

Shia marriage practices

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Article

Shia Marriage Practices: Karbala as *lieux de mémoire* in London

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Abstract: Muslim marriages have gained much attention in public debates and academic research. This article examines marriage practices among displaced Iraqi Shia migrants in the UK. Only a few studies have examined this group and fewer by investigating their marriage practices as a way to preserve their religious and cultural memory (Halbwachs 1992). The article is based on Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire*, which refers to spaces, objects or events that have a significant meaning to a particular groups' collective memory (Nora 1989, 1996). I argue in this paper that the transnational aspects of cultural memory expressed in Shia marriage practices such as rituals, images, and objects among the Iraqi Twelver Shia women in the UK can be regarded as examples of transnational Shia *lieux de mémoire*. These marriage practices, although appropriated for various personal, social, and religious memories outside of any national framework, are still highly politicized. The article focuses on the practice of *sofrat al-'aqd* (for short *sofra*) that provides women with the ability to articulate their religious and social identity through material objects placed on the *sofra* that act as women's transnational Shia *lieux de mémoire*.

Keywords: Muslim marriages; Shia Islam; *sofra*; *lieux de mémoire*; collective memory

1. Introduction

Twelver Shia (Momen 1985) remember annually the death of Imam Husayn, who is believed to have been killed together with his supporters at the battle of Karbala by the Umayyad's Caliph troops in southern Iraq in 680CE, through the performance of various commemorative ritual practices, theatrical performances, and the production of numerous literary and artistic productions (al-Haidari 1999; Chelkowski 2010; Shanneik 2015). The article examines the transnational aspects of cultural memory expressed in marriage practices¹ such as rituals, images, and objects and analyses how they are used by women as a tool to preserve the religious and cultural memory (Halbwachs 1992; Misztal 2003) of Iraqi Shia women in the diaspora. This article uses Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire*, which refers to spaces, objects, or events that have a significant meaning to a particular groups' collective memory (Nora 1989) and argues that, through these commemorative practices, Shia are able to present the Karbala narrative as *lieux de mémoire* allowing the construction of a coherent Shia identity around the persecution, displacement, and maltreatment of Shia throughout the centuries. Marriage ritual practices are appropriated for personal, social, and religious memories outside of any national framework but are nevertheless highly politicized. Various spaces of marriage practices are used to articulate different kinds of memories among and across various generations. Performing

¹ Research on marriages in public debates, see (Abaza 2001; Arabi 2001). There are a number of academic work on various forms of Muslim marriages such as on unregistered (*urfi*) (Shahrani 2010; Walby 2010), visiting (*misyar*) (Arabi 2001), temporary (*mut'a*) marriages (Haeri 1989, 1992; Mervin 2008); tourist marriage (Abou el Magd 2009). On the legal aspect of Muslim marriages in Europe, see (Nielsen and Christoffersen 2010; Bowen 2011).

Shia marriages feeds into the individual and communal efforts of Shia in the UK to keep the memory of Karbala alive and the understandings of Shia communal identity in the diaspora functioning throughout generations. The performance of Shia marriage ceremonies functions thereby as an identity marker. For the first generation of Shia living in a diasporic context, it acts as a 'signifier of stability' (Bhabha 1994, p. 102) and, for the second generation, as a way to connect with their parents' and Shia communities' religious and cultural practices. Marriage practices are usually performed in female-only spaces in which women assume authority and leadership in all aspects of organising the marriage. What to include in a marriage ceremony and what meaning and function the various elements and aspects have are negotiated between the generations and influenced by various religious and political beliefs, socio-economic and educational backgrounds, and individual migratory experiences.

The French historian Pierre Nora uses the term *lieux de mémoire*, translatable as sites, places, or realms of memory, to denote certain places in which we could anchor our memories. Being primarily concerned with collective and national memory, he argues that we need to construct and share sites that are material and symbolic 'to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial' (Nora 1989, p.19). Nora's definition of *lieux de mémoire* involves material spaces and places as well as abstract ideas of enabling connections to the past for the purpose of avoiding oblivion. There are various types and ways of remembering that are continuously reconstructed and represented on an individual and collective level. What is remembered and how it is remembered is crucial in making sense of our past, present, and future identity (Erl 2011). Nora's term represents the change in historical consciousness and public efforts in identifying with the nation and the nation-state. The identification with a particular nation-state and the construction of a national identity, likening it to a specific past, is the focus of Nora's concept. He developed it specifically to anchor French national memory and to prevent it from oblivion. The purpose of the French *lieux de mémoire* is to identify particular sites that have a specific historical meaning and to construct a narrative around these sites to develop a French national memory (Nora 1996). Monuments, texts, and other anchors of memory in contemporary society are turned into national icons and gain status in order to form a clearly defined French national memory (Nora 1989). The concept of *lieux de mémoire* assumes the nation to be a clearly definable entity and to be based on specific images and notions of gender, class, and ethnicity.

The model of *lieux de mémoire* can, however, be transferred and modified to suit other memory cultures (Grever 1997). In this article, I will take the conceptualization of individual and collective memory beyond Nora's framework of a fixed imagined community of a nation-state (Anderson 1983) and adapt a more complex transnational religio-cultural and political dimension to it. It focuses on the practice of *sofrat al-'aqd* (for short *sofra*), which is an all-female activity performed during an *'aqd* in which a table cloth is spread either on the floor or on a table on which various objects are presented such as a mirror, candles, a copy of the Qur'an, and also food items such as nuts, eggs, corn, and honey (see Figure 1, below). These food items are either symbols of fertility or seen as aphrodisiacs. The practice of *al-mashy* or *al-mashaya* (al-Sharqi 1978) literally means 'the walk' or 'the walking' and refers to a selection of mainly menfolk, chosen in most cases by women, who walk to the bride's family home to ask for her hand. Whereas particularly the younger generation of Iraqi Shia women insist on including the *sofra* as part of their wedding performance, the older generation holds onto the performance of the *mashaya* as they are both used to articulating women's Shia identities in the UK. They are both an expression of the women's *lieux de mémoire* since the women associate the objects placed on the *sofra* with various aspects related to the memory of the battle of Karbala and the *mashaya* with the collective unity of the Shia community and the preservation of Shia history, articulated through marriage practices performed in the diaspora. This construction of memory has the function of creating identities on diverse levels. Marriage practices become a useful tool to articulate identities that sometimes refer to an Iraqi/Iranian hybrid heritage, an Arab Shia (as opposed to Iranian Shia) identity, or a more nationalist Iraqi Shia identity. Such identity construction can also foreground its religious dimension by being collectively and individually identifiable and recognized as part

of a wider translational Shia community. The performance of the *sofra* in the UK (Spellman 2004) resonates in its form and also its meaning with practices performed in the Gulf. Through social media and transnational networks and ties, young women are connected transnationally, thereby confirming and challenging existing marriage practices and also building new practices and marking their own Shia *lieux de mémoire*. One of the first generation of Iraqis in London explains: 'We did not have all these practices in Iraq, these young girls here started improvising with new forms of rituals they gather and put together from here and there.'



Figure 1. A *sofrat al 'aqd* provided by Um Zahra in London.

2. Shia Communities in London

The article is based on four years of ethnographic fieldwork among various Shia women communities in the UK. There are no precise numbers on the Iraqi population living in the UK, which includes the second and third generation. According to the 2011 census, there are an estimated 73,000 Iraqis living in the UK, with the vast majority residing in London (Office for National Statistics 2013). Unofficial sources, however, estimate a much larger number of Iraqis living in the UK. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) estimates the number to be around 240,000 (International Organisation for Migration 2007, p. 8). The Iraqi Embassy, as well as a number of Shia community centres, estimate between 350,000 and 400,000. The religious and political factions and the ethnic, national, economic, and educational backgrounds of Shia communities in London are very diverse. Most came to the UK during the 1980s and early 1990s (Communities and Local Government 2009, p. 7). Some of the first generation of Iraqi women I interviewed were born and raised in Iraq and moved directly to the UK, but others had to go to so-called transit countries such as Iran, other Gulf countries, the Netherlands, or other European destinations first and then settled in the UK. This article examines marriage practices among 84 first generation Iraqi Shia, who both came from Iraq directly or through transit countries, as well as among 54 second generation Iraqi Shia, who were born and raised

in London. The interviews with the first generation of Iraqi women were mainly conducted in Arabic.² The second generation, however, used a mix of Arabic and English. In this article, the interview responses are not categorized or placed into a certain pattern but rather dealt with on an individual basis in order to demonstrate the complex diversity of the Shia community. One could, though, observe some general similarities in the responses from each generation. The article, however, does not intend to reduce responses to particular groups since the cultural and religious memory of each woman differs according to where her socialization occurred and to the degree to which the religio-cultural surroundings of her host societies impacted on her own religious practices. Not only the women's religio-cultural memory before migrating to the UK but also the women's interaction with Shia now living in London coming from other national and cultural contexts contribute to the Iraqi Shia women's understanding of identity expressed through marriage practices. Due to the diverse nature of Shia communities in London sharing the same religious spaces, different religious and cultural practices encounter and interact with one another and in some cases result in new forms of practices that are specific to Shia in Europe (Shanneik Forthcoming).

The politics of remembering is central in the upbringing of their children, as one of the women I interviewed explains: 'We had to leave Iraq when I was still a little child. So I did not remember what life is like in Iraq. However, my mother always kept telling us stories about Iraq, our families, friends and our neighbourhood. These stories gave me the Iraqi identity I felt very attached to when growing up in Iran. I do the same with my own children here in London. I tell them about life not only in Iraq but also in Iran. I want my children to be attached to their Iraqi/Iranian Shia heritage.' The various details involved in and around the concept and practices of marriage are deeply positioned within a clearly defined understanding of a religio-cultural narrative that is articulated through particular material spaces and objects, as well as interpersonal relations and social networks. Similar to Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire*, the first generation of Iraqis living in London identify certain practices they remember from their own life and marriage experience before migrating to the UK and construct a particular religio-cultural narrative of memory around them. The collective recognition and acceptance of marriage practices plays a prominent role among Iraqi Shia in diasporic spaces, as one of the Iraqis I interviewed confirms: 'We all do it this way. This is what we are and this is how it should continue. It is part of being an Iraqi and it belongs to marriage'.

3. 'It belongs to marriage'

The different social and communal steps prior to proposing to marriage are important within a marriage context and also become markers of identity. How the suited marriage partner should be found, how to propose, whom to bring along when proposing, the bridal gift, or the marriage ceremony all are constructed in a form to suit the socio-religious context back 'home' as it is remembered, as one of the women explains: 'Everything needs to be done as they used to be done back home. Everything according to its roots (*kolo ala 'usulo*). Particularly in marriage issues there is no playing around. No compromises are allowed. This is our family reputation. Everything needs to be done according to how they used to be done. Living in the UK now does not change the way we perform marriages.' The reputation but also the religious, socio-economic, and the political background of the family is important when it comes to finding a suitable match (Haeri 1989). Certain women known as *khattaba*³, who usually have wide access to the various community members and who enjoy social and religious capital (Bourdieu 1986), act as matchmakers. Very often this role is occupied by the female religious leader, *mullaya*, of the community, who, because of her religious role, is invited to various family and

² I have provided my own translation for interviews conducted in Arabic but kept the structure as close to the original as possible to avoid divergent meaning through translation.

³ Some call them *mashayya*, *dallaya*. For a historical account of matchmakers in Iraq and in Najaf in particular see (al-Sharqi 1978, pp. 89–90).

religious occasions such as events marking the rites of passage of family members⁴. At these events, the *mullaya* is allowed access to very personal and private spaces, enabling her to build an opinion of a family and its various members (Sharif 2005). This opinion is valued a lot within the community to the extent that it influences the decision whether or not the proposed groom is suitable for marriage, as one of the women explains: ‘*Mullaya* [her name] is a pious person. We’ve known her for over 20 years now and we value her opinion. When she says go away from this boy and don’t give him to your daughter. We accept it’.

The concept of marriage is still seen among many Iraqis in London as, not only a marriage between two individuals alone, but also a marriage between wider families. Transnational links to the country of origin but also to the countries where this family might have migrated before ultimately coming to the UK play an enormous role in investigating the religious, socio-economic, and political circles with which this family might have been involved at their various diasporic locations. Various phone calls, skype meetings, and conversations through numerous social-media channels such as WhatsApp, Snapchat, Facebook, Telegram, etc. are used as tools to investigate the history of not only the proposed groom’s but also the bride’s family.

The process of proposing to a woman is a communal and social act that is expressed through mainly men’s capital. The performance of the *mashaya* practice (al-Sharqi 1978), which is the walking to the bride’s family home to ask for her hand, is an essential part of the marriage process. Who to ask to be part of the *mashaya* is crucial, and the higher an individual’s rank within the community, the better, as one of the women explains: ‘You show your respect towards the family and the degree you value them as well as how much proposing to their daughter means to you when you bring people with you who are respected within the community.’ She continues by saying how challenging this step is now in the UK as back in Iraq you can chose the highest ranked men from your own family members in addition to other key figures in the community. Since, however, extended family members are not always available in diasporic places, the proposing grooms usually rely on present community members like high-ranking religious scholars. In some cases, other family members living in other European countries are asked to fly to the UK and be part of the *mashaya*. Such a step is highly appreciated and ‘increases the chances of their proposal of marriage being accepted’, as one of the women explains. Transnational links and networks are therefore used to support one’s religious and social capital within diasporic spaces in marriage contexts. At one occasion, as I was told, the eldest of the extended family back in Iraq, also called *kbeer el ‘ele*, was skyped in during a *mashaya* visit. This was seen as an enormous step in proving not only the seriousness of the proposal and the respect towards the family they were visiting and to whom they were proposing marriage but also their degree of ‘respecting tradition’, as the woman explains. The socio-religious positioning of the extended family in the Middle East both has an impact on and also, in some cases, shapes the position of the family and its intra-communal relations with other families in Europe.

The wider transnational positioning of the two families becomes sometimes more important than the local situation of the two individuals themselves, which is something that the prospected couple would be more interested in as it is more relevant to their lives together in the UK, as one of the women explains: ‘The problem that we Iraqis face here in the UK when it comes to marrying our children off is that we are more concerned about the wider family (from where they come from, which political and religious party they belong to, which *marje*’ [source of emulation] they follow, how many religious scholars in the family they have, etc.) and neglect the fact that we need to ask about the two who are actually going to marry each other. We need to concentrate more on the couples (what are their degrees of religiosity, how is their behaviour, who are their friends, what did they study, where do they

⁴ Birth or *taklif* parties for girls (marking the transition of young girls into puberty). For more on this topic, see (Eftikhar 2015, pp. 67–77; Torab 2007, pp. 169–70).

work, where do they spend their free time and with whom, etc.) than looking to what their ancestors were like back in Iraq or Iran or anywhere else.’

Another woman adds and points to the phenomenon of the dramatic increase of divorce cases among Iraqis of the second generation living in the UK: ‘I feel sorry for our children. They are trapped in-between. We [the older generation] have a concrete view on how they should lead their lives without taking into account that they were brought up in a different time and different place. Here the upbringing is usually the responsibility of the mother. The influence of other family members such as grandmothers and aunts, by whom we were influenced when we were children, is not present. How to respect the elders and even the way to talk to them is different among the kids who were brought up here. The main problems newly-wed couples face are usually in relation to in-laws who have concrete expectations how the relationship between them and the couple should be.’

The problem however, as I heard repeatedly, lies mainly in the first generation’s expectations, which were formed in a different time and place. The respect that is expected to be expressed towards the older generation should be, from their point of view, unconditional and is unnegotiable. The younger generation however, arguing from a freedom of speech and freedom of choice point of view, do not see a problem in, for example, disagreeing with the older generation and articulating this to them very clearly. The younger generation does not regard these generational disagreements as an act of disrespect but more a case of different viewpoints, which is something that the older generation regard as a fundamental issue of personal and socio-cultural attitude. The following example of an old Iraqi marriage practice, which some parents insist in following, illustrates this generational conflict more clearly. It, however, also presents how Iraqi Shia women in diasporic spaces adhere to particular marriage practices as anchors of memory, thereby constructing what Nora calls *lieux de mémoire* in order to articulate a, for them, clearly defined religious and national identity.

4. Marriage Ceremonial Practices

The fear of losing one’s identity in the diaspora urges some Iraqi Shia in London to search for anchors of memory in the hope of providing them with the feeling of stability and security. One such anchor is the *‘aqd*, signing the marriage contract. Some of the mothers and mothers-in-law insist on the *‘aqd* being done ‘as in the old days’ as I was told in Arabic. After the *‘aqd* has been signed by the groom, the witnesses, and the bride’s representative (*wakil*), the groom enters the room where the bride and other female family members and guests are celebrating, as one of the women describes: ‘Traditionally in the old days, the bride wears a white [nightgown]. Neither the bride nor anyone in the room is allowed to have anything knotted. No hair-ribbons are allowed and the bride will have her hair down.’ This is an old Iraqi practice that some of the mothers performed when they were brides back in the Gulf. It is a practice they remember from back ‘home’, which they associate with their ‘roots’, and it acts therefore as an anchor of memory, avoiding the oblivion of these ‘roots’⁵. Particularly as part of marriage practices, as the peak of the rite of passage of a woman, certain cultural signs (Assmann 2002; Assmann and Czaplicka 1995) such as the white nightgown, provide stability for individuals and articulate their belonging to a particular community. Communal confirmation of the meaning of such cultural signs adds another layer to the individual’s construction of not only the individual’s identity but also a wider communal identity. These particular cultural signs are used as a tool to communicate a certain cultural memory that belongs to a certain group of people, which provides them with the ‘roots’ and the feeling of ‘home’, which my interviewees repeatedly referred to in our conversations.

These cultural signs, which some women of the first generation of Iraqis insist in using as part of their children’s marriage practices, refer to a memory that goes back to their own childhood and was performed in a different geographical and societal space. These spacio-temporal social

⁵ The words ‘home’ and ‘roots’ were often used among first generation Iraqi women in London when talking about the performance of the *‘aqd*.

differences are not taken into consideration when it comes to contemporary diasporic marriage practices. These cultural signs are often of high importance to the women and become part of what Nora calls *lieux de mémoire* and inform their transnational Shia Iraqi identity in the UK. Through these cultural signs performed during a marriage ceremony, women are able to make a connection and link to their past in order not to forget what it means to be an Iraqi Shia. As Nora argues, the purpose of *lieux de mémoire* is to anchor our memories of a different space and time to the present and avoid the oblivion of one's roots. The importance of roots and of lineage has been repeatedly mentioned by my interviewees and is linked to the concept of Shia Islam that goes back to the narrative of Karbala.

The *lieux de mémoire* expressed through the performance of marriage ceremonies are, however, part of women's imagined authenticity of marriage practices, as one of the second generation Iraqi women explains: 'Wearing a nightwear [nightgown] during a marriage ceremony! How odd is this and who does that these days? This might have been performed in the 60s or 70s in Iraq but certainly not in the Twenty-first Century. This is embarrassing. I cannot see myself doing that in front of everyone. In front of my mother-in-law? No way.' Another young woman adds: 'And above all this is not done these days in Iraq anyway. I haven't been to a wedding party in Iraq but my friends and relatives there sent me their pictures on WhatsApp or I have seen them on Facebook and no one was wearing a nightwear [nightgown]. I don't understand why we should here?' Social media is used by the younger generation of Iraqi Shia in London to question, to a certain extent, their mothers' views and ideas on marriage practices and to negotiate new marriage practices that they want to integrate into existing ones in the UK such as *sofrat al-'aqd*.

5. *Sofrat al 'aqd* among Iraqi Shia in London

The function and symbolism of the *sofra* varies according to one's degree of religiosity and belief in the ritual itself. In terms of symbolism and structure, it parallels general sacrificial rites as there is an offering of food, an expression of intension (*niyya*), a dedication to the Shia Imams and other members of the Prophet's family (*ahl al-bayt*). See (Haider 2014), and communal consumption of the food. Food and eating in a ritualized context involve meaning generated through the collective and individual translation of signs and symbols and reflect the 'beliefs, values, cosmology, history, hierarchical structures, and other aspects of the religious culture' (Soileau 2012). During the *sofra* ritual, a religious female reciter, *mullaya*, recites passages from the Qur'an, various prayers, and pieces of poetry, and recalls particular historical Shia narrations. Through these prayers, poems⁶, and sacred stories, which are recited over the meal, the food is transformed into a powerful repository of blessing (*baraka*). The belief in the power of food that has been consecrated is wide spread in the various religious gatherings (*majalis*) I attended in Europe and the Middle East. The collective consumption of food is regarded as *barakat*, which is transformative and can be transferred to any person who partakes in the food. Through these readings, women transform the dishes on the *sofra*, opening channels to others to connect to the transcendental. Through the food, not only the bride, but also all the women who consume the food will be given the opportunity to establish a link to the sacred. Foods on the *sofra* are therefore votive dishes that have been prepared and cooked for the event of transition and connection to the transcendental (Torab 2005, 2008).

Sally Promey and Shira Brisman refer to the term 'sensory cultures' (Promey and Brisman 2010), which describes the interaction between objects and individuals through their association with different smells, sounds, touches, and sights: 'Sensory culture, like material culture, concerns not simply perception and its histories and theories but also things perceived and things produced for sensory apprehension' (Promey and Brisman 2010, p. 198). Rituals involve the utilization of a combination of

⁶ A well-known wedding song I repeatedly heard says: This is who he wanted and who he wished for The daughter of the shaykh is brought to the son of the shaykh: hay el radha we hay elly temanaha bint el shekh libnel shekh jibnaha. هاي الرادها وهاي التمانها... بنت الشيخ لابن الشيخ جبنها. See also (al-Hajjiyye 1967, p. 28).

senses '[b]ut it is only when some substance is ingested that all of the senses can operate together' (Soileau 2012). Rosewater and saffron, which are key ingredients of sweet votive dishes, are sometimes used to wash the bride's feet on the day of the *'aqd*. Some add to the *sofra* the old tradition of what is called the 'tray of luck; (*seniyyet bakht*), which contains various herbs and incense⁷ displayed decoratively on a tray (see Figure 2) and is sometimes burned in a censer over charcoal, causing an intensive and pleasant smell in the room.



Figure 2. Also referred to as *seniyyet bakht* (tray of luck) taken by Shanneik 2017 in London.

It is believed that this incense offers protection from the evil eye to prevent jealousy and envy. Women refer to Shia sources highlighting the religious importance of these herbs and thereby refer to the symbolic but also religious importance of using these ingredients before entering wedlock and starting a new life. There are various ways of displaying these herbs on the tray. Some have only the function of symbolic decorations, while some others are used because of the belief in their effect. Some younger Shia only use them because their parents or new in-laws want them to be used, as one of the younger Shia women explains: 'I don't necessarily believe in them. But they look good and our families think they will provide us with a good and happy life. Anything to make them happy really. If it's only about burning some herbs or putting some underneath my pillow then go for it.' Her mother, however, thinks that these practices are important not only for protection and for a happy marriage but also to express their 'roots', as she explains: 'I did it. My mother did it and therefore I want my daughter to do it too. This has been always part of the marriage ceremony and this is how it should continue'.

The fragrant aroma spread in the room through the rosewater, the saffron, the herbs, and the incense becomes a somatized experience for the other women present, as one of the women explains: 'Can you smell Karbala? The minute you enter the room you can smell Karbala.' Another woman adds: 'I don't know if I should laugh or cry. I always have mixed feelings in such *majalis*.' This somatized experience during a *sofra* in combination with the Qur'anic and poetry recitations is linked back to the Karbala narrative. The *mullaya*, through her readings, activates particular memories and thereby directs the congregation to a certain line of memory. The *mullaya* translates each object on the *sofra* in terms of its local, transnational, and diasporic significance in order to make it relevant to everyone in the room. By doing so, the *mullaya* generates a collective memory and thereby strengthens the group's general identity of being Shia outside of any nation-state. Some of the women I interviewed, for example, chose sacred Shia days for the wedding ceremony such as on the day that it is believed Sayyida Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad and the mother of Imam Husayn, married Imam

⁷ Also referred to as *bakhur* or *harmal*.

Ali⁸. This would be a key topic the *mullaya*, for example, would focus on in the *majlis*, contributing to the generation and direction of memories towards women in Shia Islam, emphasizing the role that Sayyida Fatima played in securing a happy marriage with Imam Ali. Female religious authoritative figures such as Sayyida Fatima are taken as role models and a reference point, particularly for younger Shia living in minority contexts (Shanneik 2015; Pierce 2012; Aghaie 2005).

6. Sofra as Contested *lieu de mémoire*

Sofra becomes a space in which various memories are activated and to which different layers of meanings, symbolism, and religious functions for each individual are associated. The *sofra* as a whole, but also each object on the *sofra*, brings various concrete and abstract memories alive for the women. Each individual interprets the *sofra* and its objects in her own terms and is affected in various ways by the *sofra's* somatized experience, as one of the women describes: 'Saffron is magical and should always be part of the *sofra*. Its discrete taste reminds you of Iran and its deep orange colour transfers you to the beauty and warmth of our homeland Iraq.' On the one hand, the individual's interpretation of and association with the *sofra* is influenced by the *mullaya*, while, on the other hand, each individual makes her own links depending on their biographic experiences. Some of the women, for example, had the feeling of being back in Najaf or in Karbala, others in Qum or Mashhad and also in Kuwait or Bahrain, as these were there places in which they were brought up or are regarded as being sacred in Shia Islam. The *sofra* was able to transfer the women emotionally to the places they left but also to bring these memories to the *majlis* in London. In regard to the younger Shia women, the *sofra* brought them back to a Shia pilgrimage trip to Karbala that they performed a year or a couple of months ago. These religious memories are sometimes linked with personal memories of having met their current husbands or having visited certain relatives while being in Iraq or Iran or have a political dimension to them as others remember the Shrine of Sayyida Zaynab in Damascus, associating it with the killing of Shia under the so-called *Islamic State* (IS). As such, these triggered memories support the general narrative of the historical persecution of Shia and thereby create a link to the mythico-historical events of Karbala. These different layers of memory are generated in varying degrees through different objects on the *sofra*, embedded within its religious votive context. The *sofra* can therefore be regarded as a place as it represents a way of intersecting various places (Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, Bahrain) and ideas (the historical persecution of Shia starting with the narrative of Karbala up to Shia's present-day persecution under IS-rule) as well as time (historical memories with contemporary migratory experiences) (see also (Foucault 1984)). Memories are eternalized through objects. The *sofra* is a place of eternity as it functions as a tool to keep the memory of Karbala alive and assures the continuation of various layers of individual memories. It represents the accumulation of various memories that have been gathered over time and through various places. The *sofra* is a tool to eternalize the memory of Karbala, which is transmitted through the temporal representation of the *sofra*. The *sofra* is mobile and has a beginning and an end, thus making its physical presence temporal. Through the various memories generated during a *sofra*, however, the *lieux de mémoire* are made eternal through the distribution of votive presents and the consumption of the food from the consecrated *sofra*. It becomes a form of transmission to present various memory narratives, allowing the construction of a coherent identity category within a religious and festive space. The *sofra* is a form of *lieux de mémoire* as it generates numerous layers of memories accumulated over time and from different places.

During a marriage ceremony, which is regarded as an event of transitional phase, the *sofra* provides security and stability through the various objects that generate particular *lieux de mémoire*, thereby constructing a collective Shia identity in the diaspora. The particular gendered Shia identity is highlighted through linking Shia marriage practices with historical female Shia figures. References are

⁸ There are certain days that are regarded as being sacred but others that are referred to as 'bad' days such as 3, 5, 13, 16, 21, 24, 25. For more see (al-Sharqi 1978).

made to particular Shia historical figures such as Sayyida Fatima, who is the genealogical connection of the Shia Imams to the Prophet Muhammad, and her daughter Sayyida Zaynab, who is remembered as the one who kept the memory of Karbala alive through the performance of religious ritual gatherings remembering the death of her brother and his supporters. The *mullaya* in a marriage *sofra* refers to such female authoritative figures, who are remembered as strong and active members of society fighting for justice urging other women in the gathering to follow their example and be ‘ambassadors of Shia Islam in the UK and in Europe’ as heard in one *majlis*. Particularly when the marriage falls on one of the days on which these Shia female figures are remembered, the narrative of the *mullaya* would be directed to such heroic female figures. The display of nuts, eggs, and corn (see Figure 3) are symbols of fecundity, renewal, and continuity. Female fecundity is represented as the female ability, and therefore religious obligation to human reproduction in order to ‘increase the number of good Shia’ as the *mullaya* continues. It is through giving birth and raising up good Shia children that the message of Karbala can continue, as the *mullaya* highlights: ‘It is in your hands In our hands as women to carry on the message of Imam Husayn. We can let the world know for what Imam Husayn was standing for through raising up children who would serve the Shia community in Europe’. Here, the woman’s body is used to express collective agency and a particular female ability to nurture and create life, which is relevant particularly within a marriage context.



Figure 3. Bread in the shape of flowers, corn, and eggs. Picture delivered by Um Zahra in London 2017.

7. Karbala as *lieu de mémoire* in London?

Shia women in London preparing a marriage ceremony consciously and actively decide what to use in terms of the objects and narratives to be included as part of the marriage practice. One of the women, who is a wedding planner in London, explains: ‘Women do not randomly decide which date the *‘aqd* is to be performed or what to put on a *sofra* or which *mullaya* to invite to lead the *majlis*. It all depends on the family and their background, whether from Iraq (and then the question is from Najaf or Karbala or elsewhere) or Iraqis who migrated to Iran or Kuwait before coming to Europe. Whether you have a *sayyid* (descendent of the Prophet Muhammad) in your family. It all depends. At the end of the day . . . It is all politics. To get married is not the business of the bride and the groom but the business of the whole Shia community here and back home. Even if the couple does not see it or they do not care, their parents care. The couple, they need to understand this, and they very often do not understand it, but they do not live alone, they live within a community, and they need to respect this. Every step needs to be thought through. It takes months to organise a wedding. People from back home are very often incorporated in the wedding planning here. They even sometimes send over some objects to display on the *sofra* or send stones or tiles from the holy shrines. Marrying is not an easy business.’

The power dynamics among Shia community members in London relate back to intra-national relations belonging to the particular religious and social spheres in their countries of origin. Historical rivalries between the two shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala in Iraq play an enormous role within Shia communities in London. Historical transnational conflicts between countries such as Iran and Iraq also play a role in the wider positions of families within Shia communities in London. The changing political and religious climate in the Middle East has an additional impact on family networks in the diaspora. Some young British Shia are outside of these power dynamics, but others are and insist on being part of it by either confirming the continuation of the status quo or changing some of these intra-communal relations. Marrying from the community requires, in the latter case, a lot of political intra-communal considerations. This is also relevant when thinking about what practices to include in a marriage ceremony.

Regarding *sofrat al 'aqd*, there are various opinions around the existence of the *sofra* within Iraqi folkloric traditions (al-Sharqi 1978; al-Hajjiyye 1967). Whereas a number of women referred to the *sofra* as being part of 'what Shia do', others deny its importance and urge women to refrain from including it in their marriage ceremonies. Those who regard it as a continuation of a long Iraqi Shia tradition argue, though, that how the *sofra* is laid out nowadays, what objects are placed on it, and what meaning each object has for the wedding organizers differs from what the women remember from the time they were married in the 60s and 70s in the Gulf, as one of the women explains: 'Now these young girls they pay a lot of attention to details. Everything needs to be set up for a reason. It looks like a piece of art.' Another woman adds: 'In our days it was only a *seniyya* (see Figure 2, above) but now it is a whole *sofra*'. There are some Shia who reject the concept of the *sofra* in itself, as one of the women explains: 'Some people do a *sofra* saying to God that if you make this couple happy, I will dedicate a *sofra* to you next time. This is as if you are making a condition to God. This I reject. If you want to do a *sofra* and donate what is on it to your guests then it is fine but you cannot make a *sofra* and connect it to a condition made to God. If God wants to make the couple happy, He will, with or without a *sofra*.' Another woman supports this opinion by saying: 'People do not get the idea of the *sofra* and use it for their own good. Not only during a wedding but also during other occasions. The whole idea of the *sofra* nowadays is being used to show off. The young girls they compete in who makes the better *sofra* on their wedding. They hire people to do it professionally. They pay them money. Imam Husayn would not have accepted this. Take the example of Sayyida Fatima, her wedding was simple and our daughters' weddings should be simple too.' The *sofra* also has a political dimension to it. Whether the family is close to, for example, the Islamic Republic of Iran or whether they want to disassociate themselves from the Iranian regime determines whether to place certain objects on the *sofra* that are regarded as 'typical Iranian' or whether to do a *sofra* at all, as some regard it as an Iranian practice, which, out of political reasons, some decide to refrain from performing. Certain objects or practices such as honey (see Figure 3), which the bride and the groom feed each other with their little fingers, is regarded by some as Iranian. Placing the honey on a *sofra* would generate for some memories of Iran. Those families who oppose the Iranian regime would therefore reject using honey as an object on the *sofra* to express their political stance regarding the Iranian government and its particular ideological orientation.

Young Shia women's usage of the *sofra* in their wedding ceremony can be seen as their conscious orientation and declaration of belonging to a Shia heritage. The *sofra* is a material and symbolic tool to express their identity of being Shia and to link their present with their historical Shia past in general and with Imam Husayn and the Karbala narrative in particular. The *sofra* becomes a form of *lieux de mémoire* for the young generation of Shia in the UK as it connects and links them to a Shia history and provides them with a religious identity they regard as important during a rite of passage. They constantly renegotiate and reproduce their identities as Shia and what it means for them to be Shia in Europe increasingly through material expression, be it through the *sofra* in a marriage ceremony or through the various other religious practices they perform during the year in which they either commemorate or celebrate their Imams and other Shia religious figures. Young Shia constantly build

various *lieux de mémoires* integrated within their local British context of living in a highly diverse Shia community in London. Different to the older generation of Shia, who might orient themselves to belonging to a particular nation-state, following a certain *marja'*, or being part of a specific tribe or family, the younger generation moves usually back and forth across these borders. They connect to Karbala as their *lieux de mémoire* but fuse it within their local context. One woman of the older generation sums it up in regard to marriage practices by saying: 'Nowadays Shia marriages are a mix of everything: the *sofra* is Iranian, the poetry Iraqi, the dress Indian, and the cake English'. Another woman refers to a marriage that took place this year, where 'the bride had an Iraqi wedding à la British style. The bride was wearing a hatinator and looked like Kate, the Duchess of Cambridge, and this before entering a *sofrat al 'aqd* . . . this is their world, it is their reality and we need to accept it as well.'

8. Conclusions

This article illustrated the complex transnational religio-cultural and political dimensions of Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire* through adapting it, for the first time, to the study of Shia Islam. It demonstrated how particular Shia ritual practices performed by and for women such as *sofrat al 'aqd* can be regarded as a form of Nora's *lieux de mémoire*. The *sofra* serves as the site of memory, allowing the individual and the community in general to build a sense of a Shia historical continuity generated out of the Karbala narrative (see also (Nora 1989, p. 7)). The *sofra* itself but also all the arrangements around it such as the various objects on the *sofra*, the poetry recited, the food consumed, and the herbs burned all are tools for the various activations of numerous memories. As Aleida Assmann explains, '[t]he site is all that, what one seeks in it, what one knows of it, and what one relates to it' (Assmann 2002). Iraqi Shia women in diasporic spaces construct an imagined authenticity of marriage practices to ensure the continuation of individual and collective memories. Whether taking the different spacio-temporal contexts into consideration or not, Iraqi Shia women very often adhere to practices they remember from their own childhood and youth, presenting them as authentic, even if they have changed or been abandoned in Iraq, in order to keep the memory of an imagined past alive. The Shia ritual practice of *sofra* is a place that combines different (non-)virtual and (re)contextualized spaces that find their origin in a particular Shia narrative interwoven with personal, individual, and biographical memory. Material objects displayed on the *sofra* relate to Shia historical sites and narratives of Shia history, which function in making the past tangible and which act as a meaning-making apparatus for the present (Assmann 2002, pp. 201–2). Each individual, however, relates to these historical narratives differently, resulting in a plethora of Shia memories, all connected in one way or another to the narrative of Karbala. These memories are individually and collectively constructed, allowing various layers of memories to be associated with the same place. The activated memories are not randomly chosen by the organizers of a marriage ceremony but rather are consciously decided upon and reflect the socio-political and religious orientations of the hosts of the marriage. Transnational networks and family ties have an influence on the local intra-communal structures and relationships in the UK. Marriage practices in Europe are one of many other communal activities that are influenced by the geo-political and religious developments in the Middle East.

The first and second generation of Iraqi women in the UK search consciously for anchors of memory to construct a particular narrative of their Shia past that determines and defines their present and future. These anchors of memory are individually but also collectively (re)constructed and (re)defined and are influenced by the past as well as current political, socio-economic, and religious changes in the Middle East and in Europe. As Aleida Assmann argues, the politics of memory provides a group with its genealogy (Assmann 2006, p. 138), legitimized through symbols 'across space and time' (Assmann 2006, p. 132). Memory pluralizes and blurs the boundaries of identity but provides Shia women in Europe with a reference point that they articulate through material objects that act as *lieux de mémoire* of a Shia transnational identity. It is the female space of the *sofra* that provides women with the ability to articulate their religious and social identity as women connected and even rooted

within a Shia past, which is expressed through ritual practices that are transnationally transmitted and influenced but locally performed.

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