The History in Procession

Shiʿite Identity Formation through Frames of Arbaʿyin Pilgrimage Narrative

Ahmad Shekarchi

Abstract: This article investigates emerging patterns of pilgrimage in the context of Shiʿite Islam and studies the case of Arbaʿyin based on two weeks of participatory observation, walking from the al-Faw peninsula in the far south of Iraq to the city of Karbalâ. I identify three narratives in this pilgrimage—tribal, ideological and orthodox—and discuss their commonalities and differentials. The *maʿāzīb* system of the tribal narrative is the core of the comparison, yet each narrative is interrelated with the others through the central themes of war, political Islam and religious seminaries. In the last section, I explore recent transformations of these themes as well as the pilgrims' configuration. The tribal narrative of Arbaʿyin presents itself as a rival to the ideological narrative pilgrimage. Although this narrative is based on the social structure of a tribal system, it struggles with new transformations and challenges in form and content.

Keywords: Arbaʿyin pilgrimage, ideological narrative, maʿāzīb system, tribal narrative

The Shīʿa community is a reviving religious identity (Nasr 2007) in the last half century which tries to rebuild itself within some of the Middle Eastern societies with a Shiʿite majority or dominant minority, such as Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen and Bahrain. There are different competitor narratives of Shiʿite identity which construct this 'imagined community' (Anderson 2006) or 'spirit' (Renan 1990). The most known dichotomy is traditional versus political Islam/Shiʿism which attracted attention after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The pilgrimage ritual performs as one of the main manifestations of the identity narrative.

Pilgrimage is a frequent act of faith in the Twelver Shiʿite context of Islam, and the Shiʿite religious calendar includes at least 28 events per year which

stimulate the believers to visit the tombs of the Prophet, his daughter, Fāṭimah, the Twelve Imams as well as the shrines associated with thousands of their offspring. In particular, Iran and Iraq host millions of pilgrims in special events and during the year. In the last two decades, the Arbaʿyin pilgrimage had become one of the most salient manifestations of the identity construction process.

This research will discuss the Arbaʿyin pilgrimage which takes place in Iraq to commemorate and honour the third Shīʿa Imam, Ḥusayn ibn Ali. A central aspect of the pilgrimage is to approach Ḥusayn's shrine in Karbalâ walking. Based on my participant observation of the event, I have identified two framings of the pilgrimage. The first frame is composed of the shorter and more popular route from Najaf to Karbalâ, which I refer to as the 'N-K route', and the second frame is composed of the longer route, referred to as 'T route', which passes through the tribal areas of southern Iraq to Karbalâ. The first is entangled with issues of transnational political and ideological utopianism, whereas the second is embedded in the communal system. The main questions of this research are about the nature of the relationship between these two plots of the pilgrimage story and how the new narrative in the N-K route has emerged from the traditional one of T route. Then, we need to know the attributes of every narrative. What is the content of each narrative, who are the narrators, and who is the intended audience? What are the main commonalities and differences of the contesting narratives? What is the role of these narratives in identity construction?

The Historical Background

The Prophet Muhammad's grandson Ḥusayn ibn ʿAli refused to take an oath of allegiance to the incumbent caliph, Yazīd ibn Muʿawīyah. As the two parties engaged in a battle on the plains of Karbalâ in 680 CE, Ḥusayn was killed and beheaded on ʿĀshura, the 10th day of the first month, Muharram in the Hijri calendar. The heads of Ḥusayn and his supporters were delivered to the caliph's court in Shâm (Damascus) and, after 40 days, returned to Karbalâ along with the caravan of war prisoners, the family members of Ḥusayn and the other martyrs. This day was coined 'Arbaʿyin' meaning the 40th day.[1] In the Twelver Shīʿa narrative, Jābir ibn Abdullaah al-Anṣari, who was one of the most prominent companions (ṣaḥabah) of the Prophet Muḥammad and the narrator of his ḥadith (rāwī), is the first person to visit the burial site of Imam al-Ḥusayn on the day of Arbaʿyin. The tradition of the Arbaʿyin pilgrimage is thus accredited to him, and his name is always mentioned in the ceremony speeches and lamentations.

Ḥusayn's death at Karbalâ is considered to be a martyrdom by the Shiʿites, and the incident has become one of the main symbols of the Twelver Shīʿa identity. In the contemporary history of Iraq, the Shīʿa-dominated political

party Ḥizb al-Daʿwah al-Islamiyyah has been using the Arbaʿyin event to promote Shiʿism where they found themselves as the victim of a historical discrimination by the Sunni Ottoman rulers and their descendant in the modern states.[2] In 1975, the party announced a rally called The Return of the Head, *Marad ol-Raʾs*, involving a walk from Najaf city to Karbalâ, in reference to the return of the martyrs' heads from Damascus. The governing secular Baʿth party decided to cancel the ceremony and confronted the participants at the point of Khān el-Noṣ (or Khān el-Moṣallā). The confrontation caused a bloody clash known as *Intifāḍah of Ṣafar*.[3] Since then, the Shīʿa community continued the ritual of covert walking every year up to the fall of the Baʿth party and the Iraqi president Ṣaddam Husayn in 2003. The rally has become a large event attracting millions of pilgrims and is established as an important and salient event in the Shiʿite community also beyond Iraq. The pilgrimage attracts people from all over the world. Today, after decades of fluctuations, the entire scene of the ritual is now very heterogeneous to be narrated by a single story. The rival narratives experience coexistence to conflict, and the exploration of their interrelationship could be helpful in understanding the complexities of the event.

Methodology

In order to capture how stories of a religious community articulate its 'identity narrative' (Somers 1994), I take the ritual as a collective act of narration. As Van Gennep argues, 'ritual is not mere re-enactment of beliefs, narratives, or values but enactment; a rite of passage does not simply mark a transition in the life cycle but affects it' (Stephenson 2015: 58). Accordingly, a religious ritual such as Arbaʿyin could be studied as a 'cultural tool' (Wertsch 1998) that works to mediate the enactment of a 'collective memory' (Halbwaks 1980) in order to construct the collective identity of a community and mobilise the collective action (Mayer 2014) (see Chart 1).

The narratology here is both the theory and technique of the analysis methodology. Theoretically, 'it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities' (Somers 1994: 607). 'Social life is itself
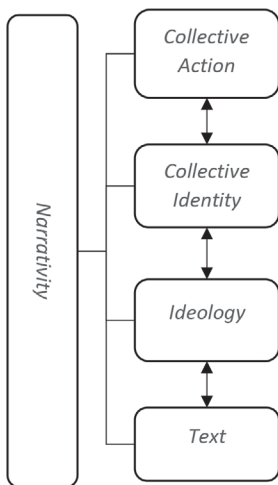
Chart 1. The ontological order of narrativity. 2022 ©Ahmad Shekarchi.

storied and that narrative is an *ontological condition of social life*…stories guide action; that people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories' (ibid.: 614).

Methodologically, 'narrativity is defined by temporality, spatiality, and emplotment, as well as relationality and historicity' (ibid.: 620). Every narrative could be narrated in different plots or framings. 'Plot can thus be seen as the logic or syntax of narrative' (ibid.: 617) and '"grasps together" and integrates into one whole and complete story multiple and scattered events, thereby schematising the intelligible signification attached to the narrative as a whole' (Ricoeur 1984: x). Among other attributes of a narrativity, Somers suggests 'causal emplotment' through which one can 'test a series of "plot hypotheses" against actual events, and then to examine how—and under what conditions— the events intersect with the hypothesized plot' (Somers 1994: 616). In a ritual which refers to a historical narrative, contrary to historiography, it is not the historical truth which bears the significance, rather the frame that a community selects to emplot the events, persons, time and space. In this case, the emplotment occurs through the performance of the ritual and the embodiment of the historical narrative. Ricoeur suggests in this regard quasi-plot, quasi-event and quasi-character for the historical narrative: 'The term "quasi" in the expressions "quasi-plot", "quasi-character", and "quasi-event" bears witness to the highly analogical nature of the use of the narrative categories in scholarly history. In any event, this analogy expresses the tenuous and deeply hidden tie that holds history within the sphere of narrative and thereby preserves the historical dimension itself' (Ricoeur 1984: 230).

Data Gathering

In autumn of 2018, I was invited to join a group to participate in the Arbaʿyin walking. The idea was to take part in the sixth proceeding of the Mīn al-Baḥr ila al-Nahr ceremony. The event was organised by the office of the Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Mohammed Saeed al-Hakeem[4] and his fellow al-Shaʾā'ir Institute. We arrived late to the ceremony and continued the journey northwardly on the shore of the Persian Gulf, Raʾs ol-Bīshih, al-Faw Peninsula in the far south of Iraq (Figure 1).

The main data was collected through participant observation during the walking and from conversations with pilgrims, members of the Mawakib[5] and the Maʿāzīb.[6] I met the 19 interviewees at their homes and had long detailed conversations during our stay. Some of them were managers of Mawkibs whom I met and talked to in the process of food distribution, chest-beating or walking. Other data has been gathered from the websites, libraries and archives. I did data verification by calling some of the interviewees or texting them again. All the data of this field research has been used in this article to

Figure 1. The placard of al-Shaʿāʾir institute opening ceremony. ©Ahmad Shekarchi.

configure the narratives of the Shiʿite identity which have represented and narrated during the pilgrimage.

The Frame Narrative: Walking to Karbalâ

Walking to Karbalâ symbolically represents the tradition of saluting the upcoming guest in advance. In the event of Arbaʿyin, the people who felt guilty about the murder of al-Ḥusayn and the imprisonment of his family ran toward the entrance of the city called Thaniyyah al-Wadaʿ to show respect to the heads of the martyrs and mourn with the prisoners. This frame narrative has been emplotted in two different ways of performative ritualisation.

There are at least two main routes of the Arbaʿyin pilgrimage in Iraq. The most well-known route, which I have called the 'N–K route' runs parallel to the Najaf–Karbalâ highway. The route is multinational and most international pilgrims arrive in Najaf by plane. The majority of Iranian, Indian, Pakistani and Afghan pilgrims travel over land. They reach the Iran–Iraq land borders and travel by bus or taxi to the city of Najaf and start the walking journey there. Travelling over land also offers the opportunity for various groups to organise their own events on route. Shīʿa diaspora of Europe, the United States, Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and Asia are noticeable on the road by their flags and placards or even their own private Mawkibs.

The other route I call the 'T route', runs through the tribal areas of Southern Iraq to Karbalâ. Ethnically, the T route is mainly Arabic and Iraqi. Local and tribal pilgrims join the stream, Mawkib by Mawkib, village by village and city by city. After al-Dīwānīyyah city, some whose relatives are buried in Wādī

al-Salām detour to Najaf, visit their fellows' graves and pursue the journey along the N–K route. Yet the majority of tribal pilgrims proceed on the trip toward Ḥillah city in the northeast of Karbalâ whose route is more verdant, hospitable, equipped and ethnically homogeneous where we found rarely non-Iraqi pilgrims.

The N–K Route: The Salient Plot

The official route runs parallel to the Najaf–Karbalâ highway and reaches a length of 80 kilometres. Along the route are 1,634 lampposts spaced at 50-metre intervals, each holding a number plate. The lampposts are called ʿamūd (Column) or ʿāmūd (informal). The route begins at the far end of Sūq ol-Kabīr (the Grand Bazaar) of the Najaf city. The other side of the Bazaar is Bāb ol-Sāʿah, one of the main entrances of the shrine of Imam Ali, the first Imam of the Twelver Shīʿa, and the father of al-Ḥusayn. Pilgrims typically start the walking after visiting Imam Ali's shrine and pass through the Sūq toward Thawrat al-ʿIshrīn (revolt of 20) square whose name recalls the revolution of 1920 against British occupation of Iraq and the mandatory regime. The distance from Sūq ol-Kabīr to the beginning of the highway reaches about nine kilometres in length (182 ʿamūd or lampposts). The final point is Bāb ol-Qiblah (entrance of the Qiblah) of the shrine of Abu al-Fazl al-ʿAbbas ibn ʿAli, the stepbrother of al-Ḥusayn in Karbalâ.[7]

This route takes three to five days of walking. During these days, the pilgrims are hosted by groups called Mawkibs, 'procession'. The term in this context refers to communities of mourners who organise the rituals of Muḥarram and ʿAshura. The groups form an essential component in the pilgrimage, through which most social functions of the procession or walk take place, as they provide pilgrims with vital services of food, water, and medication, a resting area and even cultural instructions and political propaganda. Some Mawkibs are organised by tribal sheikhs or notable families, and others are held by formal religious, political or paramilitary institutes. At certain places along the route, there is a high-density presence of Mawkibs, organised into multiple rows. In recent years, with the growing number of pilgrims, some Mawkibs have applied automatic machines to prepare breads, kebabs, falafels, shawarmas and kibbehs[8] as well as beverages such as tea, coffee, syrup and fruit juice.

A day's walk takes 8 to 10 hours, starting after morning prayers and before sunrise. Pilgrims eat breakfast on the road, continue to walk until midday prayers and lunchtime and again continue until sunset and evening prayers. This schedule could be reversed during spring and summer when the heat forces pilgrims to walk overnight instead.

There is no exact estimate of financial costs of the Mawkibs during two to three weeks of the ritual, but there is no doubt that the total expenditure of the whole ceremony exceeds billions of dollars. The majority of formal Mawkibs

on the route of N–K are affiliated to the organisation of Holy Shrines in Iran and Iraq; for instance, Imam Reza Mawkib of Mashhad managed to host more than 40,000 pilgrims and absorb donations of 50,000 blankets and 20,000 m² of moquette in one year (Rasanews 2017). Some Iraqi official reports indicate that about 10,000 Mawkibs are held in Karbalâ annually. An official in the Khuzestan province of Iran has claimed that the expenses of his local Mawkibs reach $2.5 million (Mehrnews 2017). ʿAbd al-Amir al-Shriyshī, an active Iraqi manager of a Mawkib calculates the direct expenditures of each Mawkib $25,000–$50,000 depending on the Mawkib size, consisting of $18,000 for food supplies, $15,000 for livestock, $4,500 for purified water and $4,000 for fruit juice as well as donations, including blankets, carpets, moquettes, mattresses and cooking substances such as meat, flour and rice.

The Spatial Connotation

The main symbolic indication on the 80-kilometre N–K route is Khān el-Noṣ station where the confrontation of 1977 took place and the Baʿth party halted the ritual. In the context of Arbaʿyin, the distance between Najaf and Karbalâ is called 'Bain ol-Ḥaramayn al-Sharifayn al-Kubra' (the 'Grand' area between the two holy shrines) which in this case refers to the distance between the Holy Shrine of Imam Ali in Najaf and the Holy Shrines of his sons in Karbalâ. 'al-ḥaramayn (al-sharifayn)' is also a sacred title associated with the two cities of Mecca and Madinah in the Islamic culture. The Saudi king is successively entitled as *khādim ol-ḥaramayn al-sharifayn* or the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, a title used since the era of the Ayyubid dynasty (1171–1260) and the Ottomans. In the Shiʿite context, the title of Bayn ol-Ḥaramayn referred to the distance between Masjid Shāh and Masjid Jamiʿ in Tehran traditional Bazaar built by Qajar dynasty (1796–1925) (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Signposts of old city municipality in Karbalâ. ©Raouf Shahbazi.

Currently in the Shi'ite literature it refers to the distance of 378 metres between the Holy Shrines of al-Ḥusayn and his brother al-'Abbas and the municipality of the city uses the same collocation of '*al-ḥaramayn*' and '*al-sharifayn*' to resemble the one of Mecca and Madinah. The other referent of this resemblance is associated with the Wādī al-Salām Cemetery in Najaf known as the largest cemetery in the world, and the Shī'a believe whoever is buried there is exempt from the judgement and punishment of *barzakh* (purgatory) and is given life in Heaven (Al-Buraqi 2009: 243). In another ḥadith, Wadi al-Salām is described as 'the heaven of the Earth' and is located between Najaf and Karbalâ (Jazāyeri 1997: 294).

The Relationality and Causality

This large number of pilgrims walking provides an extraordinary opportunity for religious and political organisations to advertise their messages through the broadcasting of songs, hymns and video clips and distribution of photos, brochures, pamphlets and books among pilgrims. The offices of grand clerics or the *marja's* try to attract more followers by appointing experts to answer religious questions pilgrims may have, give lectures or debate controversial issues. Since the ISIS invasion of Iraq in 2014, paramilitary components of the Ḥashd ol-Sha'bī (The Popular Mobilisation Forces) also have a remarkable presence in the Mawkibs.[9]

In Iranian context, a counter-militant group named Defenders of Holy Shrine was formed. This multinational military force was mainly formed by Shi'ites of Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Lebanon and declared its major mission to resist against ISIS to prevent destruction of the holy Shi'ite mausoleums. But later, due to the high risk near the Holy Shrine of Zainab in the suburb of Damascus, it focused on defending this building by fighting against the invaders with the battle cry of 'We are all your Abbas, Oh Zainab'.

During the war in Syria, the bodies of some of those who were killed were returned, and upon their funeral ceremonies, new forces were mobilised and substituted. In this process of conflict escalation and its association with other issues related to the war, a new narrative of Ashura event and other Shi'ite historical miseries was reproduced and promoted. The Arba'yin and Jābir is present in the lamentations of the main narrative in the N–K route in a famous dirge by Meysam Moti'i, a famous Iranian Shi'ite eulogy reciter whose performances are mainly focused on the Syrian war. This dirge was performed in a gathering in the presence of Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran:

> Along with the steps of Jābir! we are walking toward Naynawa!
> We count the lampposts of the road eagerly to reach the Shrine!
> …
> Devotees of Zeynab, brimming with passion and love
> God willing! In a little while we reach Damascus!

Here the contemporary walking bears resemblance to the first pilgrimage of Jabir, but instead, the pilgrimage expands to Syria to liberate it from ISIS in a reverse move from Karbalâ to Demascus. Apparently, the salient plot tries to connect the Arbaʿyin event to the war with ISIS in Iraq and Syria in order to urge the Shīʿa, especially the youth to fight in the war. This connection is apparent in the decorations of the Mawkibs where flags and icons of Ḥashd ol-Shaʿbī are used overtly, and in a larger context, it could be interpreted as an act of preparation for the Reappearance of the Hidden Imam in an apocalyptic manner.[10]

This plot was based on the quasi nation-state which is in the process of building its identity for the transnational Shīʿa community. Its 'abstract narrators' (Lintvelt 1981) are the official clerics, eulogists and religious institutes, the Iranian state media and its military and paramilitary alliances. This narrative aims to reach the Shiʿite imagined community. Additionally, in the identity narrative approach, the 'others' are the constituents of the person and community identity (Somers 1994). In the case of the Shiʿite modern state, a four-fold other would be identified; the West, global imperialism and the Zionism; the Sunni majority of the Islamic world; the Arabic environment of the Middle Eastern neighbours and allies; and the majority of non-political or quiet Shiʿism within the Shīʿa community. The modern narrative, in contrary to the traditional one, doesnot postpone the 'Wait for the Relief' and the re-appearance of Imam al-Mahdi to an unknown time, but defines it as a duty of the State to prepare the situation and facilitate the reappearance. This nation formation process necessitates an identity narrative that its components of characters, events and plot are not only analogous to the historical narrative but also offensive, revolutionary and social movement-oriented. Therefore, the Epic is the preferred form of the narration (see Chart 2).

The Tribal Route: The Silent Plot

Moving from Raʾs ol-Bīshih toward Karbalâ, the 590-kilometre tribal route passes 12 stations in one week: the cities and villages of Raʾs ol-Bīshih, Faw, Abū al-Khaṣīb, Ḥamdān, al-Shāfī, Shrīsh-Girnah, Nāṣiriyyah, al-Khīḍr, al-Warkāʾ, Ḥamza, Dīwaniyyah and Najaf. The structure of services and the pattern of pilgrimage are very much different from the N–K route. There is a strong correlation between the geography, which is characterised by rivers, date palm gardens, marshlands, and the desert, the inhabitants' lifestyle and the method of holding the ceremony. Whereas on the first route the ritual is dependent mostly on the participation of formal and semi-formal institutes, the second route is associated more with the everyday lives of the inhabitants and their natural resources. Furthurmore, the geography of the tribal path is intertwined with a collection of religious and historical sites in the suburbs which are commonly visited by pilgrims who detour from the main direction,
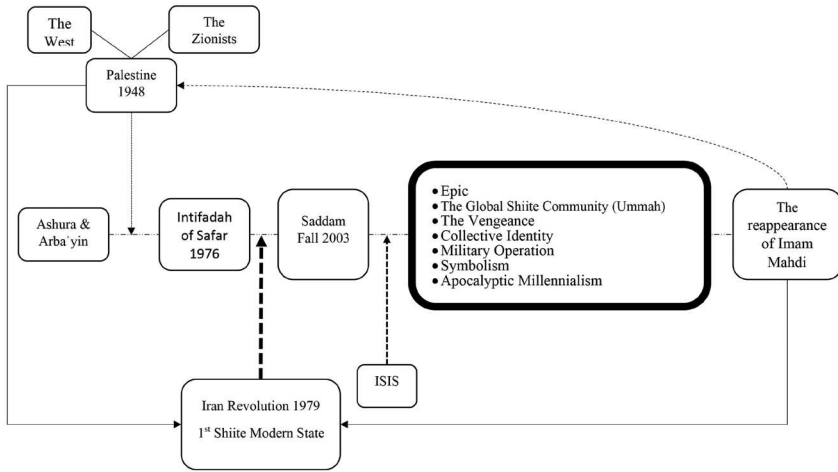
Chart 2. Narrative map of political Arba'yin. 2022. ©Ahmad Shekarchi.

make a prayer at the site and return to pursue their journey. This collection consists of the tombs of Imams' offspring and siblings, called *maqam ibn al-Imam*, as well as tombs of some heroes of the Islamic history, notable clerics and sheikhs, and some contemporary memorandums.

The Ma'āzīb System

The velocity of the money of Arba'yin in the T route is supplied by the communal system of *ma'āzīb* (pl. of *m'azzib*). In this community, every kinship unit from Bait to Fakhth, Baṫn, 'Ashīrah and Qabilah collects the money and/or stores food throughout the year and prepares the place to be ready to host the pilgrims when the ceremony starts. Some of the *ma'āzīb* have a network of guests known from previous years, and the pilgrims as well have a pre-planned schedule of the time and place of their *baytūtah* (bunk). Some of them, even the poor ones, drive to the main road, hours before sunset, to pick up the pilgrims and take them home adamantly; an act of hospitality no pilgrim could resist or refuse (see Figure 3).

In the *barrāni* of the Ḥāj Mahdī residence, in the Abo al-Khaṣīb district of al-Baṣra, where we stopped for *baytūtah*, like in most *ma'āzīb*, baths and clean clothes were provided, and food such as rice with meat and vegetable stew, fried fish, chicken and fruits was served. While the pilgrims are taking a nap and resting after lunch, the *ma'āzīb* launder the pilgrims' clothes and prepare them for the next day of the journey. Both T and N–K routes are full of *mawkib*s, but *ma'āzīb* are a tribal specificity, therefore on the political route, the *mawkib*s have to serve pilgrims day and night (see Figure 4).

Figure 3. Barrāni of Ḥāj Mahdī (left) and his son (right). ©Ahmad Shekarchi.

Figure 4. A poor taxi driver invites pilgrims to his home at sunset, Ḥamdān, Basra. ©Ahmad Shekarchi.

Image and Voice

The tribal route has two visible and invisible sections, and the visible section itself consists of multiple components. The first and most salient component is the pilgrims. Along this long difficult journey, the pilgrims have no accessories but the common Arabic clothing *dishdāshah* or ordinary shirts and trousers for men and *ʿabāyih* for women with a pair of plastic sandals which

Figure 5. Decoration of a Mawkib, symbol of al-Abbas Leather bottle above a satellite dish. ©Ahmad Shekarchi.

is the common footwear to prevent painful shoe bites and water blisters. Some pilgrims carry flags with drawings or sayings about *al-Ḥusayn*, *Karbalâ* and Arbaʿyin. Most pilgrims have no backpacks or carry very light bags.

The second component of the visible section is the *mawkib* in which the tribal, communal and religious identities of the organisers become glaring. These identities could be represented in the form of decorations and statues of figures or events of ʿAshura, sometimes homemade out of simple materials. Additionally, photos of founding sheiks of the *mawkib*, martyrs of the tribe, especially those whom were killed in recent battles against ISIS, represent the kinship network of the *mawkib*. The assortment of religious signs is composed of the portrait of the beloved Grand Ayatollah or *marja'* especially Ali al-Sīstanī[11] (b. 1930), and distinguished Iraqi Shiʿite eulogy reciters recite either the classics, such as Ḥamza al-Zighayyir, Yāsīn al-Rumaythī (see Figure 6) and ʿAbd al-Zahra al-Karbalāʿī, or the moderns like Bāsim al-Karbalāʿī whose performances could also be heard along the journey (see Figure 5).

Non-professional tribal reciters sing folklore poems to welcome *mawkib*s of other tribes upon entering their territory; these performances are followed by the Iraqi tribal war dance (*al-husah*), accompanied with a popular poem composed and chanted for the occasion. The male-only performance of *husah* is a sign of social support 'in times of happiness and sadness'.

An exclusive lamentation which is recited at this event by professional reciters belongs to Ḥamza al-Zighayyir with a poem by Kādhim Mandhur (both known as illiterates) in which the poet calls Jābir and talks to him about the events of ʿAshura:

Figure 6. At the tomb of Mullā Yāsīn al-Rumaythī, Rumaytha, Muthanna. ©Ahmad Shekarchi.

> Oh Jābir! Oh Jābir! You don't know what happened in Karbalâ.
> When they flamed up incendiary!
> The families ran fearfully to the battlefield seeking their fellows!

The distinctive components of this plot are based on the 'structural time' (Gluckman 1965). The ritual here refers to backward time. It starts from the historical event itself and reoccurs every year in the same manner and meaning. The role of the state, cooperative or oppressive, does not change the essence of the narrative. The ritual mediates social consolidation and integration through common and collective actions of the *maʿāzīb* system to heal the wound of the treason on the *ṣibṭ* (grandson) of the prophet. The core theme of the narrative is the 'oppression' al-Ḥusayn and his family experienced. The vengeance is entrusted to God and al-Mahdi, and the 'timeless' tribal community tries to morally compensate its eternal guilt (see Chart 3).

Discussion: Narrative Dialogism and Contestation

The ideas of narrative historicity and relationality suggest the 'addressivity' (Bakhtin 1986), 'the speaking of narratives to each other, a process that shapes the content and form of narratives themselves' (Wertsch 2021). This dialogism could be distinguished to 'overt narrative dialogism' and 'hidden dialogicality' (ibid: 167). In this regard, the silent plot of actions and reactions of the tribal pilgrimage is less visible than the salient plot of the ideological pilgrimage, but
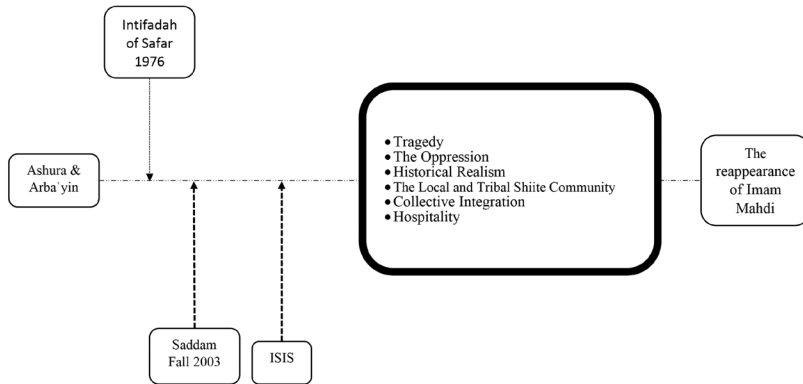
Chart 3. Narrative map of tribal Arba'yin. 2022. ©Ahmad Shekarchi.

they have simultaneously overt and hidden conversations which vary from cooperation to contestation and should be exposed in order to grasp a deeper understanding of the current role of the ritual in identity formation.

These two main types of routes and *mawkib*s manifest different structural attributes. The social network of the tribal *mawkib*s is kinship while the main narrative is based on loyalty to the governments or political figures and parties. The activity of the tribal *mawkib*s, for the most part, is philanthropic, religious or otherworldly; whereas the main narrative of the formal *mawkib*s of the first route is mostly the practice of making a perfunctory or symbolic effort to break records or demonstrate participations in future political agendas.

Table 1 summarises the comparison between the N–K route and the T route. This ideal-type categorisation helps to distinguish the similarities and differences of the two narratives and their essential attributes that sometimes bring the theoretical conceptualisations and definitions into question.

Three Competitor Narratives

The entire scene of the Arbaʿyin would be inclusively addressed by adding a third component, which is the orthodox narrative. This story has little materiality and visibility on the roads, but it is actually the absent present. The backbone of the orthodox Arbaʿyin is the network of clerics and its connection with ordinary people in the two previous narratives. Religious seminaries mobilise the pilgrims, manage their activities relating to the pilgrimage, provide links between them and build up a community; correspondingly, contestation lines emerge on both routes. In the contemporary Shīʿa community, three types of hierocracy are distinguishable: the hard Shiʿism which is represented

Table 1. The comparison of tribal and political narrative of Arbaʾyin. 2022.

	Tribal	**Political (Najaf-Karbalâ)**
Temporality	Historical	Contemporary
Spatiality	Geographic ≈ 600km/17days Folklore Ordinary Life	Symbolic ≈ 100km/3 days Militaristic Persuasive/Ideological
Emplotment	Historical/Mournful Oppression	Apocalyptic/Traumatic Vengeance
Relationality	Maʿāzīb Clan/Kinship Philanthropic	Formal Institutes Transnational Propaganda
Historicity	Lineage	Modern State

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in the core of the Iranian government and its allied militia and is based on the concept of power; the soft Shiʿism typified by the traditional religious seminaries and is mainly scholastic and discursive; and the social Shiʿism which is based on activism and networking. The huge ritual of Arbaʿyin is a by-product of hard and soft cooperation where the hard type provides security and logistics and the soft one legitimates the operation and facilitates it. Both hard and soft communities struggle with the social type and simultaneously benefit from its international network and media as well as its philanthropic institutes and seminaries.

In this context, we can explore three angles of interrelatedness between these three narratives by means of a focal theme for each pair. First, the tribal–political line is related by war. The stories of the Iran–Iraq War are existent everywhere on the T route. The Fāw peninsula was one of the bloodiest battle-wgrounds of the war, and some armaments, installations and facilities still exist in the desert or in abandoned neighbourhoods. The wall writings of Iraqi or Iranian armies' rodomontade and slogans are still readable. Nevertheless, the tribal kinship system let some families of war martyrs have new marriages. Additionally, the new generation joined the al-Ḥashd ol-Shaʿbī to fight ISIS in the Sunnī triangle in the northwest of Iraq. This intertextuality provides al-Ḥashd with a remarkable opportunity to manifest in form of Mawkibs, follow their rules of ornamentation and public services.

Secondly, the political-ideological Shiʿism, which is predominantly compatible with the Hard Shiʿism, not only promotes the war against ISIS through Arbaʿyin but also tries to foster the millennial construal of Shiʿite identity. A cleric in the walking ceremony considers the Arbaʿyin not only a religious ritual but also a manoeuvre to prepare for al-Mahdīʾs rise. Besides, this narrative benefits from the multinationalism of Arbaʿyin to strengthen the notion of Islamic *ummah* and the transnationality of Islamic identity.

Then, two interrelated discourses could be distinguished. First is the reappearance of Imam Zamān or al-Mahdi which support the apocalyptic and millennial aspects of Shiʿism, and the second is the discourse of Ḥashd ol-Shaʿbi and Mudāfiʿān-e Ḥaram who has fought against ISIS and highlighted its transnationality. These two items have been associated as the *jihād kifaʾī fatwa*[12] which is a type of military preparation and manoeuvre to participate in the al-Mahdī rising after his reappearance and the whole operation of the Arbaʿyin ritual could be considered as the civil branch of this Jihad. During the ritual, the pilgrims train to synchronised and organised participation in the al-Mahdi uprising.

In particular, the presence of Iranian state-supported Mawkibs in the Arbaʿyin walking provides it with more political and international connotations. These connotations were reinforced by Iran participation in the war when ISIS attacked Iraq, and the forces of Ḥashd ol-Shaʿbi/Mudāfiʿān-e Ḥaram established there, which imposed a military atmosphere to the event of Arbaʿyin. This new and emerging dimension of the ritual is more apparent and tangible on the road of Najaf to Karbalâ. This road is one of the main routes to reach the shrines of al-Ḥusayn and al-ʿAbbas on the 40th day of their martyrdom.

Third, spending time at the houses of *maʿāzīb* would reveal the integrated connection between tribesmen and clerics. Every tribe has its associate clergy who gives speeches of Muḥarram and Ramaḍān, performs weddings, child births and funeral ceremonies and advises them on religious duties. Furthermore, in the *barrāni* of *maʿāzīb* houses, there is always a sign of their *marjaʿ*, either his photo hanging on the wall or his book of *tawḍīḥ al-masāʾil* (manual of *fatwā*s or jurisprudential manual) resting on the niche . The most famous appearance of this connection happened after the fall of Saddām when the militias of Muqtadā al-Ṣadr barricaded Imam ʿAliʾs shrine and provoked the US army to occupy it. Al-Sīstanī returned from his remedial travel and started a land trip from far south of Iraq and invited the tribesmen to join him to prevent the occupation of the shrine. The crowd reached the old city of Najaf, entered the shrine and helped the militias exit anonymously, and the crisis ended peacefully.

Syncretism: A New Arbaʿyin?

Since a new generation of Arbaʿyin pilgrims is emerging, there are some clues pointing to the hypothesis that in coming years there will be dramatic changes in the occasion. As one of these clues, young reciters and eulogists have been improvising new styles of lamentation and mourning which are not yet recognised and legitimised by the seniors of the field. Mahmūd Karīmī, one of the most prominent Iranian reciters, has obtained immense stylishness among Iraqi youths by his *shūr*[13] mode of reciting. Some young owners of *mawkib*s equip trucks with strong speaker sound systems to broadcast tracks of new generation reciters. Although the elders regard the performances as blaring and clamorous, the youngsters show a very tender reception of it. They have night gatherings and chest-beating to perform live and collective mourning in accordance with Karimi's *shūr* mode.

Second, some young pilgrims have had different behaviours and appearances that are considered weird and awkward by others. Smoking is very common among Iraqis, men and women, and though it may seem strange, they begin smoking as teenagers. Teenagers smoking Shisha or Nargīlah beside the walking road of Arbaʿyin seems weird to other pilgrims, as do the teenagers' hairstyles, clothing, body language, loud laughs and practical jokes. Other pilgrims, especially the eldest, are uncomfortable with it, and some even call these teenagers queer, which is unacceptable in this context. Although this phenomenon needs more research and proof, it could be an indicator of social transformations inside one of the most important Shiʿite ceremonies (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Youth smoking Shisha or Nargila on the road. ©Ahmad Shekarchi.

Conclusion

Historical identity formation of the Shīʿa is based on the pivotal events of Ghadīr and Saqīfah. The event of ʿAshura is, beside Saqīfah and Fadak, one of the triple historical traumas of the Shīʿa. The orthodox narrative considers itself the guardian of the tradition, and clerics of this narrative give speeches, manage events, and empower the core narrative to prevent the heresies. The political narrative of the ritual of Arbaʿyin tries to heal these traumas by constructing the promised global Shiʿite communities up to the Reappearance of the Hidden Imam. Yet in the tribal narrative the community finds itself guilty of the martyrdom of al-Ḥusayn and tries to recompense this historical trauma which has transformed to a stigma for the Iraqi Shīʿa. Therefore, the tribal network begs the pilgrims to host them and mobilise all of its facilities in order to apologise to al-Ḥusayn and his fellows upon their return to the battleground.

Since the ISIS invasion on Iraq and the military clashes with multinational Shiʿite forces, Arbaʿyin pilgrimage has mostly considered as an indirect mechanism to persuade, mobilise and organise the Shiʿite community for the battle. This narrative was stimulated especially through the US–Iran confrontation in Iraq and the media propaganda of each side. I have found a competitor narrative of the event which has roots in the ground of social and cultural structures rather than in the political. Moreover, the political-military narrative is correlated with the mystic-emotional individual reductionism which is prevalent in the majority of social surveys conducted in the field. In most of surveys, the interviewees mentioned: undergoing inwardness, passion, mental and physical healing; purification of the soul and mind through reflection and contemplation; perception of the sacred and the otherworldly; re-experiencing the sacred suffering of al-Ḥusayn and his fellows (Bod 2019; Forughi et al. 2020; Pouyafar 2018); identity connection with the community; experiencing ritual effervescence; and suspension of ordinary life rationality and social stratification (Bod 2019; Razavizadeh 2017). Other commonalities of pilgrims could be identified as transnationality, global Shiʿite identity, anti-imperialism, resistance and liberation through preparation for the Reappearance of al-Mahdī (Givian and Amin 2017).

My analysis of the alternative narrative of Arbaʿyin questions the political account of the event where an obvious pre-modern collectivist tribal edition of the ceremony takes place simultaneously and with an assortment of other narratives. This conceptual and factual array of contradictory elements suggests a more comprehensive mode of analysis. The tribal narrative approves that the political story not only has strong contenders but also defines itself through overt and hidden dialogue with other narratives.

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Notes

1. The sanctity of the number 40 and especially of the 40-day period in the religious lore of the region is most probably one of the reasons behind this tradition. Fortieth-day observances honoring the dead are still common in the Middle East (Ayoub 2011).

2. Also known as the Islamic Call Party. Formed 1958–1959 in Iraq by Shii ulama to work for social justice and foundation of Islamic state. Most prominent Shii activist group by late 1970s. Inspired by Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, who criticized both capitalism and communism in favor of an Islamic alternative. Used *tawhid* as the basis for modern politics, economics, and philosophy. Made significant intellectual and conceptual contributions to the contemporary Islamic revival. Outlawed and repressed by Saddam Hussein in 1980 due to suspected Iranian influence and its opposition to the government; its members were deported, tortured, imprisoned, and/or executed. Al-Sadr was executed in 1980 (Esposito 2003).

3. Safar is the Islamic month in which Arbaʿyin is commemorated.

4. Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Saʾid al-Tabataba'i al-Hakim (1934–2021) is an Iraqi Twelver Shīʿa marja, one of the four members of the Hawza of Najaf and one of the most senior Shīʿa clerics in Iraq after Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.

5. Literally means procession, but they act as multipurpose temporary stations to host pilgrims during the day.

6. Literally means the host, who takes care of guests by providing with food, hot shower, laundry, medicine care and sleeping facilities.

7. The *qiblah* is the direction towards the Kaaba in the Sacred Mosque in Mecca.

8. *Kibbeh* (/ˈkɪbi/, also *kubba* and other spellings; Arabic: كبة, romanized: *kibba*) is a family of dishes based on spiced ground meat, onions, and grain, popular in Middle Eastern cuisine (Wikipedia).

9. When the war against the Islamic State began in 2014, Iraq's security apparatus collapsed, leading many volunteer fighters to join paramilitaries rather than the weakened military or police forces. These substate forces were grouped under an umbrella organization called the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), or al-Hashd al-Shaabi in Arabic (Mansour and Jabar 2018).

10. The Twelver Shīʿa or *Imamiyyah* believe that ʿ*Ali ibn Abi Ṭālib*, the first Imam and the cousin of the Prophet *Muḥammad*, his two sons, *Ḥasan* and *Ḥusayn*, and nine of their lineage consist the Twelve Imams of which *Mahdī* is the last

and considered as *monjī* (the savior), '*mahdī* (the Guided One), *montaẓar* (the Awaited One), *ṣāḥeb al-zamān* (Lord of the Time), *al-ġāʾeb* (the Occulted/Hidden One), *ḥojjat Allāh* (Proof of God), *ṣāḥib al-amr* (Lord of the Cause), *baqīyat Allāh* (Remainder of God) and, most often, *qāʾem* (a complex term meaning among other things: the standing, one who stands up, one who rises, the resurrector)' (Amir-Moezzi 2012) who would reappear upon God's order.

11. The most prominent *marja* (religious jurist) of Najaf seminary.

12. On 13 June 2014, the representative of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Sheykh Abdul Mahdi al-Karbalâi delivered the famous statement that came to be known as the 'wajib al-kifai' fatwa. Highlighting the critical security challenges on the ground and underlining the huge responsibility resting upon the shoulders of the Iraqi people, Sheykh Karbalâi declared the 'defense performed by our armed Forces and security organs' as 'a holy defense against these terrorist aggressors… Sheykh Karbalâi explicitly proclaimed the moral obligation to defend the nation from the aggressors a wajib kafai [collective duty], a duty incumbent on those capable of realizing the objective, which is preserving Iraq, its people and its holy sites' (Rudolf 2018: 4).

13. Shur (passion): chest-beating according to fast rhythms, gentle beats without intervals (Maẓāhirī 2016: 296).

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