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**The Power Paradox in Muslim Women's *Majales*:
North-West Pakistani Mourning Rituals as Sites of
Contestation over Religious Politics, Ethnicity, and Gender**

During revolutions, rebellions, and movements, women are often called on to serve contradictory roles. They are asked to perform work—political, communicative, networking, recruiting, military, manual—that generally goes beyond the society's usual gender restrictions. At the same time, women serve as symbols of movement identity, unity, commitment, and righteous entitlement. To fit into this idealized symbolic image, individual women must fulfill often “traditional” or even exaggerated “feminine” behavioral and attitudinal requirements, such as loyalty, obedience, selflessness, sacrifice, and “proper” deportment: all in all, they are to put aside any personal aspirations and wishes for self-fulfillment and give their all to promoting the values and interests of their nation, revolutionary movement, or social group.

In serving the revolution, group, or movement, women gain skills, experience, and awareness of their own capabilities. However, they are to place all of this at the disposal of the revolutionary movement or, more precisely, its male leaders. Then, when the struggle is over and they are no longer needed, the female Algerian and Palestinian freedom fighters, the French and Iranian revolutionaries, and the American “Rosie the Riveters”

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are all supposed to go home and revert to earlier, narrower gender roles, as if all of their experiences had not happened and nothing had changed.

But of course things do change. In spite of increased pressures to serve their group selflessly during times of agitation and to promote their group's values devotedly, women do *not* abnegate all sense of selfhood. Within the tight constraints of their loyalties, they manage to maintain agency. Their experiences and what they have learned from them about themselves, society, and possibilities for change do not disappear but are incorporated into their self- and worldviews and may play a part in further personal and social transformation.

In this article, I examine a situation where women in Peshawar, Pakistan, as part of a religious/political movement, were passionately loyal to their deprecated religion and threatened religious group. With all their hearts, they wanted to serve their embattled religious sect. And yet, in spite of their dedication to their religion and religious movement, they used their service experiences to consider and transform their self-images and worldviews.

Many Americans might assume these Pakistani Shi'a Muslim women, caught up in a religious fundamentalist movement, to be so much controlled by their attachment to their culture's values and constraints that they become passive subjects, lacking selfhood and actor status. This view may be due to the fact that the women are Middle Eastern, Muslim, and religious fundamentalists. Any one of these three identities might imply that a woman is so attached to or embedded in her social grouping and its values that she capitulates entirely and is incapable of agency. True, dedicated as they are to their beleaguered religious group, they are not willing to question openly its values or tenets by obviously straying outside of its gender boundaries. My field research demonstrates that through their summer 1991 women's religious rituals (*majales*), Shi'a women in Peshawar, Pakistan, carried out crucial outreach work among Shi'a from various ethnic backgrounds, assisting their mobilization into the unified Shi'a movement.¹ In conducting this political work, they did not threaten central Shi'a values or gender expectations: they worked under male guidance in sex-segregated female groups and wrapped themselves in proper purdah veils while traveling to and from women's religious rituals.

While conducting their political and symbolic Shi'a movement work, however, the Peshawar women simultaneously furthered their own mo-

¹ Peshawar, a city of some three million inhabitants in northwestern Pakistan, is capital of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP). It is located not far from the Khyber Pass leading into neighboring Afghanistan.

bility, freedom of action, and personal development. The paradoxical demands on women of the Shi'a movement—that they should be capable political workers as well as obedient, pure, self-abnegating, covered, and secluded symbols of the strength and rectitude of the Shi'a religion and movement—provided a gender situation with some fluidity and dynamic potential. In spite of what outsiders might think and what movement adherents and political/religious leaders might attempt to project, gender—even for members of a fundamentalist Shi'a movement—is not immutable or unmalleable.

During my field research in Peshawar in the summer of 1991, Shi'a women engaged in subtle gender negotiation and modification through the practice of their religious mourning rituals—the *majales*. Through this religious ritual work, the women generated paradoxical power. Their significant political outreach and consolidation work made them valuable political resources—and thus all the more important to contain and control. But their travels around the city and even to other cities to attend *majales*; their developing performance, social, and leadership skills; their experiences with diverse people and situations; and their growing awareness of their capabilities presented them with opportunities to think differently about themselves, women in general, and women's place in society. It is ironic that the *majales* brought women *both* fundamentalism *and* freedom as well as a female community *both* coercive *and* enabling. Investigation of 1991 Shi'a women's *majales* in Peshawar reveals how women, no matter how loyal to their social group's values, religion, and aims in troubled times, may nevertheless find means for self-development—and thus potentially also for an evolving self- and worldview and for gender transformation—through the very practice of their group service.

The martyrdom of Imam Husein generated Shi'a Muslims' central myth and paradigm as well as these mourning rituals, which hold such profound significance for contemporary Pakistani Shi'a women.² Although the reigning caliph's army killed Imam Husein and his followers thirteen hundred years ago, the martyrs' struggle and plight still influence believers' worldviews and political stances at present. After their A.D. 680 conquest, the victors marched the captive womenfolk from the Karbala plains, south of present-day Baghdad, to Damascus, the caliph's capital. Zaynab, Imam

² Sunni (the majority in most Muslim countries) and Shi'a are the two main groups of Muslims. Shi'a, with their belief in intercession between God and humanity through the Family of the Prophet, *Imams* (successors to the Prophet), and *imamzadeh* (descendants of the *Imams*), are roughly analogous to the Catholic branch of Christianity. Similar to Protestant Christians, orthodox Sunnis do not accept intermediation or spiritual hierarchy, although many among the Sunni masses do.

Husein's sister, initiated the Shi'a mourning rituals by courageously lamenting and recounting the martyrdom story along the way and even at the caliph's court. Since then, the lamentations have been elaborated into passion plays, chants and hymns, ritual self-flagellation, processions, and narrations. With the profound spiritual and emotional meanings that they hold for believers, these rites of lamentation are also politically charged. Adherents use them for expressing Shi'a identity, making political statements, and contesting political power. Although the efficacy of Shi'a mourning rituals in political competition and conflict has been documented,³ their implications for ethnic and gender politics have been neglected.

My Peshawar study investigated connections among religious rituals, ethnic identity, and political hegemony. The *majales* provided a medium for Indian immigrant Shi'a to monopolize ritual process. In the Shi'a unification effort, Indian-Pakistani, or Mohajir (refugees from India), Shi'a were propagating their own ritual style, religious interpretation, and language—Urdu—at the cost of those from other Shi'a ethnic groups, such as Pukhtun and Persian-speaking Qizilbash.

Regarding gender politics, my research explored the paradoxical effects of women's rising commemorative ritual participation for their self-actualization and autonomy. Although women played a central part in knitting together Shi'a from various ethnic groups, and thereby gained mobility and a heightened sense of community, they were also exposed to intrusive social coercion and Shi'a activists' increasingly fundamentalist attitudes. The Shi'a movement's alternative power framework thus brought women constraints and losses as well as new freedoms. Because both female and male Shi'a organizers sought to use women's intensified ritual devotion for their own ends, women's ritual involvement became a contested resource in the subtle struggle over gender power.

To develop the analysis, I first contextualize my research on women's *majles* (sing. of *majales*) in Shi'a political history, Peshawar gender attitudes, and my own cross-cultural research experience. After introducing the concept of alternative power frameworks, I go on to review the social histories and divergent ritual practices of the three main Peshawar Shi'a ethnic groups and then analyze the expansion of Mohajir ritual influence and the Mohajir-dominated Shi'a fundamentalist movement. Finally, I dis-

³ In addition to Gustav Thaiss's (1972, 1973, 1978) sagacious work in prerevolutionary Iran, other examples of *Moharram* rituals commemorating the passion of Imam Husein as sites of political competition, conflict, or struggle over change are provided by Peters 1956; Jayawardena 1968; Hegland 1983a, 1983b; Good and Good 1988; Singh 1988; Freitag 1992; Ram 1994; and Thaiss 1994.

cuss the paradoxical power that women *majles* participants generate and speculate about where the contradictory forces might lead Shi'a women.

**Power politics, gender politics,
and Peshawar women's *majales***

The 1979 Iranian Revolution strengthened Shi'a identity not only in Iran but in other countries as well.⁴ My interest in the connections between Shi'a religious rituals and power contention was first aroused during my field research in Iran, which began in July 1978, just as the Iranian revolutionary movement was gathering force. A Fulbright fellowship to Pakistan in the fall of 1990 offered the opportunity to further probe connections between Shi'a ritual and politics. However, my teaching and research in Peshawar were rudely interrupted in mid-January 1991 by the pre-Gulf War evacuation of Americans. In July I was able to return, just in time for the anniversary rituals of Imam Husein's martyrdom. Shahida, a former student from the University of Peshawar, took me to her Mohajir neighborhood public Huseiniyyah Hall, launching me into the summer's round of women's *majales* and my research on the ethnic and gender politics of Imam Husein mourning ceremonies. At each *majles*, women invited me to a future *majles* in their own home or told me about others and urged me to attend. During the next two months, I spent most of my time scurrying around the city to women's rituals and interviewing Shi'a men and women.⁵

Few ethnographers have studied Shi'a women's rituals;⁶ male researchers

⁴ Iran is the only country where Shi'a Muslims are the majority and also control the government. Shi'a are a minority in most other Muslim countries, such as Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Lebanon, and Afghanistan. Although most Iraqis are Shi'a (about 55 percent), the government is Sunni controlled. As Nayereh Tohidi reminded me, Shi'a are the majority in newly independent Azerbaijan, formerly a republic of the USSR, although the government is secular. A large minority in Tajikistan is Shi'a as well. Among the many studies of Shi'a are Keddie 1983; Mottahedeh 1985; Cole and Keddie 1986; Rizvi 1986; Cole 1988; Hasnain 1988; Loeffler 1988; Norton 1988; Schubel 1991, 1993; Pinault 1992a, 1992b; Nakash 1994; and Walbridge 1996.

⁵ See Hegland 1995, 1997, in press for more discussion of my research experience.

⁶ For materials on the variety of ritual practices among Shi'a women, such as pilgrimage and *sofreh* (meals donated to the saints to request or thank for assistance), I refer the reader to the work of Anne H. Betteridge (1985, 1989), based on fieldwork in the southwest Iranian provincial capital, Shiraz, and Azam Torab (1996), based on Tehran research. The Ferneas' (1978) article about Muslim women's religious practices includes a vivid description of Shi'a women's mourning gatherings, which Elizabeth Fernea attended, in a small town of southern Iraq. Elizabeth Fernea's well-known book, *Guests of the Sheikh: An Ethnography of an Iraqi Village* (1989), contains gripping portrayals of *Moharram* activities by southern Iraqi Shi'a. In

have no access to the sex-segregated women's gatherings. Even with the entrée provided by my students, going on my own to rituals was difficult for me, because I did not know what reaction to expect from fervent Shi'a practitioners, particularly in the aftermath of Desert Storm. The American offensive against their fellow Iraqi Muslims had horrified and infuriated Pakistanis, and Saddam Hussein's genocidal slaughter of Iraqi Shi'a after the war and American inaction sorely grieved Pakistani Shi'a.

As an American, therefore, I was reluctant to attend *majales* where I might not know anybody and sometimes had to compel myself to go. My second *majles*, the 'Ashura ritual at a large Qizilbash home, was the most nerve-racking for me.⁷ A student's brother guided me through alleys and deposited me at the passageway leading to the women's upstairs balcony. (My student could not come with me, much to my regret; her conservative family did not allow their womenfolk out even to attend sex-segregated religious rituals.)

I slowly moved up the steps, emerging into the crowd of women already seated on the floor as close as possible to the lattice looking down on the courtyard below, where all the action would take place. All faces looked at me in wonder and then turned to murmur questions and speculations to their neighbors. I gathered the courage to find a space to sit and, eventually, even talk a little to the women around me. Hidden from male sight up on the latticed balcony, we women listened to the sermon and then crowded in to watch the men's spectacular grieving and bloody self-flagellation following the entrance of the white horse representing Imam Husein's bereaved steed.

Later, I realized I need not have been so apprehensive. As I attended more rituals and became acquainted with the regulars so that I could join in the chatting and community feeling, my comfort level rose. Although I am concerned about many implications of religious fundamentalisms and cannot entirely share these women's worldviews, during my visits I concentrated on trying to understand them. People did not query me on my opinions that summer but rather focused on expressing their own. In char-

contrast to city and town women's access to mourning rituals, Erika Friedl (1989) found Shi'a women in a southwest Iranian village lacking their own rituals and able only to watch the men while veiled and crouching unobtrusively on rooftops. Women were likewise excluded from *Moharram* processions in a settlement of about three thousand (in 1978-79) near Shiraz (Hegland 1986b).

⁷ 'Ashura, meaning "tenth" in Arabic, refers to the tenth of the Muslim lunar month *Moharram*, commemorated as the martyrdom anniversary.

acteristic anthropological “participant observation” research practice, I participated in their *Moharram* experiences as fully as possible while observing attentively.

As a Western, liberal woman, I saw this situation to be marked by a religious ideology and related sociopolitical stances that severely confine women. Indeed, I had come to the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) precisely because I wanted to study gender dynamics and women’s coping mechanisms under extreme conditions. Yet I wanted to focus not on women’s confinement but, rather, on their attempts to create selves, lives, and communities to serve best their own interests and those of their loved ones and affiliates, under their limiting circumstances.

For several reasons, I felt a bond with these Shi’a women that somewhat mitigated the worldview discrepancies. We were all females together, and in both their cultural setting and my own Midwestern, Scandinavian Lutheran background, women were perceived as having commonalities and were expected to interact among themselves at social gatherings. Further, in both cultural environments, women were supposed to be “nice” and were responsible for reaching out to and including other women. Adding to my sense of belonging at Peshawar Shi’a women’s ritual gatherings were my memories of similar Shi’a women’s gatherings I had attended in Iran. With these women, I was furious at Saddam Hussein’s brutality against the Iraqi Shi’a and greatly saddened by their plight. I too was distressed by discrimination and violence against Shi’a in Pakistan and elsewhere. My personal philosophy of concern about people suffering under inequality and unrightful power resonated with the Shi’a collective memory of Imam Husein and his small band’s courageous battle against the tyrannical caliph’s great forces. I grew intrigued with how these Pakistani Shi’a applied their paradigm of a persevering struggle between justice and evil domination to their current political situation, just as the application of this paradigm to the 1978–79 popular movement against the Shah’s government had fascinated me in Iran.

In Pakistan’s early history after the 1947 partition from India, Sunni-Shi’a conflict was not significant. The founders of Pakistan were largely secularists, and, in fact, Jinnah himself was a nominal Shi’a convert. In the early 1960s, however, Sunni religious leaders reacted to the Western-educated political elite’s plans for a democratic, secular state with demands that Islamic principles must govern Pakistan (Ahmed 1987). *Moharram* clashes broke out between Sunni and those Shi’a opposed to a Sunni Islamic state. Shi’a supported President Ali Bhutto: his secular government and Shi’a connections (his wife was originally an Iranian Shi’a) portended tolerance for the Shi’a minority, some 15–20 percent of Pakistan’s

population. Then, with President Zia-ul-Haq's politically astute efforts at Islamization, Pakistani Shi'a became seriously disaffected (Keddie 1993). Many aspects of President Zia's 1979 reform package, Shi'a angrily pointed out, were derived from a Sunni school of law and were not in accordance with Shi'a religious law (Richter 1981, 153). Shi'a were particularly incensed that Zia planned to collect *zakat* (religious taxes) directly from bank accounts; Shi'a did not give religious taxes to the government but to Shi'a leaders (*mujtahids*). After widespread demonstration in 1980, Shi'a were exempted from the government *zakat* taxation, but Zia's rigid Sunni Islamization had alienated Shi'a and encouraged Sunni-Shi'a acrimony, resulting in the bloody *Moharram* 1986 rioting in Pakistani Punjab (Keddie 1995, 207–9). Peshawar Shi'a, still furious, told me that during that period extremist Sunni groups, fueled by Zia's press for Islamization and funded by Saudi donations, had attacked Shi'a mosques in the NWFP and had even desecrated the Qur'ans found inside.

Peshawar Shi'a had particular reason to feel outraged frustration against the government. The top-ranking Pakistani Shi'a cleric, Arif al-Hussaini, a Peshawar resident and ardent Khomeini supporter, had been assassinated in 1988; those responsible had still not been punished. Militant Shi'a, racked by thoughts of Arif al-Hussaini's martyrdom and his as-yet unapprehended assailant, were at loggerheads with militant Sunni. Inspired also by the Iranian Revolution and by the related growth of Shi'a religious transnationalism,⁸ Peshawar Shi'a⁹ were gaining self-consciousness, I found in 1991. Many believed that the Sunni Muslim government and majority population discriminated against and mistreated them. Shi'a leaders felt that a stronger political front could potentially pressure the Sunni government into better protection and sensitivity to Shi'a needs and demands. Consequently, they were working to unite the divergent Shi'a ethnic groups—Mohajir, Pukhtun, and Qizilbash—into one large alliance.

As is often the case, women played central roles in reaching out to other

⁸ Shi'a present an opportunity to rethink the constructed boundaries for anthropological research and analysis. Some Shi'a leaders and communities spread around the globe—are their own languages, ethnic identities, nationalities, and variations in ritual practice—are finding means and motivations to develop closer ties and a greater sense of unity. We see not only the strengthening of Shi'a religious nationalisms within countries, but also the growth of Shi'a religious transnationalism.

⁹ Studies of Shi'a in Pakistan are rare. See Ahmed 1987; Keddie 1993, 1995, 183–86, 208, 209; Sagaster 1993; Schubel 1993; and Hegland 1995, 1997, in press. I am grateful to David Pinault for providing me with Ursula Sagaster's article.

Shi'a ethnic groups and strengthening social connections, in this case, largely through women's ritual mourning gatherings.¹⁰ Their task required increasing mobility and independence for *majles* attendance. By patronizing these mourning rites, they could spend time outside of the house in enjoyable social interaction, which was much appreciated by women ordinarily restricted to their homes by the stern Peshawar modesty code (*purdah*).¹¹

It is difficult for contemporary American women to grasp the extent of Peshawar women's containment and suppression. Peshawar is the capital of the NWFP, homeland of the Pukhtun ethnic group, whose stark views of women's place are distilled in their ominous saying: "Women — either the house or the grave." Ideally, a female should go out of the house only twice during her lifetime: once when being conveyed as a fully veiled, arranged-marriage bride from her father's to her husband's extended household, and the second time when her dead body is carried from house to cemetery. Although few (if any) women actually attain this ideal, nevertheless they are secluded as much as possible. Schooling takes few out of the home; only some 3 percent of NWFP females are literate. When women do leave the home, their segregation from men is still rigid: even social occasions, such as weddings or funerals, are sex-segregated. Further, men of any standing have men's houses — separate buildings or set-aside rooms — for entertaining other males apart from their own households, so that their women need never be exposed to outsiders.

Generally, to be allowed out of the home, Peshawar females must have very good reason; be fully concealed with a body veil and, for most, a face shield; and be escorted by a male relative. The careful modesty normally necessary even for non-Pukhtun women — the majority male Pukhtun population expected rigid *purdah* for proper females — became even more important with the growing Afghan refugee population. Women venturing outside without the knowledge or permission of their supervising menfolk feared their men's suspicion and severe punishment, rival groups' political

¹⁰ Hegland 1997 provides detailed discussions of Peshawar Shi'a women's ritual activities and their social bonding work in the Shi'a consolidation movement. For other analyses of women's social bonding work and its usefulness in politics, see Aswad 1967; Kaplan 1981; Joseph 1982, 1983; Hegland 1986b, 1990, 1991; di Leonardo 1987; and Petecet 1991.

¹¹ For informative discussions about the general situation of Pakistani women, see Eglar 1960; Papanck 1973, 1982, 1984, 1994; Rahat 1981; Ramazani 1985; Weiss 1985, 1990, 1992; Shaheed 1986, 1994; Rauf 1987; Mumtaz and Shaheed 1987; Mehdi 1990, Ewing 1991; Jalal 1991; Haeri 1993; and Mumtaz 1994.

or honor-motivated violence,¹² or harassment or worse, which any male “naturally” might commit against an unprotected woman.

Little wonder, then, that Shi‘a women eagerly grasped the expanding latitude to travel far afield for women’s religious gatherings. In addition to compelling spiritual reasons and sectarian loyalty, women tremendously enjoyed the adventure, socializing, and special refreshments at rituals. In spite of such attractions, though, their ritual participation confronted the women with problematic paradoxes: the Shi‘a unification goal rather inevitably bolstered religious fundamentalism and group social pressure. Non-Mohajir women faced further drawbacks. As the Mohajirs’ ritual style, religious approach, and language (Urdu) became predominant in the consolidated Shi‘a movement, the languages and ritual/religious styles of Shi‘a women recruited from other ethnic/linguistic groups, such as the Persian-speaking Qizilbash, were becoming lost to them.

Alternative power frameworks:

Opportunity and oppression

Several anthropologists have analyzed situations where women turn to another power framework in order to enjoy the alternative system’s freedoms and benefits.¹³ Embracing an alternative power framework and enjoying the freedom, opportunities, and mobility that it offers may also result in unsought and unforeseen restrictions and disadvantages (Abu-Lughod 1990). People may draw on several “spheres of action” in power manipulations and strategizing toward their own ends (Friedl 1991a; see also Friedl 1991b).

To gain affirmation, competence, status, religious reward, and self-assurance, Peshawar Shi‘a women evaluated several power frameworks and juggled numerous aspects of their identities and affiliations, all with their respective diverging, converging, and overlapping discourses. For these women, religion, family, ethnicity, gender, and nationality were significant sources of identity and meaning. They faced the challenge of finding means to satisfy their socially constructed needs and aims in each discourse while threatening others as little as possible.

¹² Kidnapping and rape of opponents’ womenfolk are not excluded from strategies of political competition in Pakistan. Perpetrators of such political violence against women have little fear of legal results: in order to bring the rapist successfully to conviction, a prosecutor would have to produce four male eyewitnesses to testify that the sexual encounter was indeed rape and not consensual, or else the female victim would be punished. See Haeri 1995b.

¹³ See Cattell 1992. For additional examples of people turning to alternative power frameworks or organizing paradigms, see Bailey 1957, 1960, 1970; and Cohen 1969, 1981.

Choosing appropriate frameworks

For Shi'a women, attachments to family and religion were so critical and profound that they were not prepared to pursue social status, self-assertion, career, competence, or distinction through means considered illegitimate by religious teachings and cultural understandings about family. In Deniz Kandiyoti's (1988) terminology, Peshawar Shi'a women were not prepared to reject the "patriarchal bargain" of exchanging autonomy for support and protection. Given their existential situations, they had good reason for this stance: economic dependence, lack of other viable options, and the perceived impossibility of living without family and male protection meant that women could not opt to leave sternly patriarchal, religiously supported family authority. In addition, the powerful emotional, psychological, and spiritual ties connecting women with their religious community and Shi'a saintly figures made them understandably reluctant to resist openly their religious heritage's patriarchal components (Hegland, in press).¹⁴

Pakistanis, on the whole, seem less ready to question their religion than are people in many other Middle Eastern countries. Their reluctance is related to the proximity and history with India and its Hindu majority, among other factors. As part of their nationalistic as well as religious duty, Pakistani Shi'a and Sunni women have shared responsibility for upholding Islam — Pakistan's *raison d'être* and the rallying focus against larger and more powerful India.¹⁵

Advantages for women in the Shi'a movement:

Freedom, mobility, women's community

For a number of reasons, then, Peshawar Shi'a women abstained from direct criticism or flagrant disobedience in order to pursue their own goals

¹⁴ Nancy Tapper (Lindisfarne's) publications on Syrian elites (1988–89) and an Afghan Durrani Pukhtun tribal group (1991) and Patricia Jeffery's (1989) on Muslim shrine managers in India feature women who could not afford to leave the relative security of family ties and patriarchal protection and so felt forced to comply with patriarchal authority. Also see Rugh 1984; Altorki 1986; al-Khayyat 1990; Peteet 1991; MacLeod 1992a, 1992b; Joseph 1993, 1994; Arebi 1994; and Friedl 1994.

¹⁵ This is not to claim that women completely refrained from any thoughts along these lines. With longer-term and more intimate interaction, enhanced experience and research skill, and the right opportunities (Keesing 1985), a field-worker might be able to hear indications of cynicism concerning religious gender teachings from these Peshawar Shi'a women. An illiterate, poor Iranian village woman confided to Friedl her strong suspicion "that religion, as preached and practiced, was not made by God but by men in order to suppress women!" (Friedl 1989, 133). All other village women with whom she spoke, Friedl reported, found it troubling to deal with the contradictions about women in their religion. Shi'a

(see Hegland, in press); rather, they appropriated the authorized *majles*, framing their ritual performances with their own interests.¹⁶ They thereby fulfilled central responsibilities, avoided jeopardizing valued connections, and even won approval from male family and religious supervisors. The male president of the Peshawar Shi'a organization, for example, did not hesitate to acknowledge women's contributions to *Moharram* commemorations. They did more for Imam Husein than men, he said: women spent far more time attending *majles*. Indeed, they maintained connections with each other through less frequent ritual gatherings during the off-season but socialized with other females practically from morning to night, day after day, during the entire two-and-a-half-month annual mourning season. Women were thought to be more emotional and compassionate, more attached to the saints and their sorrowful deaths. The president praised his niece Shahida for her *noha* (mourning couplets) chanting fame. He promoted his sister Mahreen's preaching career and sponsored her *majles* rituals in the courtyard he owned, where Mahreen lived with two other unmarried sisters. The president and others intent on uniting Shi'a into a strong political pressure group recognized the importance of women's gatherings for reaching out to the Shi'a population.

With new opportunities come new trials

Able to transcend their narrow ethnic social neighborhoods through entering the consolidating, Mohajir-dominated Shi'a movement's wider feminine ritual arena, the Peshawar Shi'a women did not consider that the greater opportunity for spatial movement through the alternative power framework would entail greater oppression in other regards, particularly for Qizilbash women. Indian-Pakistani Shi'a maintained links with relatives in Hindu-dominated areas. They were accustomed to the intense ritual life, rather fundamentalist worldview, and careful restrictions on women's behavior that provided Shi'a in India with shelters and markers against the Hindu population. The consolidating Shi'a fundamentalist movement in Peshawar influenced Indian women immigrants but affected Qizilbash women all the more; Mohajir language and ritual style were overshadowing Qizilbash ritual practices.

Women from other language groups—such as Pukhtuns and Persian-speaking Qizilbash—who were attracted by the Shi'a fundamentalist

women in Peshawar were probably somewhat less inclined to ponder contradictions, or at least to verbalize such reflection.

¹⁶ See Hegland in press for elaboration on how the women subverted *Moharram* rituals to construct their own meanings.

movement faced the demise of their own language in ritual practice and interethnic Shi'a interaction. In the consolidation of Peshawar Shi'a groups, Urdu, the language of the Indian Shi'a, gained preeminence. Urdu, the national language of Pakistan, is used in the educational system and is the mother tongue of the Mohajirs, who had mostly come to Pakistan at the time of the partition in 1947 and maintained close ties with relatives and associates in India. Urdu was a natural choice as the Pakistani Shi'a common language, because any Shi'a who attended public school automatically studied in this language. The use of Persian, the mother tongue of the Qizilbash (a minority among a minority), thus was declining in Pakistan.

For similar reasons, the Mohajir ritual style was becoming more popular at the Qizilbash format's expense. As the consolidating Shi'a fundamentalist movement gained force, Qizilbash women faced the extinction of their own ritual tradition: lyrical, gentle cultural performances. The Mohajirs were the most prominent Pakistani Shi'a group, and, in addition, their more fervent, vehement, and fundamentalist preachings and practices better matched the influential Islamic Republic of Iran brand of Shi'ism and more emphatically responded to extremist Sunni Muslims in Pakistan. Just as their spectacular, passionate ritual processions distinguished Indian Shi'a from the surrounding Hindu majority, their sensational rituals dramatically set off Pakistani Shi'a from the surrounding majority Sunni population.

Shi'a women attained gratifying social support and a sense of belonging by joining rituals, but only in exchange for submitting to peer surveillance and social pressure that enforced rigid behavioral expectations for women. The many sermons they heard decreed the essentializing fundamentalist Shi'ism that fueled Shi'a self-identification in Iran and in Pakistan.¹⁷ Indian Shi'ism's fundamentalist tendency, exacerbated by the explosion of sectarian violence and flourishing Hindu fundamentalism, spread to Pakistan through Urdu media, kinship networks, visiting, and clerical contact.

¹⁷ Detailed discussion on the applicability of the term *fundamentalism* to Middle Eastern or South Asian Islamic religious movements can be found elsewhere. *Fundamentalism* is, in my belief, the best term available to refer to a reemphasis on religion, including a return to what are considered by adherents to be the fundamentals or basics of the religion, the need for their application in this-worldly life, and—therefore—efforts to influence politics. Fundamentalists generally consider standardized belief and behavior, principles of hierarchy and obedience, traditional gender roles, and restrictions on women to be basic to their religions. They claim support for their assertions from holy sources. Fundamentalisms will naturally vary in meaning and character according to situation and even from person to person—in spite of their belief that only one version of the truth is valid (Loeffler 1988).

Finally, extremist Pakistani Sunni fundamentalist rhetoric and violence against Shi'a, together with strong Sunni Islamist influence in government, further pushed Pakistani Shi'a into their own defensively fundamentalist entrenchment.

Religious fundamentalism—a power framework alternative to ethnic group resource and territory protection

Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr (1994, 1995) argues that many aspects of current Islamic fundamentalism originated during the partition process between Pakistan and India. Nasr sees Pakistani theologian/ideologue Mawlana Mawdudi as developing a Muslim fundamentalist perspective to safeguard the interests of Muslims within the Muslim state of Pakistan.

Only if that [Muslim] majority would reaffirm its attachment to the fundamental tenets of the faith from which its identity was drawn would it safeguard its interests. . . . Fundamentalism was . . . the means for creating impregnable walls around the Muslim community. By interpreting Islam as an ideology for a vigilant community, by emphasizing puritanism, the exoteric dimensions of the faith, strict obedience to Islamic law narrowly interpreted, and by discouraging those customs and rituals that resembled Hindu practices or could serve as a bridge with Hinduism, Mawdudi moved to change the cultural milieu of Indian Islam as well as the context in which Muslims were encountering the political choices before them. . . . Fundamentalism, therefore, was at inception nothing more than radical communalism. (Nasr 1995, 126, 127, 128)

Anthropologists will see parallels between using fundamentalism to emphasize Muslim religious/cultural characteristics—and thereby to strengthen the boundary between Muslims and Hindus, between Muslim territory and Hindu territory—and Fredrik Barth's seminal work on ethnicity (see Barth 1969, introduction). Barth suggests that one way for an ethnic group to deal with contact and competition with another under conditions of change is to "choose to emphasize ethnic identity." And "the innovators may choose to emphasize one level of identity among the several provided by the traditional social organization."¹⁸

¹⁸ Barth 1969, 33, 34. In his classic work on ethnicity, based on research among the NWFP Pukhtun, Barth explores the factors, such as visible markers and value orientations, that bring about and maintain or modify group distinctions, resulting in the persistence of ethnic groups. It is precisely conditions of contact, interaction, and competition over territory and resources, he argues, that lead to the generation or exaggeration of markers and value orientations differentiating ethnic groups (Barth 1969, 1, 2).

Barth focuses on generative processes rather than essentialist entities in examining ethnicity. Borrowing his approach, one can postulate that Muslims who were in contact with Hindus under the divisive partition conditions would develop extreme forms of appearance, behavior, and value orientations to mark their identity and maintain the boundary between themselves and the surrounding Hindu population.

In partitioning India and Pakistan, the religious "level of identity" was emphasized over the ethnic. This process is repeating itself in Pakistan with the religious dichotomization between Sunni and Shi'a through the growth of fundamentalism and extremist groups in both branches of Pakistani Islam and, in correlation, deemphasizing ethnic identity among Shi'a groups.¹⁹

In earlier periods, Shi'a *Moharram* processions in India had been community events, with Hindus participating alongside Muslims (Cole 1988, 115–19; Freitag 1992). But as sectarian tension escalated before partition, *Moharram* rituals proclaiming Muslim identity and community carried explosive potential. Indian Shi'as' more dramatic rituals had reinforced their separate identity against the majority Hindus and their rich ritual calendar. Those Mohajir Shi'a migrating from India to Pakistan continued practicing their accustomed rituals, which were far more fervent than the rituals of local Qizilbash, who, having lived for generations in Muslim areas, had not faced a menacing Hindu majority. The Mohajir style of *majles* began to supplant their own informal, dispassionate performances and their less strict lifestyles. With barriers of language, ethnicity, and distinctive ritual practice between them and the wider fundamentalist Shi'a community eroding, Qizilbash women had more to lose in terms of attitudinal and behavioral latitude. Although embracing the Shi'a unification movement allowed Qizilbash females a way out of confinement to home and narrow social circle, they now had to deal with greater demands for conformity in dress and behavior and repeated ritual assertions in sermons and symbolism of feminine inadequacy and dependence.

Ethnic groups and women's divergent ritual practices

In the past, women in particular had been limited to religious gatherings in their own ethnic enclaves: Mohajirs, Qizilbash, or Pukhtuns. The Mohajirs had settled in the newer Sadar area of Peshawar during the 1947

¹⁹ While Pakistani Shi'a are suppressing ethnic differences, thereby strengthening sectarian unity, other Pakistanis are engaging in ethnic conflict. Violence between natives and immigrants from India (Mohajirs) in Karachi, for example, has produced far more dead than the Sunni-Shi'a battle there.

partition of India. Most Mohajirs were from merchant families and generally lived well on proceeds from Sadar Bazaar area commerce.

Qizilbash Shi'a had long lived in the Peshawar "Old City," where narrow, rambling walkways formed a maze between jutting walls that hid courtyards and homes. Originally of Turkish background, their forebears had been brought by the Persian shahs from Anatolia to serve in their administration and military. The Qizilbash had become Persianized during their long residence in that country (Roemer 1990). Qizilbash fought for the Safavid state of Persia and then were employed by Nadir Shah during his invasion of India in 1739 (Cole 1988, 41, 45). While traveling east in Persian service, the Qizilbash had become scattered along the way. A sizable group, still speaking an older version of Persian, lived in Peshawar's Old City. Most Qizilbash women who attended *Moharram majales* lived comfortable lives, supported by male family members' profitable occupations such as merchants or bankers.

Shi'a are a religious minority among Pukhtun; most Pukhtun are Sunni Muslims. The Pukhtun, the ethnic group populating Pakistan's NWFP, were described as unruly and fierce by British colonial administrators. The present border between Pakistan and Afghanistan divides the Pukhtun homeland. More than two million Afghan Pukhtun refugees who fled Afghanistan during the recent war now live in Pakistan (Grima 1992, 3). As this ethnic group dominates in the NWFP of Pakistan, some Pukhtun who are asserting their identity and political power have been lobbying to change that province's name to Pukhtunistan.²⁰

Pukhtun Shi'a rituals

Among Shi'a women of these three ethnic backgrounds, ritual practices differed dramatically. For Pukhtun Shi'a, *Moharram* practices resembled some sufi groups' rituals. Male ritual performers in Pukhtun villages, enabled by their faith in Imam Husein's protection, put on spectacular demonstrations walking on coals or piercing themselves without negative effect. Pukhtun women practiced arduous facial self-flagellation, swinging their hands together from above to strike their cheekbones.

For several reasons, Pukhtun ritual practices were not as rapidly displaced by those of the Mohajirs as were Qizilbash rituals. Although Pukhtun Shi'a living in Peshawar might attend rituals with non-Pukhtun, most Pukhtun Shi'a lived in rural areas and were not exposed to Mohajir influence. Pukhtuns dominated in the NWFP and were thus generally more

²⁰ If this renaming should be done (although it is highly unlikely), each of the four provinces in Pakistan would carry the name of its predominant ethnic group.

influential than the small Qizilbash minority. Also, Shi'a zealots admired Pukhtun Shi'a because of their dramatic and arduous mourning practices and so did not target them for tactful missionizing, as they did the "lax" Qizilbash.

Mohajir Shi'a rituals

Mohajir women practiced strict mourning. They attended ritual sessions from morning to evening during the two and a half months of mourning, especially during the first ten days of *Moharram*. Going from one home in Sadar to another, they joined perhaps eight *majles* sessions a day. At mourning gatherings they maintained somber demeanor: they did not talk frivolously, smile, or laugh. They did not wear makeup, gold jewelry, or flamboyant hues of red, pink, orange, or yellow, but wore black on the most important mourning days and on lesser days wore reserved colors such as blue or green.

Mohajir *majles* sessions, conducted in Urdu, began with singing *marsia* (devotional or commemorative verses) while women sat on the floor, sometimes beating their chests. Then a preacher admonished the women about their Islamic duties. Her sermon ended in a martyrdom story while women wept and moaned and slapped chests or legs. After the sermon, women stood while different circles of young women vied to lead *noha* (mourning chants). All the women beat their chests in rhythm to the chanting, often with athletic swinging movements, stretching their arms up high and then flinging their hands back down for resounding blows to the chest. Finally, prayers were directed to the Prophet and other holy figures before the women sat down for a treat offered by the host.

Qizilbash Shi'a rituals

In contrast to their Indian counterparts, Qizilbash women modified their appearance and comportment very little for *majles* gatherings. Wearing bright clothing, makeup, jewelry, and cheerful faces to *majles* sessions, they chatted and laughed and did not change their normal behavior to step into mourning stance. Indian women therefore criticized them — although not to their faces — for their shocking lack of piety. Until recently, Qizilbash women had conducted their *majales* in their own Persian language. Sitting at ease on the floor, they sang or chanted lyrically about Imam Husein and his family while tapping themselves gently on the chest with one hand. The program might include a *rozah*, or story about Imam Husein's martyrdom. The audience joined in the choruses, but women did not weep or display a sorrowful air during the *rozah* recitation. Rather than frantic,

heartrending grief and self-mortifying fealty exhibitions, Qizilbash rituals were quiet, poignant performances.

Mohajirs' encroaching cultural hegemony over Qizilbash

In 1991, women were attending more rituals than in the recent past, both in their own and other congregations, and another change was also taking place: the Indian *majles* model was prevailing over Qizilbash ceremonials. By 1991 Shi'a women and men were beginning to attend rituals of other ethnic groups in addition to their own, as Shi'a consolidated. They thereby emphasized sectarian identity and deemphasized ethnic identity. Increasingly, the ritual language was Urdu, the Indian immigrants' language. All over the city, Husein rituals began to replicate the Indian format characterized by extreme displays of grief, self-flagellation, and a more fundamentalist worldview. Women were central in the process of pulling different Shi'a ethnic groups into a cohesive unit, and, in conjunction with this unification work, their religious practices became altered. The Qizilbash women's informal ritual interaction and gentle cultural Persian-language performances were being replaced by the Mohajir passionate performances of mourning and fundamentalist sermons about Islamic duty, conducted in Urdu.

One reason for the recession of the Qizilbash performance mode was education. Although government education in Urdu facilitated Shi'a unity by providing Shi'a of various linguistic backgrounds with a common language, such unity came at the cost of diminishing the use of other languages. Qizilbash girls still spoke Persian at home, but in general, the use of that language was declining. Educated young Qizilbash women were now experts in Urdu mourning *noha* and *marsia*. Consequently, chants and songs in Urdu were replacing Qizilbash chants and songs in Persian.

Earlier, all female *majles* narrators among the Persian-speaking Qizilbash had been *rozah-khwani* (reciters of *Moharram* stories) rather than preachers who gave sermons in Indian-Pakistani fashion. But in 1991, only one woman still presented *rozah* in Persian. Shireen had begun performing not long before, when other aging female *rozah-khwani* had retired. At a *majles*, she would intone a story about the Karbala martyrs, interspersed with refrains joined by the audience, especially her daughters and nieces sitting at her feet. During such performances, there was no outpouring of grief, nor was there a sermon admonishing women of their Islamic duties. However, since Shireen delivered her *rozahs* in Persian, only Persian speakers could understand them. Consequently, Urdu-speaking hosts in the Mohajir Sada Bazaar area did not ask Shireen to come and give performances, and no one else was training to deliver *rozahs* in Persian.

Language learning appeared to be going in one direction only, with Persian speakers learning Urdu but no Urdu speakers learning Persian. As more Urdu-speaking Mohajirs frequent the Old City Qizilbash rituals, and as more Qizilbash become comfortable in Urdu through education, the less welcome Persian *rozahs* will be.

All women who gave sermons in Sadar were Mohajirs and used Urdu. Government schooling in Urdu extended the audience for Urdu-speaking preachers, and literacy equipped these preachers to deliver orations based on the published views of Urdu language fundamentalist theologians. One afternoon I sat with Mahreen, the most prominent female Indian-Pakistani preacher, as she prepared to deliver a sermon, leafing through and studying first one and then another Urdu book from her small library.

Mahreen was training several Urdu-speaking Mohajir little girls to preach. The eldest sister of the talented Old City Qizilbash singing group spoke with Mahreen about bringing her own young daughter for training. Rather than asking a Persian-speaking *rozah-khwana* from her own Qizilbash background to teach her little girl, a Qizilbash mother was turning to Mahreen, an Urdu speaker of Indian origin. This is another indication of tradition shifting away from Qizilbash practices and toward the Urdu language and Indian Shi'a mode of mourning ritual that was pulling more and more women into the hegemonic, fundamentalist Shi'a community and worldview.

Freedom and fundamentalism

The Shi'a unification movement offered women mobility and autonomy. Women went to various *imambara* (the house or place of the Imam in Urdu: privately owned ritual spaces; *imambargah* in Persian) in their own area of the city—Sadar Bazaar area, a newer city section for the Indian women, and the Old City, or old part of Peshawar for the Qizilbash. Because women were needed to help consolidate the various Shi'a ethnic groups, they traveled elsewhere as well.²¹ Increasingly, women commuted the fifteen to twenty minutes between the two city sections by bus, motorized rickshaw, or automobile to attend the other ethnic group's sessions. Someone told me of a woman who complained—or perhaps it was bragging—about the ten to fifteen young women in her extended family

²¹ In Hegland 1995 and 1997, I document how some Shi'a men steered their female relatives in ritual performance and Shi'a consolidation activities. Men also marched in their own flagellation groups to mourning sessions in public Huseiniyyah Halls and the some one hundred *imambargah* in Peshawar's Old City district.

household who frequented *majales*: her bus expenses during the mourning months amounted to 50 rupees (about US\$2.00 in 1991) a day. At the 1991 ninth of *Moharram* women's *majles* in Huseiniyyah Hall, the public mourning place in Sadar, most of the hundreds of women present were from the Old City or even from towns and villages surrounding Peshawar. That evening, the night before the tenth of *Moharram*—commemorated as the anniversary of Imam Husein's martyrdom—some Sadar Indian-Pakistani women went to the Old City. Like Qizilbash women, they walked, in the company of a few other women only, among the many Old City *imambargah* almost all night long.²²

Thanks to the more relaxed mobility constraints, the outstanding performance group of Qizilbash sisters attended their first Indian *majles* at a Sadar home while I was present. They listened to the Urdu-language sermon and joined in the Urdu singing and chanting. Warmly welcomed, they stayed a while afterward and exchanged notebook *marsia* and *noha* materials with the host's teenaged daughter. The eldest Qizilbash sister taught at the University of Peshawar, where the host's daughter studied; the national educational system brought Shi'a from different ethnic communities into contact. Later, I saw these Qizilbash sisters perform in a courtyard *majles* hosted by Mahreen, the Sadar Indian-Pakistani woman preacher. The ability to converse with each other and sing and chant in Urdu enabled Shi'a groups of various origins and native languages to commemorate jointly Imam Husein's martyrdom.

Because of intermarriages between Peshawar Shi'a Mohajirs and people in their home Indian communities, women frequently went to India in order to visit relatives and joined *Moharram* rituals there. Travelers visited Iran as well. Women spoke to me enthusiastically of their pilgrimages to Iranian shrines and of their visit, in the company of male relatives and as guests of the Iranian government, to the 1991 commemorations of Ayatollah Khomeini's death anniversary. I met a young couple coming from India on their way to Qom, center of Shi'a learning in Iran, for religious schooling. At least one young woman from Peshawar was also studying at Zeynab University in Qom. Even locally, women's mobility expanded as a result of the Shi'a fundamentalist movement's recruitment of females through education: some females were students at the Iranian Cultural Center in Peshawar.

²² Men did the same, but, instead of slipping unobtrusively through alleyways, they aggressively broadcast their progress with loud chanting and reverberating chest beating. With thunderous mourning announcing its arrival, each male troupe then put on a vigorous collective chest-beating exhibition in each *imambarn* that it visited. Following, male hosts served the troupe refreshments.

Even more so than other women, female preachers were highly mobile. Demand for their services gave them a hectic mourning season schedule as well as a wide social network, respect and status, opportunities to study and speak, and even gustatory delights—ritual offerings of food to the martyred saints. Mahreen was surely one of the most sought-after and mobile women in Peshawar. Well-known female preachers might even be invited to speak in other cities, as was common for male preachers.

A number of single, childless, widowed, and even divorced women found in ritual an approved outlet for their energy. Religiously motivated, an active outside life brought women this-worldly power in terms of social support and freedom from household confinement. One woman, an outstanding performer with a beautiful voice, did not have children. Her *Moharram* singing was her profession, her calling, another woman explained; her strenuous schedule and highly regarded talent helped fill her childless days. One evening she was sick. Her feet had swelled up, she told me, because of so much walking from one *majles* to another. Her husband scolded her: “You’re going to get terribly ill if you don’t rest. Don’t go tomorrow!” She tossed her head in the midst of telling the story. “I told him, ‘I’m *going*.’ And today I got up and got ready and I’m *just fine!*”

This singer’s story, implying that with the Imam’s mystical intervention the singer need not listen to her husband, expressed an outrageous sentiment for a Muslim woman, who is charged with obeying her husband. It is ironic that if Mahreen or another preacher of Indian background gave the sermon at the *majles* that this soloist insubordinately attended, she would hear there much about the obligation of pious women to submit themselves entirely to their husbands. She defied her husband for the opportunity to hear that she must not defy him.²³

This singer’s ritual-wrought defiance exemplifies the paradoxical nature of feminine ritual-shaped freedoms. Involved with the Shi’a movement, which offered an alternative power structure and entrance into a wider world, Peshawar Shi’a women encountered mounting fundamentalism and the androcentrism permeating *Moharram* ritual symbolism and organization.²⁴ Fundamentalist sermons taught women their Islamic duties, such as modesty and *hejab*, or covering; separation from unrelated men; and obedience to husbands. Only near the conclusion of her sermon did a Mohajir preacher turn to the Karbala martyrs. During the almost three months of mourning in 1991, Sadar Shi’a women generally heard several

²³ I am grateful to Diane Dreher for noting this paradox.

²⁴ In Hegland 1997 and in press, I discuss the negative influences of androcentric rituals and fundamentalist pressures at greater length.

Mohajir-style, fundamentalist sermons a day and some during other times of the year as well.

Community and coercion

Women aimed at forming a female ritual community as large and unified as possible, cutting across ethnic, linguistic, class, and even sectarian lines. To this end, the Shi'a women attempted to be inclusive, welcoming anyone who came to a *majles*, no matter what her background. They included members of all language groups by making sure there were some chants or songs in the mother tongue of all present. Pukhtun women were usually in a small minority at Mohajir- and Qizilbash-hosted rituals, but at one point or another, other women would call out, "Now one in Pukhtu, let's do one in Pukhtu."

Even professional singing girls, who were generally looked down on as low-class and lacking in moral constraint, were not turned away. At a *majles* in Mahreen's courtyard, several singing girls started a song at the same time as another group. Leaders waved the others quiet. When I questioned my student Shahida later, she said people had not wanted the singing girls to feel ashamed. At another ritual some half of the females present were singing girls. A young relative of the host mockingly sang a phrase in the nasal, tinny tones supposed to be the singing girls' style. An older woman reprimanded her, and she was quiet. During *majales*, ritual managers attempted to suppress judgmental attitudes toward singing girls, who otherwise could never enter these courtyards.

In actuality, ritual insiders enjoyed advantaged economic standing and pious reputations, and ritual leaders all the more so. However, an apparently open and warmly accepting feminine ritual community—characterized by the appearance of class inclusiveness that ritual regulars so carefully fostered—helped attract higher attendance and the larger community's favor.

As part of their incorporating behavior, women refrained from overtly criticizing others, choosing rather to guide through praise and example. Although Shireen, the Qizilbash *rozah-khwana*, told me in private that the plastic flower decorating the hair of one sister in the eminent Qizilbash singing group offended her, she did not show her disapproval. She also was disturbed that an older Qizilbash woman, a *seyyid* and informal ritual leader, frequently made mistakes even in Persian verses.²⁵ Asking me to turn off the tape recorder, Shireen spoke quietly into my ear. The woman

²⁵ *Seyyids* are descendants of the Prophet Mohammad in the male line (through his daughter Fatima and her husband Ali, since the Prophet Mohammad had no surviving sons).

even said *rahem* (womb), which, Shireen said, “has a bad meaning,” when the word was supposed to be *raheem*, meaning mercy. Shireen did not say anything to the woman, though; *seyyids* must be respected, she explained. Even when a woman stumbled noticeably while reading from the Qur’an, there were no raised eyebrows or words of reproach.

Ritual performance seemed to be failure-free; thus, women’s *majales* provided a safe arena for developing performance and social skills. *Majles* participation helped women to form a sense of self and identity through comparison and regulated competition with others. They developed autonomy through travel, organizing, and leadership in the women’s community (Hegland 1997). The few women who were married into another Shi’a ethnic group were particularly well situated to practice mobilizing and administrative skills. An Old City Qizilbash woman was married to a Pukhtun man from the NWFP town of Parachinar. She and her daughter were active in both Qizilbash and Mohajir ritual schedules. With the woman’s sister, they sponsored a huge gathering at the large Old City Hus-einiyyah Hall that women from all ethnic backgrounds attended. When some Parachinar Shi’a men were killed during a procession, this mother-daughter team inflamed Qizilbash, Pukhtun, and Mohajir women.

The empowering affirmation, social support, and opportunities for personal development that women gained through ritual gatherings, however, were matched by coercion and a patriarchal worldview.²⁶ Even the mere reciting and going through ritual bodily motions brings its own coercions, as ritual practice theorist Catherine Bell notes: “One might retain one’s limited and negotiated involvement in the activities of ritual, but bowing or singing in unison imperceptibly schools the social body in the pleasures of and schemes for acting in accordance with assumptions that remain far from conscious or articulate” (1992, 215).

Further, ritual dedication subjected women to female social group pressure and also to male domination even in the absence of males. Because *majales* were sex-segregated, males were generally not present; women themselves were in charge of surveillance, supervision, and management of other women, thus acting as agents of patriarchal control.²⁷ Women urged other women to attend *majales*. Once involved in rituals, women

²⁶ Because of fundamentalisms’ androcentrism, declared reliance on holy texts, close-knit groupings, and required belief and behavior conformity, women operating within a fundamentalist framework can go only so far in creating autonomous space and extending mobility. Among the publications analyzing fundamentalisms’ dangers for women are Hardacre 1993; Baffoun 1994; Hale 1994, 1996; Lawrence 1994; Mazumdar 1994; Papanek 1994; and Shaheed 1994.

²⁷ Paradoxically, scrutiny and coercion from other women helped women to be successful in the only way open to them within their existential framework’s parameters.

were pressured to attend regularly. If someone did not show up at a certain ritual, women asked relatives and friends about the absentee and interrogated her at the next opportunity. My students had to have the excuse of exams to be absent. Even then, others criticized their failure to attend *majles*. The warmth and intimacy women received from fellow mourners made their scrutiny and social pressure all the more effective.

By following proper form throughout the course of a ritual, women hoped to earn approval and respect and were thus acutely conscious of other women's surveillance and extremely sensitive to the potentially pointed meaning even in brief glances. Quite unintentionally, I became a part of this process. At one Mohajir *majles*, Shahida's mother and her best friend exchanged knowing, amused looks after the mother gave a bellowing call for response during another woman's sermon. Then they noticed my eyes on them and immediately retreated into their solemn mourner roles.

Women were susceptible to other women's evaluations regarding their responsibilities for others' deportment as well. At a Qizilbash *majles*, one of the informal ritual leaders, a *seyyid*, felt my eyes on her as she beat herself with one arm, while holding her tiny granddaughter in the other. The little girl was not beating herself. Aware of my gaze (although here, too, I certainly did not mean to reproach), the grandmother took the child's hand, raised it high, and then slapped it back on the little chest. As the child became distracted, looked around, and forgot to beat herself after a few moments of compliantly striking her small bosom, her grandmother (still aware of my observation) repeated this action several times.

Even in the absence of males, women carried Peshawar society's patriarchal tenets and gender expectations into the ritual environment. There, through mutual surveillance and positive and negative commentary, which could be highly subtle or even projected, women managed each other and kept each other within the proper boundaries of their severely patriarchal world. The more prominent female ritual figures were all the more committed to the patriarchal order and earning their male family seniors' approval—and thus to their control functions as well. Female ritual seniors had gained their respected positions through upholding patriarchal cultural and religious values and took their responsibilities of monitoring others' compliance seriously.

All leading female *majles* preachers, performers, and hostesses were related to prominent male activists. Women were beholden to their male supervisors for opportunities to earn fame, freedom, performance competence, and social and spiritual power. These males directed their female relatives' religious careers. After hearing other women talk about her, I

began to suspect Mahreen's brother of refusing her suitors in order to keep her single and preaching under his management. Mahreen's brother, a high-ranking Shi'a leader, owned the courtyard where she lived with her two other unmarried sisters and hosted her renowned *majales*. With his sons and other younger male kin, this brother carried in the huge kettles of *majles* food and, after the formal service, dished it into platters that Mahreen's female guests distributed to mourners, now seated around long tablecloths quickly spread on sheeted courtyard floors. Male physical power carrying in the heavy kettles, financial power funding the meal, and social/cultural power monitoring women's behavior highlighted female subordination and dependency. The relatively great mobility that her brother allowed Mahreen for her preaching engagements did not mean that he also granted her self-rule. In fact, her famous preaching ability and associated roving made her all the more valuable and thus crucial to contain. Outstanding ritual and Shi'a movement contributions by no means freed women from patriarchal authority exerted either indirectly by female social group pressure or directly by male domination.

Although women emphasized *majles* participants' egalitarian status, in actuality, hierarchies of age, talent, education, piety, modesty, personality, activism, self-mortification, family size and composition, social clique, male relatives' positions, and wealth and class disrupted *majles* ideals and enabled elites to dominate the less powerful and subtly coerce them into acquiescing to the elite's ritual administration and control.

Although ritual managers—older, high-status women—allowed young women to shine in chanting and singing competitions, they quietly controlled the course of a *majles* by signaling to each other from back rows. They ruled on contested performance slots, decided when one ritual stage would end and another begin, and monitored behavior with glances and comments. More modest (fully covered and secluded), pious, talented, and assertive women enjoyed greater respect in the *majles* setting. Because these characteristics coincided with ritual status and power, women (or their male relatives) desiring higher Shi'a political positions sought to acquire them. Although other women wore merely the Pakistani *shalwar kamis* (loose pants and long tunic) and *dupata* (long rectangular scarf, put over hair when praying) at rituals, preachers kept themselves covered completely with black veils. The Qizilbash *rozah-khwana* and her daughters wore long black dusters over their clothing. This Qizilbash *rozah-khwana* was the only non-Pukhtun Peshawar woman whom I saw beating herself on the cheekbones. Her piety, modesty, *Moharram* story recitations, extreme self-mortification, and initiation of women's bus trips to out-of-city *majales* gained her leadership status and the respect of even her older

sisters-in-law. As female singing circles were usually formed along matrilineal lines, women from families with a good number of sisters, daughters, cousins, or nieces who were talented, eager performers attained highest performance recognition. Preeminent women had large, extended families whose members, male and female, young and old, were all active in Shi'a rituals and organizations.

In earlier years women had learned mourning chants and hymns by heart. In 1991, though, it was no longer possible to be successful in Shi'a religious life without literacy. Women performers relied on their ability to transcribe the latest chants and hymns, learn, and then perform them, notebook held up for the chorale to read. Preachers prepared their sermons from published materials, and Qur'an and prayer reciters sat at the front of the group and read from a book resting on a black pillow.

Because only 3 percent of NWFP females are literate, Shi'a ritual performers' reading and writing abilities tell us much about their socioeconomic status. All female leaders were related to economically and politically powerful men. Although less obvious than male performers' and hosts' competition, women performers, hosts, and donors carried out status contestation as well.²⁸ They sought to have the largest and most resplendent shrines, shrine rooms, and battle standards in honor of Hazrat-e Abbas,²⁹ signs of their own and their family's economic and social success.

Prominent *majles* hosts must be wealthy. They need ritual space—a large separate building or courtyard with adjoining rooms and a room to house shrine and ritual paraphernalia. The Old City Qizilbash community alone boasted more than one hundred such ritual spaces. Shrines or ritual areas differed greatly from family to family and could be quite ostentatious. Some families dedicated an entire room to house battle standards, maybe a covered, thronelike preacher's seat, pictures, statues, candles, and other ritual items. Other families owned whole buildings built specifically for *majles* gatherings. Waiting for a *majles* to begin in one large courtyard, I accompanied other women into the large, separate room built to the side of the courtyard. There, surrounded by framed photographs of the Karbala shrines, black banners inscribed with invocations to the Karbala saints, and glass-protected Qur'an verses in exquisite calligraphy hanging on the walls,

²⁸ For an entertaining account of the strategies of one aggressively competitive chorale determined to capture a performance opportunity at a major *majles* of the 1991 season, see Hegland, in press.

²⁹ Hazrat-e Abbas, younger half-brother of Imam Husein, was martyred with him at Karbala.

the women lit candles placed on a long shelf in supplication to the Karbala martyrs.³⁰

Aspiring ritual hosts could not stop at the one-time ritual space investment. Ritual status depended on regularly hosted gatherings featuring tea, betel leaves, pastries, or even meals feeding hundreds. Hosts required clean sheeting to cover the entire sitting area; serving dishes and utensils; drinking glasses and pitchers; long tablecloths; *Moharram* decorations and shrine items; cleaning, washing, and cooking assistance; transportation funds; and communication means. More prominent figures hosted ten-day ritual series representing *Moharram's* first ten days, culminating in 'Ashura (the tenth), commemorated as Imam Husein's martyrdom anniversary. Richer hosts served meals or even, for all-night chanting and self-flagellation sessions, a series of refreshments at breaks: first tea, then dinner, a midnight snack, and finally early morning breakfast.

Naturally, women relished the blessed offerings — the *tabarruk* — given by donors as thanks to a sainted member of Imam Husein's family or to request a specific favor or general health and well-being. The *tabarruk* refreshments did much to sweeten women's *majles* experience and whet their appetites for ritual participation. But as only the well-off could afford the treats that added so much to the *majles's* attraction and convivial social interaction, the sense-satisfying refreshments reminded all present that their benefactors enjoyed a privileged temporal position and a gifting relationship with Imam Husein, Prince of Martyrs. Participating in *majales* hosted and funded by politically and economically powerful Shi'a meant that one had to accept the elites' ritual administration and interpretation and to recognize their social and political leadership (Hegland 1986a).

Although a few Shi'a Pukhtun landlord families sometimes sponsored a Peshawar *majles*, it was mainly affluent Mohajir and Qizilbash families who enjoyed devoting themselves and their resources to *imambara* and *majales*. Among both Mohajir and Qizilbash, the top Shi'a organizational officers and most ardent Shi'a activists were also among the very richest.³¹ Shahida's uncle owned one tall building of Sadar Bazaar shops and was

³⁰ As Iranians do not have shrines in their homes, I found shrines of great interest, believing them to be derived through influence of Hindu practices in India. For description and discussion of Shi'ite shrines (in Hyderabad, India), see Naqvi 1987 and Pinault 1992a. Cole 1988 offers a fascinating historical treatment of *imambara* in northern India. See also Das 1992.

³¹ Economic and political elites typically host, sponsor, and control *Moharram* rituals. Many publications document how the powerful use mourning plays, story recitations, processions, and self-flagellation sessions to demonstrate and fortify their positions. See nn. 3, 4, and 9.

planning to construct yet another commercial high-rise. The father of the Qizilbash sisters was a highly successful rug merchant and owner of a huge new Old City home with a top story courtyard open to the sky. The eldest sister was married to a prosperous young banker and vociferous Shi'a spokesman.

Both Shi'a urban business and commercial groups had brought capital from elsewhere—the Indian-Pakistanis, money from Indian merchant families, and the earlier Qizilbash settlers, money from their Persian or Afghan government connections or financial concerns. Most Mohajir and Qizilbash Shi'a continued to have incomes and living standards well above the Peshawar average.

Economic differences between Shi'a *majles* patrons and some non-Shi'a devotees were even more apparent. A great many women at the public Huseiniyyah Hall rituals were Pukhtun village women or even less prosperous Sunni women attracted by both free food and holy blessings. At one Sadar Huseiniyyah Hall women's *majles* I even recognized some young sweeper girls I had seen earlier gathering street brush. Less advantaged women sometimes came to private courtyard rites, licensed by the rule that no one should be prevented from entering. *Tabarruk* meals served to all comers at the public Huseiniyyah Halls and large courtyard ritual gatherings significantly supplemented poorer women's skimpy diets (and those of family waiting at home) and accentuated the great economic and political discrepancies between themselves and their Shi'a benefactors.

Sugar-coated power frameworks

An outsider might well wonder why Shi'a women accepted—in fact championed—the fundamentalist Shi'a movement; why Qizilbash women readily relinquished their own ritual cultural performance format, relaxed comportment, and language for Mohajir ritual mode; or why less favored Shi'a or even non-Shi'a bowed to Shi'a elites' ritual management, interpretation, and style, thus accepting (at least for the time being) their religious, social, political, and economic superiority. Why did women not overtly resist or critique these power frameworks and their constraints, disadvantages, and indignities?

In all three cases, the frameworks' advantages looked so appealing that women sought them out, believing that the rituals would enrich their daily lives, palates, opportunities, spirituality, and social circles. Becoming ritual and fundamentalist Shi'a activists brought women excitement, mobility, fame, artistic development, approval, and higher community status. Adding Urdu chants and hymns to their ritual repertoire and Mohajir *majales*

to their ritual schedule made even less prominent Qizilbash women's religious and social lives all the more fulfilling. And, of course, both Shi'a and Sunni women at whatever political and economic level relished *tabarruk* refreshments and cherished the *majales's* spiritual power. Shi'a women, to gain access to beloved and powerful rituals, an engaging social schedule, a sense of intimacy and community, and political connections, were all too happy to yield to elites' ritual management. Particularly because they lacked other ways to gain such inducements — because of severely restricted access to education, careers, nonreligious outside activity, and even opportunities to leave home seclusion — these Shi'a women found heightened *majles* involvement and the fundamentalist, standardizing Shi'a unification movement highly alluring.

**Conclusion: Flourishing women's *majales*—
paradoxical potential**

Ritual contributions to Imam Husein and consolidating Shi'a from various ethnic backgrounds carried contradictory ramifications for Peshawar Shi'a women. In 1991, these women were gaining freedom with their expanding ritual activities. *Majles* gatherings provided them with opportunities for mobility; *majles* participation was a way to get out of the house without endangering their reputations. They were attaining mobility within Peshawar and taking buses to other cities for women's *majales* — without male escort. The Peshawar women were extending their worlds, but their wider-ranging mobility and ritual performances were allowed and abetted by men: their male supervisors defined the borders of their larger worlds.

On the one hand, women could spend time with friends, relatives, and neighbors and develop satisfying and stimulating performance relationships with a close circle of associates. On the other hand, the warm embrace of these associates provided greater opportunity for surveillance and social control over ritual participants. In turning to the wider Shi'a movement's alternative power structure, women were more often in contact with limiting symbolic representations of femininity and confining fundamentalist values and expectations regarding women's place. Yet so compelling were the alternative power frameworks' attractions that women overlooked the associated shortcomings and losses.

Given these observations, one wonders about the long-term outcome of Peshawar women's escalating *majles* attendance and promotion of Shi'a unification. How long can these Shi'a women — especially the out-of-line Qizilbash — resist conformity to the fully veiled dress, seclusion, and

behavior dictated by Shi'a fundamentalism? Since their outstanding ritual contributions have not resulted in males handing over to them the power to define their own boundaries, what will happen should male family and religious authorities decide to tighten once again parameters on female mobility? Continued tension can be expected between the need for females to work as constructors of Shi'a community and as propagators of the Shi'a fundamentalist movement among women and the need to cloister and control females as a central aspect of fundamentalist Shi'a identity. Further, women can be expected to go on taking advantage of that paradoxical tension in their quest for a measure of independence, new vistas and experiences, and community.

Epilogue: The power paradox

Sadly, sectarian bloodshed has erupted in Pakistan each *Moharram* since my 1991 research, with the worst occurring in Punjab and then spreading to Karachi. In 1995, bloodshed began even before the *Moharram* mourning period—during Ramadan, the month of fasting for both Sunni and Shi'a, with yet another Karachi Shi'a mosque massacre on February 5 and two more on February 25 (see Burns 1995). Karachi turned into a chaotic sectarian battlefield. Hundreds of people there and in other Pakistani cities were killed in 1995 alone. According to journalist Ahmed Rashid (1995, 23), “The SSP [most violent of the extremist Pakistani Sunni parties] believes in a purely Sunni state and the physical elimination of all Shias. Its hate literature has flooded bazaars and schools. ‘We believe the conflict between Shias and Sunnis can never be eliminated,’ Azam [chief of the SSP and a Parliament member] said recently. ‘We believe the Shias are not Muslims.’”

The Shi'a, in response, have organized into political groups, and some extremist Shi'a have committed violence against Sunnis. Emphasizing the need for dialogue and government intervention to prevent disaster, in a Shi'a publication Asif Hussein (1995, 2) pointed to the escalating seriousness of the sectarian crisis: “In turn, [the Shi'a] have created a group calling itself the Sipah-e-Muhammad (SMP), which now claims to have thirty thousand members. Its headquarters, in Lahore, is guarded by gunmen and they claim to have already retaliated against the SSP and vowed to counteract any further actions with equal force.”

Because of the sectarian violence, many Pakistani Shi'a continue to perceive themselves as under siege and believe they must build from divergent Shi'a congregations and ethnic groups a garrison of fundamentalist Shi'a unity. One can therefore expect the contradictory tension inherent in the position of fundamentalist Shi'a women to escalate. Under such threaten-

ing conditions, women are all the more needed to reach out to different Shi'a groups, weaving them together, and to propagate Shi'a fundamentalism among women. Yet a primary symbol of Shi'a fundamentalist identity is the seclusion and restriction of women. How will these paradoxical pressures play out? To recruit women, movement organizers must find ways to make activism appealing to women. Yet they must also be able to contain and control women and their work and abilities. To be competent roving spokeswomen and outreachers, women must be granted some mobility, autonomy, self-development, and community support. The more they gain, the more effective they can be for the Shi'a movement, but also the more astute and the more prepared and powerful they will be if they get out of control and decide to take their abilities and passions in other directions. This power paradox inherent in women's *majles* activism conveys a mutable and malleable gender formation—even in this apparently gender-rigid environment—enabling women to seek subtly personal advancement as well as gender slippage and transformation.

Women supported the Iranian revolutionary movement, marching in revolutionary demonstrations—modeled after *Moharram* mourning processions—in numbers equal to men, only to face heightened modesty requirements and mobility restrictions under the ensuing Islamic Republic. Even in the Shi'a fundamentalist Iranian Islamic Republic, however, women slip out of control and containment. Shahin Gerami (1994) found that middle-class Iranian women did not accept all of the teachings of the Islamic Republic officials about females and their place. Women answering her survey rejected sexual spacial segregation and thus also the belief that women should not work as they do not belong in public space. Some Iranian women are cultivating the means to dispute patriarchal religious authority—even within the pages of government-sponsored women's publications and on the panels of government-sponsored women's conferences.³²

During the Iranian Revolution, and other revolution/movement/conflict/agitation periods from the French Revolution onward, women were allowed greater freedom, mobility, and leeway in order to assist in the struggle. "Afterwards, male ideologues try to edge them out of leadership and visibility," Erika Friedl observes. But it is not easy to do so. "As the Iranian case shows, women are not likely to be silenced completely or for long."³³

In the short run Pakistani Shi'a women will probably maintain loyalty

³² I am grateful to Iranian friends for describing such.

³³ Erika Friedl, personal communication, March 20, 1996. I am grateful to her for urging me to make this point boldly and directly.

to their threatened community and thus be distracted from considering their own separate interests. But that will not be the end of the story.

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