its social stigma is dramatically emphasized: “It is such an outrage that everyone calls her *rand*, / ‘O why did I not die? Alas, bridegroom Qasem.”<sup>13</sup> *Rand*, a particularly powerful Urdu word, connotes two feminine-gendered states that possess negative connotations. A *rand* or *randi* is a common prostitute, and the word can also refer to a widow. A more polite,

less emotionally charged way to refer to a widow in Urdu is to use the chaste word—in all its semantic range of meaning—*bevah*, which literally means “without being in a state of marriage.” *Rand*, particularly in the context of a young widow, conveys a deep social anxiety about the powerful sexuality that cannot be diffused through lawful sexual intercourse with her husband.<sup>14</sup> In South Asia, where the Hindu taboo of widow remarriage prevails, such young women, who are unable to remarry and enjoy the sexual relationship allowed by marriage, are dangers to society. As this verse implies, even saintly figures are not immune from the gossip and social anxieties expressed by the public.

This wedding introduced in Kashefi’s *Rowzat al-shohada* assured the enduring popularity of this hagiography of the heroes and heroines of the battle of Karbala. As many of the Shias whom I interviewed in Hyderabad explained to me, the historical veracity of whether the wedding of Qasem and Fatimah Kubra actually happened is irrelevant. They believe in the wedding, Fatimah Kubra’s sacrifice, and Qasem’s martyrdom for the cause of religion. For them, it is a matter of the heart, not of the mind. It is not a matter of empirically proving that the wedding took place. For the Shia of Hyderabad, I was told repeatedly that the *mehndi ki majlis* helps them to remember the battle of Karbala, and heroes like Fatimah Kubra and Qasem remind them of their family members and friends who suffer bad marriages, poverty, or widowhood. This story vernacularized to make Qasem and Fatimah Kubra idealized Hyderabad Shias orients one’s faith and allegiance to the holiness of the Ahl-e Bait, because one can imagine and feel Karbala in a truly *real* and immediate fashion: through the idiom and worldview of the Deccan, not the Arabistan of an Iraqi Karbala.

*Rowzat al-shohada*, with its nearly immediate popularity in effecting the consolidation of Shiism in the Deccan, has not been accepted by all. Since the mid-nineteenth century, Indian

12. This hemistich (*misra*) in the final *bait* of Fatimah Kubra’s poetic speech lamenting her deceased husband, Qasem, brings this chapter to a significant conclusion. Fatimah Kubra calls her husband *wali*, which conveys the dual meanings of “lord” and “saint.” Husayn Va’ez Kashefi, *Rowzat al-shohada (Garden of the Martyrs)* (Tehran: Kitab Foroushi-ye Islamiyya, 1979), 328.

13. “Bint-e Shah kahti thi, ha’e Qasem bane” (“The Daughter of the King said ‘Alas, bridegroom Qasem!’”), in *Matam-e Husain (The Mourning of Hasayn)* (Hyderabad: Razvi, 2008), 45.

14. For a particularly insightful examination of the expression of sexual anxieties in the South Asian public sphere in the nineteenth century, see Charu Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001).

Shias in the cities of Lucknow and Hyderabad have debated whether it is properly Islamic to observe obviously Hindu-influenced Muharram rituals such as the *mehndi ki majlis*. In the following section, I examine the content and form of those debates and how the Shi'i community in Hyderabad has largely resisted the devernacularizing pressures exerted by Iran in the past 150 years. I begin the following section with an account of several interactions that I had with a young Shi'i man named Shaja'at, who, based on a clear case of ethnographic intervention, began to question his rejection of the *mehndi ki majlis*, an experience that exposed him to an ontological dilemma that he had heretofore not encountered. For Shaja'at the dilemma regarding his desire to identify with the cosmopolitan Shi'i community, yet his developing pride in his Hyderabad identity and emergent awareness of the distinctiveness of its vernacular devotional practices, reflects an individual's attempts to engage with a locative praxis of equivalence, yet his experience illustrates the discursive process of mediating global and local.

#### Debating the *Mehndi ki Majlis* in Hyderabad

I spent more than three months in 2005 working in the archives at the Salar Jung Museum in Hyderabad. I was slowly transcribing a manuscript section about Qasem's wedding—a laborious process considering the fragile condition of the manuscript and the museum's poor lighting—when the manuscript preservationist who was sitting next to me asked me if I was working on Shi'i manuscripts. I explained my project to him, and he told me about the kutubkhaneh-ye Ja'fariyya (Ja'fari Library) located just around the corner, almost next door to the home of Sadiq Naqvi, one of Hyderabad's well-known *zakirs* and an expert on the Shi'i literature and history of the Deccan. Although I had been in Hyderabad for several months at this point, no one had yet told me about a Shi'i library located in the Darulshifa area. The preservationist told me to ask for Shaja'at and that he would be more than willing to help me locate some of the texts for which I had been searching.

I decided that paying a visit to the Ja'fari Library would probably be more productive than sitting around Salar Jung, so I hopped on my scooter and set off. It turned out that I had walked past the Ja'fari Library on several occasions without realizing that it was a library. Located in a small building on the grounds of the Sartauq-e Alava *'ashurkhana* dedicated to the fourth imam, Zain al-'Abidin, it was unremarkable and lacked any signs designating its function. Adjusting my *dupatta* (scarf) to cover my head, I entered the small room where three or four men were sitting quietly and reading. I asked for Shaja'at. He was a young bespectacled man, sitting at one end of a long table, his head bent over some text that he was reading with great interest. I introduced myself to him and explained yet again the subject of my research and that there were several books I needed for my research, especially Sayyid Mahdi Lakhnavi's proof-text of Qasem's wedding, *'Aba'ir al-Anwar*.<sup>15</sup> This is one in a significant series of texts that began to be composed in the mid-nineteenth century in response to critiques of the historical veracity of Kashefi's *Rowzat al-shohada* and the permissibility to observe the *mehndi ki majlis* as a ritual expression of Indic vernacular Shiism. Shaja'at produced this text for me, and he also provided me with a dissenting voice in Hyderabad's Shi'i community.

I returned to the Ja'fari Library on several more occasions to search the catalogs, and one afternoon Shaja'at mentioned in passing that Zahra Academy, the women's wing of the Shi'i Daneshgah-e Ja'fariyya madrasa, was hosting its annual seminar and graduation ceremony on 31 July 2005. I was invited, and I told Shaja'at that I would try to attend. I did not realize that I was being invited as a guest of honor, and when I showed up at the Zahra Academy, I was rather taken aback when I walked into the hall in which approximately two hundred women were seated and wearing Iranian-style *hijab*. I felt that I had committed a social gaffe by wearing a loose *shalwar-qameez* and *dupatta*—typical modest dress for most of Hyderabad's Shi'i women. I had the impression that I was in Iran once

15. Sayyid Mahdi Lakhnavi, *'Aba'ir al-Anwar (Tears of Light)*, 3 vols. (Lucknow: Sarfaraz Qaumi, 1925).



again; there was even a mullah sitting on the stage in his robes and turban. What I did not realize at that moment was that I was a “chief guest” at the institutional center of the “Iranianized” Shi’i community of Hyderabad.

After the commencement at Zahra Academy, I had a number of conversations with several of the invited women speakers. One of them invited me to her daughter’s wedding the following week. She informed me that it would be a truly *ja’iz* (legal) Muslim wedding, unlike so many of the weddings that take place among the Shias in Hyderabad. I was immediately intrigued by this piece of unsolicited information about Hyderabad Shi’i weddings. I asked what would make this wedding *ja’iz* in her opinion. A woman, whom I call Zeba Husaini, explained that no dowry would be given, nor would any of the “Hindu” events be celebrated. I asked whether even *mehndi* would be done, and she responded that *sachaq* (henna ceremony and presentation of gifts at the bride’s house the day before the wedding), *mehndi*, and *barat* (the procession of the groom to the bride’s natal home on the day of the wedding) would not be performed. She quite proudly drew a parallel to the Sunna of the prophet Muhammad in which his daughter Fatimah al-Zahra (the namesake of the women’s wing of the Daneshgah-e Ja’fariyya) received a simple dowry and rejected the excesses of wedding celebrations.<sup>16</sup>

Another middle-aged woman, a social worker named Kaneez Fatimah, stated that these Iranianized Shia are different from the other Shias in Hyderabad because they do not attend *majlis-e ‘aza*, and, most important, “do not participate in Muharram activities like the *mehndi* of Qasem.”<sup>17</sup> Zeba affirmed that only the *‘aqd-e nikah* (the signing of the wedding contract) was necessary and that that was all that is truly Islamic. It seemed to me that every Indic element—everything that rooted Zeba and her family in India as Indians—had been excised from this upcoming wedding, further drawing this small group of Hyderabad Shi’i into the aesthetic and ideology of Khomeini’s idealized Islamic Republic.

Following this event at Zahra Academy, I went with Shaja’at and his wife, Seema, to their house, located just down the street, to have lunch. Seema had just completed a course of study at Zahra Academy and received her certificate. Seema is a social worker for the Imam-e Zamanah Mission, a charitable Shi’i organization that serves the Old City. I was looking forward to speaking with Seema about what she believes about Qasem’s marriage and whether vernacular Shi’i devotional practices such as *mehndi* are positive expressions of devotion to the Ahl-e Bait in an Indian context. I tried to ask Seema several questions, but she always deferred to Shaja’at to respond. I was frustrated and tried instead to discern her thoughts by paying close attention to her reactions as I spoke with her husband about Kashefi and *mehndi*.

After a delicious lunch of chicken and rice, we began to discuss the matter of *mehndi* and whether it is appropriate for Indian Shias to use it as a tool for remembering the sacrifices of Imam Husayn and his family. Shaja’at asked me whether I believe that the wedding happened—a question that I am often asked, and one that I am reluctant to answer. With each of these discussions, part of me wonders, does it matter what I think? What stake do I have in this question? Of course, I do have a stake, and I have an important role in this debate, as I engage all types of Shias and try to discover what is happening in the devotional and ideological life of the Hyderabad Shi’i community. The situation is growing ever more complex, and how do I address these issues to people on each side of the divide? Do they recognize that there is an apparent ideological and praxis-oriented split within the community?

In response to Shaja’at’s question, I asked him what he thinks. I asked him whether he thinks that I believe in the wedding, and then I told Shaja’at that “it doesn’t matter what I think. I am here to find out about what Hyderabad Shi’i think about the wedding.” I asked him if he believes that the wedding took place. He gave a click of his tongue, lifted his chin, and closed his eyes a bit, the standard nonverbal response

16. To protect this woman’s privacy, I have changed her name. Zeba, interview by the author, Hyderabad, 31 July 2005.

17. Kaneez Fatimah, interview by the author, Hyderabad, 31 July 2005.

for “no.” This is often done in response to a comment, question, or situation that is perceived to be annoying or not worth asking. I knew that he did not believe that the wedding took place, but I also thought, how interesting that he was so willing to help me in my research, especially as I was looking for texts that prove it happened. I asked him why he does not believe that Qasem and Fatimah Kubra married, and he said that it would have been impossible and inappropriate considering the circumstances.

I was surprised by what he said. Shaja’at asked me how many daughters Imam Husayn had, and I said three. He disagreed and said that he had only two: Sakinah (Roqayya) and Sughra. He asserted that it was Sughra who is purported to have married Qasem and that Fatimah Kubra never existed. I was a bit surprised by this and said that there are countless references to Sughra being ill and remaining behind in Medina. He said, no, that is not true. This issue of identity and presence or absence of characters (*kindar*) at the battle of Karbala is fascinating. We continued the conversation in this vein for a few minutes, and I sort of let Shaja’at make his point. He said that Fatimah Kubra is not real and that the wedding could never have happened.

I asked him why he does not believe in *Rowzat al-shohada* as a text, and again he gave me the standard response that there are many other more “authoritative” and “*sahih*” martyrdom narratives (*maqatil*) to which I should be referring. He cited *Lahuf, Bihar al-Anwar*, Sheikh al-Mufid’s *Kitab al-Irshad*. I said, “Yes, I am familiar with all of these texts, and they are very important [they are all also written in Arabic].” I said, while we were at it, we may as well include the *Tarikh* of Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari in this list, as he mentions the battle of Karbala in his history. Shaja’at heartily agreed with me and said that it is also an authoritative text. After having gotten Shaja’at to identify the authoritative texts, I asked him what makes Kashfi so unauthoritative. Aside from reiterating Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari’s argument that it is based on weak or faulty *riwayats* (tradition, narrative) and includes events that “never happened,” he

could not say specifically what is so wrong with the text. I pointed out that this text has been very influential in the development of Muharram literature in Hyderabad. Shaja’at then lowered his voice even more (he always speaks so quickly, and he mumbles, which makes it very difficult for me to understand sometimes, especially on the phone), and he said that sometimes the transmission of what happened at Karbala goes around and around and bits and pieces of things get added or deleted from the narrative. I lit up and said that when I was a child we used to play a game called “telephone.” We would sit in a circle and one person would whisper a sentence in the next person’s ear. By the time we had transmitted the sentence around the circle, it had become something completely different. I asked him if he thinks this is a similar situation, and he said absolutely, yes. I asked him then, what makes us so certain that the “authoritative” texts are the correct narratives? He seemed a bit nonplussed by this questioning, and our luncheon slowly came to an end after our conversation desultorily drifted off into other topics of a less theological nature.<sup>18</sup>

When I met Shaja’at again for lunch on a hot summer day in March 2006 (March is “summer,” the hot season in the Deccan), he was carrying a notebook. We chatted through lunch—he filled me in on news about his wife and what was happening at the Shi’i library where he works. After lunch, we went outside to sit, hoping to catch a cooling breeze. Shaja’at said to me, “I have been thinking a lot about this Qasem marriage, and I have even been looking through some of the books about this. See, in this text I found a reference to the marriage, and in this other text, too. But, I still cannot believe that it happened.” As a member of the minority “Iranianized” Shi’i community in Hyderabad who does not believe in or accept the historical possibility of the marriage of Qasem, the thirteen-year-old son of the second imam, Hasan, to Fatimah Kubra, the eleven-year-old daughter of Imam Husayn, at the battle of Karbala, Iraq, in 680 CE, Shaja’at was clearly interested in this matter. He, too, was interrogating the archive to find an answer as to whether it is correct prac-

18. Shaja’at and Seema, interview by the author, Hyderabad, 31 July 2005.

tice for Shi'i Muslims to observe the *mehndi ki majlis* commemorating the South Asian custom of decorating the bride and groom with henna. Shaja'at's act of sharing his own research with me not only brought into dramatic relief the influence of the ethnographer's presence but also made me understand the emotional and intellectual contours of how Hyderabadis debate the appropriateness of observing the *mehndi* mourning assembly as an expression of their Indian and Shi'i identities. In the context of the *mehndi* mourning assembly and the debates that have been prominent for the past century and a half, the vernacular matters very much.

The expansion of Muslim networks in the past 150 years, while connecting minority Shi'i Muslim communities together, has also resulted in pressures to conform to the notion of a cosmopolitan Shi'i community. In the introduction to their edited volume, *Muslim Networks*, Miriam Cooke and Bruce Lawrence observe that "because Islam is not homogeneous, it is only through the prism of Muslim networks—whether they be academic or aesthetic, historical or commercial—that one can gain a perspective on how diverse groups of Muslims contest and rearticulate what it means to be Muslim."<sup>19</sup> Networks of pilgrimage and the movement of Shi'i religious scholars between the Indian cities of Lucknow and Hyderabad and the spiritual centers of Iran (Qom) and Iraq (Najaf, Karbala) indicate the connectedness of Shi'i Muslims trans-regionally, yet these very networks highlight the significance of the vernacular-local in defining Shi'i religious practices and worldviews.

The Shi'i community in the South Indian city of Hyderabad has strongly resisted campaigns launched by the religious elite of Iran and Iraq to abandon vernacular Muharram ritual-devotional practices. The *mehndi* ceremony, or *majlis*, is steadfastly observed on 7 Muharram by Hyderabadis Shias in defiance of pressures from the ulema in Iran and Iraq to eliminate practices deemed to be unauthentic and un-Islamic (and antimodern). I suggest that participation in the *mehndi* mourning assembly narrates a worldview connecting Hyderabad's Shias

to Karbala through the ecology, aesthetics, and values of the local Deccani culture.

Hyderabad has been a center of Shi'i culture in India since the founding of the Qutb Shahi dynasty in 1512 CE. From the first decades of the Qutb Shahi dynasty, countless Iranian Shi'i poets, theologians, artists, and warriors came to the Deccan to serve in the court. The Iranian influx had a significant influence on the development of Deccani Shiism. Theological-devotional texts and devotional practices were carried along with these immigrants (*afaqis*) and adopted by the Qutb Shahi kings and incorporated with the cultural and religious practices of the Telugu-speaking Hindus indigenous to the Deccan plateau. Very quickly, Persian martyrdom narratives about the battle of Karbala, such as the Iranian mullah Kashefi's early-sixteenth-century *Rowzat al-shohada*, were translated into meaningful local forms. Verse narratives eulogizing the martyrs of Karbala also became a popular genre of memorial literature in the Deccan. In the Shi'i kingdoms of the Deccan, the literature, both prose and poetry, and rituals of the *majlis* mourning assembly gradually transformed their Persian language and idiom to express the vernacular world of the Deccan in the local languages of Urdu and Telugu. This process of translation was neither difficult nor unnatural. These epic stories of Karbala resonated with the Hindus of the Deccan, who themselves participated in the great oral epic traditions of the Mahabharata and Ramayana, in which kings are larger than life but the heroes and heroines are identified as being truly real and human. Mir Vali Khan Munis's *Riyaz al-tahirin* (*Gardens of the Chaste*), an Urdu translation of Kashefi's *Garden of the Martyrs*, describes the wedding of Qasem and Fatimah Kubra in astounding and thoroughly Deccani-Indian—not Arabian or Persian—detail.

The devotional rituals and practices that were brought with the Iranian *afaqis* were also transformed by the local Deccani culture. The description of the Deccani-Indian-style wedding of Qasem and Fatimah Kubra at the battle of Karbala in *Riyaz al-tahirin* reflects the practices

19. Miriam Cooke and Bruce Lawrence, *Muslim Networks: From Hajj to Hip-Hop* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 1.

that the Shias of the Deccan had adopted from the local Hindu culture. Wedding rituals such as *sachaq*, *mehndi*, *manjha* (turmeric grinding ceremony), and *barat* do not exist in Arab Muslim culture—these are distinctively Indic practices that Indian Muslims, both Sunni and Shia, have integrated into their cultural and religious identities. In Urdu devotional poetry commemorating the battle of Karbala, these rituals are invoked to great emotional effect, making men and women weep for this young couple’s sufferings. In one of the most popular *salams* sung on 7 Muharram, and in the assembly of grief held before any joyous occasion, the child Sakinah calls out to Qasem, “Come home, brother, so that I may adorn you with *mehndi*.” The *mehndi* ceremony is usually held on the day before an Indian wedding. The bride’s family goes to the groom’s house singing songs and bearing gifts and trays of henna for decorating the hands and feet. It is a joyful occasion for Hyderabad Shias, but in honor of the heroes and heroines of Karbala, there must always be a moment of remembrance and grief before happiness. Again, Karbala is brought to memory through a Deccani worldview influenced by Indic cultural practices and values yet made into something distinctively Muslim.

In attempts to construct a cosmopolitan, homogenized Shi’i identity, the religious elite of Iran and Iraq has targeted practices such as the *mehndi ki majlis* as not truly authentic. Cities like Lucknow in North India have reduced the observance of *mehndi*. I became aware of the debates about Qasem and Fatimah Kubra’s wedding in August 2002 when I was studying Urdu in Lucknow. In the course of an interview with a prominent scholar of Urdu Karbala literature, in response to a question that I asked about the Hindu influence in the ritual remembrance of Qasem and Kubra’s wedding, this professor emphatically assured me that these days far fewer Lucknowi Shias observe the *mehndi* on 7 Muharram. He declared, “We don’t follow these superstitious practices any longer. *Mehndi* is un-Islamic, and all of these wedding rituals are too

expensive. A Muslim wedding shouldn’t have all those extra Hindu-type rituals. Instead, we celebrate the sacrifice of Fiza.<sup>20</sup> Did you know that she was black—from Ethiopia? That is more modern.”<sup>21</sup> Yet Hyderabad Muslims, unlike Muslims in other parts of India, have resisted pressures to conform to what they perceive as an arbitrarily defined set of Muharram practices. In the course of interviews with a diverse sample of Hyderabad Shias, I constantly heard both men and women assert that the *mehndi ki majlis* of 7 Muharram is authentic and that it is truly Muslim.

In the course of ethnographic fieldwork and archival research, I have identified three principal arguments used by Hyderabad Shia to defend the practice of *mehndi*. First, people say that if they believe that Qasem and Fatimah Kubra were married at Karbala, then why does it matter so much whether one can historically verify that it happened. Second, Hyderabad Shias openly acknowledge that the wedding rituals observed in the *mehndi ki majlis* derive from local Hindu culture but that Muslims have adopted these practices and values making them equally Islamic. Third, it is for the Shia of Hyderabad to determine what is and is not acceptable Muharram practice.

One of the most common explanations that I heard from my informants in Hyderabad for why the *mehndi* mourning rituals continue to be observed is simply that they have faith that it happened. One of my informants asked me, “Does it matter whether it is in some history book?” Another informant named Sabiha, who is the daughter of one of Hyderabad’s most renowned *‘alims* (religious scholars) postulated, “Mir Anis and Mirza Dabir [two famous nineteenth-century Urdu composers of Karbala poems] wrote about the marriage of Hazrat Qasem and Bibi Kubra, and Muslims believe that their poetry was signed by Imam Husayn. Therefore, whatever they wrote about Karbala in their *marsiya*s is historically verifiable.”<sup>22</sup> For some Hyderabad Shias, the absence or presence of textual proof does not affect one’s belief in

20. Fiza was an Abyssinian princess who converted to Islam and served as the maidservant to Fatimah Zahra. According to tradition, after Fatimah’s death, Fiza remained loyal to the Ahl-e Bait and was present at the battle of Karbala.

21. Sharib Rudaulvi, interview by the author, Lucknow, August 2002.

22. Sabiha Asghar, interview by the author, Hyderabad, 8 February 2005.

whether the wedding happened. For others, the belief that Imam Husayn sanctioned the composition of poems about Karbala validates the authenticity of the marriage. It is a matter of faith.

A second argument that I encountered roots the *mehndi* of 7 Muharram in the local Hyderabad context. Reza Agha, Hyderabad's senior-most Shi'i religious scholar and the preacher at the city's largest annual *mehndi* mourning assembly, explained to me in several interviews that the Urdu word for wedding, *shadi*, which literally means "joy," is not what happened at Karbala. Reza Agha asserted that only the signing of the *nikah*, or Muslim marriage contract, could have been performed in such a situation. He declared, "There is a big difference between the joyful rituals of a wedding and the actual marriage."<sup>23</sup> Reza Agha pointed out that there is a semantic range of meaning that we must keep in mind. The marriage act may have taken place, but there were none of the rituals. Hyderabadis observe the *mehndi* because it is such a central aspect of Indian marriages, both Hindu and Muslim. Sadiq Naqvi, another informant, explained that the clothing, jewelry, and customs that are performed by Indian Muslims are derived from Hindu practices but that over time these practices have been thoroughly Islamicized and are considered completely authentic and not in tension with religious law, or Sharia.<sup>24</sup>

The third explanation was one that I heard while sitting around enjoying a snack of spicy chickpeas and ice cream at a turmeric grinding ceremony at the home of another Shi'i family in the Old City. A young woman who is working on her master's degree at Osmania University beckoned her father to speak with me after she learned of my research. She said, "My father, although he works in the Gulf, has lived in Iraq, and he has very strong feelings about Hazrat Qasem and the *mehndi*." Fatimah's father joined our small circle sitting on an immaculate white sheet and entered into our dis-

ussion of the *mehndi*—many of the Hyderabadis who have emigrated to the Gulf, Canada, or the United States have renounced the 7 Muharram *mehndi* rituals as un-Islamic and rooted in superstition. I admit that I expected the same from this man, but in a few words, Riaz consolidated aspects of the first two arguments mentioned above, and he effectively resolved the dilemma in his final two sentences:

The *mehndi ki majlis* is a way of expressing our love, affection, and gratitude for them. All of the rituals associated with the recollection of the Ahl-e Bait are acceptable because they help the devotee to remember the Prophet's family and their sufferings. Living in South Asia we have been influenced by our environment. One can choose personally if one observes the rituals or not. Either way it should be fine. What is religiously allowed or not can be determined only by Allah. It is not the prerogative of individual religious scholars. None of them have the right to say what is *halal* or *haram* [permitted or forbidden].<sup>25</sup>

#### Through the *Mehndi ki Majlis*, We Remember Karbala

In this essay I weave together a series of fieldwork encounters with the Shi'i community of Hyderabad, paying particular attention to Shaja'at's struggle to reconcile through a dual praxis of locative and linguistic equivalence the devernacularized, cosmopolitan Shiism that he learned in the *howzeh* (religious seminary) of Qom with his Hyderabad identity that is profoundly influenced by Indic values and customs. Shaja'at discovered that his belief that Qasem and Fatimah Kubra could have never married at Karbala had become a bit shaken through his interactions with me. Sometimes I wondered if Shaja'at had imbibed too much of the ethos of the Qom seminaries and in the process ceded a bit of his Hyderabad, Indian Shi'i identity, yet on that March day he showed me his own investigation about whether the marriage could have happened and whether it is okay to observe such a distinctively Indic event and still be *au-*

23. Sayyid Maulana Reza Agha, interview by the author, Hyderabad, 31 May 2005.

24. Sadiq Naqvi, interviewed by the author, Hyderabad, 15 August 2005.

25. Riaz, interview by the author, Hyderabad, 12 December 2005.

*thetically* Shia. I could sense his own ontological struggle as a Shia deeply embedded in the transregional homogenizing interpretation of Shiism espoused by the postrevolution Iranian government and the vernacular, hybrid Deccani identity of Hyderabad.

The Shia of Hyderabad feel deeply connected to the imams, and, through devotional texts and practices, Karbala is always present and local. For the majority of Shia living in the Deccan, whose mother tongue is either Urdu or Telugu, the Arabic language and the worldview espoused by the ulema of Iran and Iraq render a devotional spirituality that is vibrant with the culture of the Deccan into something foreign and as arid as the desert of Karbala. The nature of this debate indicates the importance of local or vernacular contexts in the shaping of several religious worlds for Hyderabad Shias. In Hyderabad, Fatimah Kubra and Qasem are religious and social role models—hagiographers depict Kubra as an idealized Indian Shi'i Muslim bride and widow, willing to sacrifice her own status as an auspicious bride in order to allow her husband to be martyred for the cause of justice and religion. As one of my informants stated, the *mehndi* mourning assembly is both a method for remembering Karbala, for demonstrating one's love for Imam Husayn and his family, and a means of articulating what it means to be Muslim, and what it means to be Shi'i and Indian, too. S