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Acknowledgements
The author would like to thank the American Institute of Indian Studies for funding this research. He would also like to thank numerous local Ladakhi groups who assisted him in this project.

This research article is available in HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies:
https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol38/iss2/11
Sanctifying Minority Status in the Himalayan *Ummah*: Eid al-Ghadeer Commemorations Among the Shia in Leh, Ladakh

Rohit Singh

Drawing on ethnographic data, this article argues that the Shia in Leh, Ladakh employ religious ceremonies such as Eid al-Ghadeer to construct a sense of sacred community and a sanctified minority status within the Himalayan *ummah*. Religious discourses pertaining to minority-hood are central to how locals define and redefine themselves in the context of modernity in the Himalaya. Further, the ceremonial embrace of their minority status engenders discourses through which the Shia define their relationships to local Buddhists, local Sunnis, and broader global audiences.

**Keywords**: Eid-al-Ghadeer, Islam, Ladakh, Shia, *ummah*.

**Introduction**

This article explores how the Shia in Leh, Ladakh use ceremonial occasions to construct religious significance for their status as a minority community. The data in this article come from 16 months of fieldwork I conducted in the region from 2012-2013. I worked with both Buddhists and Muslims in the region incorporating methods of participant observation of religious ceremonies, recording oral histories, and interviews. These data demonstrate that the celebration of minority-hood is key to how Shi’is in Leh envision their place within multiple contexts including the history of Islamic *ummah* (community), their status in local politics, and their place within a broader global public sphere. Local issues of identity and belonging remain concerns for these Muslims for three key reasons. First, locals, as in the case with the Shia throughout history, strive to justify and legitimate their minority status in relationship to the Sunni majority. Second, the Partition between India and Pakistan in 1947 brought Ladakhis into the geo-politics of modernity. Ladakhis struggle to define themselves as bordered subjects and political citizens (Aggarwal 2004). For Ladakhis, questions of identity remain tied to issues of political representation, government investment in infrastructure, increased militarization in the region, and ongoing dynamics pertaining to inter-religious relations (Bhan 2013; Bertelsen and Van Beek 1997). Locally, Shi’is in Leh must negotiate what it means to be a minority in a Buddhist majority where inter-religious tensions often manifest. Globally, mass media connects
the Shia to broader political and religious reform movements. This new global pan-Shia identity is emerging throughout the Muslim world along with increasing sectarian conflict (Nasr 2006).

Thus, the marker of minority-status remains central for locals as they define and redefine themselves in the context of modernity. In this article, drawing on ethnographic data I conducted in the region, I argue that the Shia in Leh, Ladakh articulate their religious significance of being a minority group within the Himalayan ummah. The celebration of minority-hood is prominent during ceremonies when locals collectively remember and reflect upon narratives pertaining to their past Imams. During these occasions, they deem themselves an elect minority within the Muslim ummah, who are under the moral authority of the Imams. Further, I argue that while invoking collective memories of past Imams, local Shi‘is craft discourses to define their community in relation to other populations, including local Buddhists, local Sunni Muslims, and foreign governments. I explore these dynamics through the lens of the local 2012 and 2013 Eid al-Ghadeer commemorations which I observed in Leh, Ladakh.

Shia worldwide celebrate Eid al-Ghadeer. They believe that on this day Muhammad publicly declared Ali ibn Abi Talib (ca. 597-661) as his divinely selected successor. In doing so, Ali became the heir to the prophet and the first Imam. Shi‘is believe the Imams are God’s chosen leaders for the Muslim community (ummah). Shi‘is in Leh reference Ghadeer narratives to differentiate themselves from the Sunni Muslim majority on the grounds that only the Shia recognize Ali as the first and rightful heir to the Prophet Muhammad. Sermons and narratives delivered during Ghadeer present Ali as the perfect Muslim who was God’s chosen successor to Muhammad. Through discourses relating to Eid al-Ghadeer and public memories of Ali, Shi‘is in Leh promulgate key doctrines, polemics, and narratives foundational to how the Shia construct a collective a sense of identity within the ummah as an elect minority uniquely partaking in the charismatic authority of Ali and the Imams. This status, moreover, separates and distinguishes their place in the Himalayan ummah.

**Eid al-Ghadeer Commemorations in Leh**

For the Shia, love for their Imams and for the ahl-e bayt (People of the House referring to the Prophet Muhammad’s family) is the ideal underlying sentiment for all religious ceremonies in their liturgical year. Based on Shi‘i hagiographies narrating triumphs and tragedies their Imams and the Prophet’s family encountered, Shi‘is in Leh divide their liturgical calendar into two distinct categories of ceremonial time: Eid (Arabic for festivity, feast, or celebration) and mātam (‘grief’ in Urdu). Times designated as Eid mark occasions for celebrating joyous events in the lives of the Imams and the Prophet Muhammad’s family, such as birth of a specific family member. Mātam, designate occasions for grieving tragedies that befall the prophet’s family, such as the death of Hussein at Karbala. The timing of events designated as Eid or mātam purportedly correspond to the dates of past historical events associated with Shi‘i holy beings. By ceremonially remembering the joys of the Prophet’s family during times designated as Eid or collectively mourning during times designated as mātam, Shi‘i community members publicly express and reaffirm their collective identities as Muslims who love and pledge allegiance to the Prophet and his progeny. Shi‘is in Leh use rituals, narratives, and discourses connected to the timing of Eid and mātam to simultaneously affirm their religious identity as Shi‘i Muslims, their national identity as Indians, and their sense of local Ladakhi identity. The month Muharram is the most significant period of mourning, and it is preceded by Eid al-Ghadeer, an event that Shi‘i Muslims consider the most important time for celebration.

During Eid al-Ghadeer, locals employ narratives, liturgical recitations, and religious speeches to ceremonially present themselves as descendants of a moral minority of Muslims who recognized the significance of Ghadeer and continued to support Ali and the Prophet’s family after Muhammad’s death. Eid al-Ghadeer falls on the 18th day of the month of Dhu al-Hijjah in the Shi‘i liturgical calendar. Celebrations take place both in Leh city and in surrounding villages. In Leh, Eid al-Ghadeer is sponsored by the Anjuman-e Imamiya (The Society of the Imams), the main organizational body for the Shi‘i community. Commemorations last two days: women gather on the first day and men on the second.

Celebrations of Eid al-Ghadeer begin by decorating the exteriors of the Shi‘i mosque and Imambara (House of the Imams) with multicolored string lights turned on at night. Inside Leh’s Imambara, the main location for local celebrations of Eid al-Ghadeer, multicolored streamers are draped around and tied between various pillars on the first floor of the building. During Eid al-Ghadeer and other ceremonial gatherings in the Imambara (see Figure 1), the center of attention is situated in the front of the Imambara.

The first center of attention in front of the Imambara is the minbār, a ceremonial pulpit upon which local sheikhs (religious scholars) sit to give teachings; it is also a podium from where speeches are delivered and from where
ceremonial poems are recited that praise the Imams and members of the Prophet’s family. The *minbār* resembles a small staircase about six feet in height with three steps leading to the top of the structure, where sheikhs sit to deliver their sermons (see Figure 2). Usually hanging above the *minbār* is a picture of Ayatollah Khomeini, indicating the Leh Shi’i community’s recognition of Iranian clerical authority. Behind the *minbār* is placed an image depicting Hussein’s tomb in Karbala embroidered within a large cloth placed inside an archway. Atop this archway hangs a small framed picture featuring Arabic calligraphy of Ali’s name. Around the *minbār* are three key images reflecting important aspects of Shi’i identity: Khomeini representing Shi’i deference to contemporary clerical authority, images of Hussein’s tomb at Karbala, and the name of Ali, the figure who stands as the originator of Shi’i religious identity. The three images are not just present during Eid al-Ghadeer, but are fixed throughout the year.

The other key focal point of the Eid al-Ghadeer commemorations is the podium near the *minbār*. Microphones are placed near the podium under which are strung wires connected to multiple speakers. The podium in 2012 was decorated with red, blue, and yellow streamers in front, and *khatags* (*kha bdag*) were placed on top of the podium. *Khatags* are ceremonial silk scarves, most often white in color, that are used throughout the Tibetan cultural world. Embroidered within these scarves are the eight auspicious symbols of Buddhism. *Khatags* are exchanged in various social and ceremonial settings in Tibetan societies.
Ladakhi Buddhists and Muslims both use *khataq*s. The eight auspicious Buddhist symbols are also found on the outside of gates of both Buddhist and Muslim homes alike. The *khataq* serves as an inter-religious cultural symbol for both Ladakhi Muslims and Buddhists. Members of both religious communities exchange them with each other during ceremonial occasions. These exchanges indicate that this ceremonial item serves as a symbol of a shared civil religion.

The Eid al-Ghadeer ceremonies in both 2012 and 2013 started in the morning and lasted for two hours. The main assembly room in the Imambara is fairly large and easily accommodates several hundreds of Shi’i Muslims in attendance. Most of the audience sat on the large, flat carpeted area in front of both the *minbār* and the central podium. Sheikhs, community leaders, guests, and other highly respect members were seated on a cushioned area adjacent to the *minbār*. This seating arrangement reaffirms local hierarchies within the community. Various speakers from the community—including educators, religious leaders, and highly regarded working professionals—came to the central podium to deliver Ladakhi or Urdu speeches on the importance of the day. In between speeches, local school girls wearing traditional head-coverings (hijab) and local school boys came to the central podium to deliver Urdu and English language synopses of the events that purportedly transpired at Ghadeer when the Prophet appointed Ali as his successor. The main speaker of the event was Sheikh Ghulam Haddi, the senior-most religious leader in the community, who is in late seventies. Following Sheikh Haddi’s speech, most of those in attendance proceeded to the local mosque where they performed their midday namāz (daily worship).

### The Culinary Construction of a Minority Community

Collective feasting customs distinguish the Shia from the Buddhist majority in the city. Rules governing the exchange of food draw boundaries between insiders and outsiders within the community. During Eid al-Ghadeer, most of the audience returned for the ceremonial lunch (see Figure 3). Before meals were served, several rows of long yellow mats with floral design, upon which food would be eaten, were spread out throughout the Imambara. Locals refer to the mats as *daster khan*, an Urdu term designating this cloth. One of the leaders of the Leh Shi’i community, explained to me that the *daster khan* was placed down to honor and show respect to the food. *Daster khan* are also designed to prevent food from falling on the floor, which is disrespectful to the food. Lunch consisted of goat meat, rice, and curry. Food was served on large stainless-steel plates. As is the typical dining custom for Leh Muslims, three Muslims sat together to share a single plate. Three Muslims, after receiving their one plate, mix the curry into the rice using their right hands. They also make sure to divide the meat evenly. They dine with their right hands. According to one elder male, a local leader I spoke with at the Imambara, the practice of sharing one plate was done to show brotherhood: “when sharing the food, there is never a feeling of ‘I am better than you or I...
am clean and you are not... I am rich man, you are a poor man’”. Sharing food and eating collectively demonstrates unity and equality among Muslims; dining traditions thereby foster community building.

Shi’is differentiate themselves from other Ladakhis by not eating cooked foods or drinking any liquids from the hands of non-Muslims such as Buddhists. Sunnis eat from the Buddhists so long as the food is halal (lawful). Some Buddhists feel angry with Muslims, namely the Shi’i community, because these Muslims seemingly view Buddhists as unclean, evinced by these Muslims not eating what Buddhists cook. Commensality reinforces social borders of community for these Muslims.

Two justifications are given by Shi’is in Leh for not eating what Buddhists or other non-Muslims cook. First, Buddhists are unholy because they are not Muslim. Buddhists’ innate impurity, it is implied, could contaminate their food. Second, the more common justification, however, is that food from Buddhists is not guaranteed to be halal because even if the individual food item was originally halal, it may have been touched by hands or cooking utensils exposed to haram (forbidden) items like alcohol. The residue from haram substances can seep into halal foods. For example, a cup given to a Muslim by a Buddhist with tea inside may have earlier been used to serve an alcoholic beverage like chang, a beer made from fermented barley. If a Buddhist had improperly washed the cup, the chang could mix in with the tea served to a Muslim. To minimize the chance of exposure to forbidden substances, Shi’is ideally eat only from the hands of other Muslims because Shi’is assume that Muslims follow Islamic dietary restrictions. During Eid al-Ghadeer, the sharing of food is a way of publicly binding the community as one Muslim community dedicated to Ali. Dietary restrictions draw boundaries between insider and outsiders to the community. Commensality, in short, serves as an important marker of identity in distinguishing themselves as a morally pure minority community under the charismatic authority of the Imams.

Narratives and Collective Memories of Ali in Leh

Ceremonial decorations, sermons, and dining practices are dedicated to Ali, an individual whose hagiographies are foundational to Shi’i conceptions of the charismatic authority of the Imams. Historically, the Shia distinguish themselves as a minority or faction who supported Ali as the successor to the Prophet Muhammad. On Eid al-Ghadeer and other occasions during my fieldwork in Leh, I asked several locals why Ali was special to them. Three common themes emerged in their responses: (1) Ali was the mightiest warrior; (2) Ali had perfect religious knowledge; and (3) Ali was a pure Muslim chosen by God to lead the Muslim ummah after Muhammad’s death. During the 2012 Eid al-Ghadeer, Dr. Shaukat Ali, a community leader, told me that Ali was the strongest warrior who fought for the Prophet Muhammad. He cited the Battle of Khaybar in which Ali used his bare hands to open the gates of an impenetrable fortress. I also heard one Muslim reference Ali’s sword, the Zulfiqar, an epic weapon he wielded on the
battlefield. Ali’s warrior prowess garnered him the reputation for being a lion among men. In the village of Chushot Yokma, located roughly 25-30 kilometers east of Leh city, an image of Ali riding a lion is placed on the walls inside the village’s Imambara (see Figure 4). Shi’is in Leh refer to Ali by the epithet, Amir al- mu’minin, “Commander of the Faithful”, referring to Ali’s military might and strategic expertise when he served as a commander in Muhammad’s army.

Ali’s knowledge is also praised by many Shi’is, believing that he embodies complete knowledge of worldly subjects, such as science, and he also had perfect wisdom of Islam. Referring to Ali’s ‘ilm (gnosis), speakers at both the 2012 and 2013 Eid al-Ghadeer commemorations quoted a line attributed to the Prophet Muhammad: “I am a city of knowledge, and Ali is the gate” Ali’s vast intellect, according to one youth I spoke with, can clearly be seen by the Nahj al-Balagah (The Peak of Eloquence), a religious text purportedly written by Ali featuring sermons and letters covering a vast scope of topics including creation of the universe, religious doctrines, and the history of Islam. According to my informants, Ali’s complete knowledge enabled him to always know how to properly comport himself as Muslim.

Shi’is in Leh also praised Ali for his purity, a quality making him uniquely qualified to govern the ummah after the Prophet’s death. They refer to him as ma’sūm, an Urdu word meaning ‘innocent’. During the 2013 Eid al-Ghadeer celebration, a large poster was hung above the Imambara entrance in Leh (see Figure 5). To the left and right of the poster were images of the Kabah, the most sacred center of Islam and the central destination of pilgrimage for Muslims embarking on the annual hajj to Mecca. Above, below, and in between these two pictures of the Kabah is a quote written in both Arabic and English, a statement made by Muhammad at Ghadeer: “I Have Perfected Your Religion, And Completed My Favor On You. And Have Consented With Islam as Your Religion. He whose Guardian Leader (Maula) was I, This Ali (who stands besides me) is his Guardian Leader After Me” [sic]. The placement of the Kabah in this image is significant for Shi’is due to its claimed connection to Ali.

At the birth of Eid of Ali in May 2013, Sheikh Qasim, the chief Sheikh in Leh city, referred to a popular story according to which Ali’s mother was given permission by God via Gabriel to deliver Ali inside the Kabah, despite it being a holy place where no blood is to be shed. God permitted Ali’s birth inside the Kabah because of Ali’s innate and special purity. Many religious leaders in Leh stress that Ali remained pure throughout his life because since his early childhood he was a Muslim living alongside Muhammad. Ali, unlike other Muslims who converted later in their lives and previously practiced other religions, never ‘worshipped idols’ or partook in haram substances such as alcohol.

The proclamation quoted in the banner described above is the main focal point of the Eid al-Ghadeer celebrations. Shi’is interpret this quote by Muhammad as meaning he chose Ali as his successor. Stories culminating with the declaration by Muhammad are recounted numerous times during the Eid al-Ghadeer ceremony in Urdu, English, and Ladakhi. According to oral narratives in Leh, over 100,000
Muslims gathered in Ghadeer to hear an announcement by the Prophet during his final pilgrimage to Mecca or hajj. God told Muhammad to not fear the people. Muhammad brought Ali to stand before him. Muhammad asked the congregants if they followed him and they said yes. He replied that “If you love Ali, you love me. If you hate Ali, you hate me. Then God will hate you”. Finally, the Prophet delivered God’s message that whomever over which Muhammad was master, Ali was now their master. Various speakers in the Imambara stressed that upon hearing this all the Muslims at Ghadeer rejoiced, and many, such as Abu Bakr, the first Sunni Caliph, personally congratulated Ali. Locals use these discourses to designate their special status as a moral minority in the ummah, united in support of Ali as their Imam. They also contrast themselves from the Sunni majority as they envision themselves as a divinely guided minority in history of the ummah.

Community and Charismatic Authority

Weber views charisma as: “A certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities” (Weber 1947: 328). Applying Weber’s theories to Islamic Studies, Liyakat Takim, in The Heirs of the Prophet: Charismatic and Religious Authority in Shī‘ite Islam, examines how different Islamic traditions attempt to deal with the universal problem of the death of the Prophet Muhammad. The Prophet is a charismatic authority uniquely capable of uniting Muslims based on divine authority. Takim cogently argues that whereas other Muslim communities struggled to routinize the Prophet’s charisma by transferring his charismatic authority onto traditional and legal institutions—particularly the emerging Islamic scholarly community (ulema)—the Shi’is proposed a mechanism to circumvent routinization, maintaining the Prophet’s supernatural and exceptional charisma in the world via living Imams through a hereditary succession of the Prophet’s charisma (Takim 2006: 24). Locals celebrate Eid al-Ghadeer as the moment in which the Prophet passed his perfected knowledge of Islam to Ali. This occasion began a line of succession whereby the Imams and would sustain the Prophet’s wisdom and infallibility in the world. These qualities, which are ‘charismatic’ in the Weberian sense, uniquely qualify the Imams to have wilāyat (guardianship) over the Imam. In her historical study of the doctrine of wilāyat, Maria Dakake analyzes early Shi‘i writings on Ghadeer Khum and she argues that the doctrine of wilāyat became “the ideological conduit for extending a belief in the charismatic authority and elite spiritual status of Ali and the succeeding Imams to the community collectively and the ordinary Shi‘ites, individually” (Dakake 2007: 7). Dakake contends that Shi’is collectively and individually come to “participate in the charisma” of the Imams because Shi’is envision themselves as a “charismatic community” who have exclusive access to the wisdom and infallible guidance offered by the Imams (ibid). The charismatic community resonates with my observations of Eid al-Ghadeer commemorations in Leh; there, some Shi’is proudly proclaimed their allegiance to Ali and love for the Prophet’s family, in contrast to the ‘other sect’.

When examining Leh’s Eid al-Ghadeer ceremonies, however, we see one important dimension missing from discussions on charismatic authority as articulated by Takim and Dakake. While I agree with Dakake that Shi’is try to partake of the charismatic authority of the Imams, it is important to articulate how they do so. Pointing to Eid al-Ghadeer, I argue that Shi’is, at least in Leh, connect with the Imams and their charismatic qualities through timed ceremonial gatherings. In these gatherings, performances allow Shi’is to make sacred figures from the distant past, such as Ali, imminently present in their collective memories. Performance produces the charismatic authority of the Imams within the collective memories and narratives of those gathered in the Imambara. Thomas Csordas’s theories on charisma articulate this point. In contrast to Weber’s view of an innate and natural quality within select leaders, Csordas contends that charisma arises from linguistic performances “in a mobilization of communal symbolic resources that are realized in a mode of discourse or performed in a genre of ritual language within particular social settings” (Csordas 1997: 141). During Eid al-Ghadeer, Shi’is in Leh gather in the Imambara for the ceremonial remembrance of past Imams to invoke the distinctive qualities of Ali and his descendants through the performance of poems, speeches, and story-telling. Through participating in or observing these performances, Shi’is connect themselves to the doctrines, narratives, and ideals constituting Ali’s charisma.

The Doctrinal Foundations of a Charismatic Community

I recorded interviews regarding local theological discourse on Imams with three sheikhs. These include Sheikh Nasir, a young scholar in his thirties who studied in Iran; Sheikh Jawad, a senior Sheikh who studied for several years in Iraq and whom members of the Shi’i community praise as their top intellectual scholar; and a third anonymous Sheikh who is well-versed in Shi’i polemical traditions. Sheikhs
such as Sheikh Nasir and Sheikh Jawad become the centers of attention during various times of Eid and mā'ām when they sit on the minbar inside Imambaras to deliver tablīgh (sermons) on theological points such as the qualities of the Imams, issues of justice and injustice, the importance of loving the Prophet’s family (ahl-e bayt), and what differentiates the Shi’i community from other Muslims. The answers they gave me largely parallel contemporary, trans-local views espoused by scholars within the Twelver Shi’i tradition (Newman 2010 and Ende 1990). Religious knowledge and education for Shi’is in Leh arrives largely from outside the region, such as when local students enter global centers for Shi’i scholasticism in Iran and Iraq. Once they return to Ladakh, they impart this knowledge to local Ladakhis, especially during Friday prayers or during ceremonial occasions like Eid al-Ghadeer.

During interviews, local scholars emphasized the significance of Ali and that the other Imams were the rightful successors to the Prophet Muhammad. Being a minority tradition in Islam, the Shi’i developed doctrines to argue for the charismatic nature of their Imams and the Imams legal right to govern per Islamic law. They have cast themselves as an exclusive minority within Islam, guided by the charismatic authority of the Imams.

When I asked Sheikh Nasir and Sheikh Jawad about the source of authority and power for the Imam lineage which began at Ghadeer, they presented five main points: (1) Ali and the Imams are divinely selected (nass); (2) the Imams possess spiritual gnosis (’ilm); (3) the Imams are infallible (mas’ūm); (4) the Imams are connected to the Prophet’s family (ahl-e bayt); and (5) the Imams’ existence is necessary for maintaining God’s creation of the human world. Like speakers at Eid al-Ghadeer, during interviews these two sheikhs stressed that Ali and the Imams are selected directly by God. Sheikh Jawad posits, “The Prophets were made by God. Who made Prophet Muhammad? God. Just as the Prophets were made by God, we say that the successors were also. Those who believe this we call the Shia... The Imams were sent by God just as the prophets were sent by God.” The logic of his argument is based on the key premise that God always sends divinely selected individuals for the sake of keeping his laws for humanity in the world. When it came to revealing his laws, God sent special individuals in the form of prophets. Just as God sent prophets to bring his laws to the world, now that the prophetic lineage has ended, the successors to the prophets, the Imams, must maintain the laws as the presented by Muhammad, the last Prophet. Because the successors must maintain God’s laws in the world, they must necessarily be divinely selected because God always sends divinely selected individuals to keep his laws for humanity in the world. Sheikh Jawad made a key distinction by emphasizing this to be a solely Shi’i theological view. The Sunni, in contrast to the Shia, posit that the successor to the prophet is chosen through elections within the ummah. Many Shi’is in Leh directly stated or indirectly implied that their line of succession, starting with Ali at Ghaedher Khum, holds a moral and theological high ground over the Sunnis, whose first three chosen successors supposedly emerged via human elections and not through divine will.

These sheikhs also stressed that Ali and subsequent Imams are not just ordinary men chosen to govern the ummah, but they were granted spiritual powers by God to do this, particularly divinely guided gnosis and infallibility that only Imams possess. Sheikh Jawad described some of the key Shi’i beliefs on the innate wisdom or gnosis (’ilm) possessed only by Ali and the other Imams:

Khuda [Urdu for God] gives them [the Imams] a special gnosis (’ilm). Knowledge automatically comes to them. In their mind knowledge is automatically present. They do not need to ask questions, to read texts, or to seek knowledge. We are normal individuals. We have to read to get knowledge or ask questions from others. The Imams are not like us. God gives them knowledge directly. Knowledge comes instantaneously to them. Some have to read to gain knowledge. Some have to ask others. Yet the Imams do not have to do this. Only the Imams have this instantaneous wisdom.

Sheikh Jawad discusses the intellectual qualities of the Imams. The average person, he claims, lacks knowledge, and he must make effort to find knowledge regarding any subject matter, including religious practice. The Imams, as Sheikh Nasir pointed out earlier, possess knowledge required to instruct Muslims on religious affairs. The basis for that is the special knowledge given to them by God; special knowledge manifests as instantaneous wisdom. Without reflecting or conducting any research, Imams can immediately provide accurate knowledge or any question or challenge posed to them. In the Shi’i perspective, as Sheikh Jawad stated, no other individuals in the world possesses such God-given knowledge arising instantaneously. God has made Imams uniquely qualified to teach and govern the Muslim ummah.

On Eid al-Ghadeer locals commemorate the day this unique spiritual power was introduced in the world concomitantly with Muhammad ordaining Ali as his successor. An embodied connection to prophetic knowledge was created
between Muhammad and Ali. Sheikh Jawad described that at Ghadeer, “Just as mother pigeons place food directly into the mouths of their children, Muhammad placed his knowledge directly into the mouth of Ali. However, much knowledge the Prophet had about Islam, about the orders of God, he gave this knowledge directly to Ali”.

Theologically speaking, God sent his final Prophet to perfectly establish his laws in the world. Although the final prophet died and the Imams do not have direct access to revelation like past prophets, Muhammad’s complete and perfect knowledge survived because Muhammad directly transmitted his wisdom to Ali at Ghadeer Khum. This process of transmission was not a slow process of teaching and learning, rather it was an instantaneous transmission, straightforward and direct as a mother pigeon giving food from her mouth to her children. Locals consider themselves to be a minority who preserve and live out the divinely inspired teachings of the Imams. Stories of Ghadeer create a master narrative for Shi’is, presenting a vision of time and history that guarantees them a divine status under the Imams’ wilāyat or guardianship. The Ghadeer narrative and its corresponding traditions of hermeneutics and polemics, in short, allow Leh’s Shi’is to envision a meaningful place for themselves within the history of the cosmos (beginning with God’s creation of the ahl-e bayt), within the history of Islam (beginning with Ali’s wilāyat), and the end of history, following the return of Ali, leading to the Day of Judgment, an event in which Shi’is will have the love of the ahl-e bayt and the wilāyat of the Imams as their refuge. Through public ceremonies, such as Eid al-Ghadeer, locals construct an image of their community as a minority destined to serve the Imams and love the Prophet’s family till the end of time.

Ghadeer Narratives and the Sunni and Shia divide

For Shi’is in Leh, Eid al-Ghadeer commemorations reaffirm the key narratives, historical reference points, doctrines, and theological arguments that define them as a distinct community locally, in Leh, and globally, as part of a broader Muslim minority within the ummah. Thus during Eid al-Ghadeer locals address what they perceive as a moral and theological historical problem: Ali was not appointed as the head of the Muslim community after Muhammad’s death, even though Muhammad purportedly chose him as his successor at Ghadeer. Instead, after the Prophet’s death, the majority of Muslims appointed and supported Abu Bakr as the first Caliph. Also, the majority of the Muslim community has never universally recognized any other Imam as the rightful leader of the ummah, with the exception of Ali who served as the fourth Caliph. The Shi’is in Leh consider that only their Muslim community celebrates Ghadeer; their Sunni neighbors maintain that Muhammad instructed his sahaba (companions) to elect a leader among themselves, culminating in Abu Bakr succeeding the Prophet. Referencing this Sunni and Shi’i difference, at the 2012 Eid al-Ghadeer ceremony one Shi’i Muslim argued, “People celebrate this day to be the day when Ali was chosen as the Prophet’s successor. Those who follow Ali are Shia. Those who are not are the Other sect”. The Sunni are the ‘Other’ for the Shia, and that ‘otherness’ was a common subtext during Eid al-Ghadeer speeches in Leh. The Sunni do not celebrate Eid al-Ghadeer because, unlike the Shia, the Sunni do not believe Ali was chosen by God as Muhammad’s successor at Ghadeer.

Shi’is occasionally critique leaders of the ‘other sect’, those Sunnis, and the election process that put the Sunnis in power. Shi’is maintain that the Caliphs ignored God’s commandment issued by Muhammad at Ghadeer and usurped Ali’s right to rule. Shi’is also contrast how their Imams’ envisioned qualities with those of the Sunni Caliphs. Three key themes emerge as to why Shi’i Imams held theological high ground over the Sunnis: (1) the God-given authority of the Imams over the Caliphs; (2) the innate purity of the Imams in contrast to Caliphs; and (3) the innate wisdom of the Imams, which the Caliphs lack. These discourses demonstrate that Eid al-Ghadeer celebrations offer times and venues for fostering solidarity among Shi’is in Leh while to some extent simultaneously reaffirming borders and divides between the Shi’is and their Sunni ‘Other’.

When comparing the Imams to the Sunni Caliphs, the Shi’is in Leh highlight foundational differences using two sets of binary oppositions: (1) between the Prophet’s family (ahl-e bayt) and the Prophet’s sahaba and (2) between the Imams and the Sunni Caliphs. While Shi’is characterize themselves as devotees of the Prophet’s family and Muslims aligned with Imams, they cast their Sunni ‘Other’ as committed to the Prophet’s companions and elected Caliphs.

These polemics and narratives are trans-local in origin, reflecting the foreign religious training of local sheikhs and an increased affiliation with outside religious groups through outlets such as mass media. Some Sunnis in Leh critique the Shi’is, arguing that many of their doctrines are innovations (bi’da) to Islam because these doctrines are not found within authoritative textual sources, specifically the Qur’an and hadith. Sunni critiques reflect broader polemical traditions invoked in contemporary sectarian conflicts.

Between the Sunni and Shia in Leh,
longstanding and trans-local traditions of sectarian polemics manifest, potentially drawing ideological borders between the two communities.

Sectarian Unity and Local Politics

At the local level Sunnis and Shi'is in Leh must also negotiate what it means to live together as one Muslim minority in a predominantly Buddhist district. In spite of disagreeing on Ghadeer and occasionally invoking sectarian rhetoric, usually when the other group is not present, Sunnis and Shi'is in Leh enjoy cordial relations. They interact as neighbors, friends, classmates, and coworkers. They even occasionally inter-date and even inter-marry, though this is discouraged. On occasion, Sunnis and Shi'is even foster a collective identity as one Muslim minority community within a predominantly Buddhist region.

Collective identity is at times central in political disputes. For example, in 1989 communal politics consumed much of the Indian nation-state. At this time, Buddhist and Muslim communities in Ladakh became divided over whether to remain part of Kashmir. Most Muslims did not support Buddhist demands for independence from Kashmir. This created communal tensions in the region for the span of three years. When Leh experienced communal agitations from 1989 to 1992, the Sunnis and Shi'i leaders united under the banner of the Ladakh Muslim Association; setting aside sectarian differences Sunnis and Shi'is expressed local, public Muslim solidarity against the Ladakhi Buddhists, their common other (Bertelsen and Van Beek 1997).

Nowadays, Sunnis and Shi'is also unify on global political issues. On the last Friday during the month of Ramadan, the two communities perform a unity march in Leh's bazaar against 'Western superpowers'. This annual event is called Youm-e-Quds (Jerusalem Day). Muslim groups worldwide set aside sectarian differences to participate in Quds protests. Iranian cleric Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979 promoted the Quds protests to express solidarity with Palestinian Muslims and to show Muslim unity against Israel. Thousands of Muslims, including students, Sunni and Shi'i religious heads, and members from local Muslims organizations marched through Leh at the Quds demonstrations I witnessed in 2014. Sunnis and Shi'i leaders delivered speeches that condemned the Israeli government as a regime in which the “Zionists have kept the people of Palestine deprived of their fundamental rights” (Balkhang 2013). Speakers at Youm-e-Quds called on Muslims and non-Muslims to support Palestinians and all other persecuted populations because “it is a humanitarian obligation to express solidarity with those people whose rights have been violated by so called superpowers” (ibid). Pointing to countries like Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, one speaker called on an end to the spread of terrorism within Muslim countries.11

Many Sunnis and Shi’is in Leh use media such as television, newspapers, and the internet to learn about global issues, particularly politics in Muslim countries. They view Western nations as superpowers attempting to divide and conquer Muslims. Islam and all Muslims are under threat. During Youm-e-Quds, Sunnis and Shi’is in Leh march against perceived shared external threats by foreign superpowers such as Israel, and they march against internal threats from terrorist groups. These internal threats are global terrorist groups who profess following Islam. Although Sunnis and Shi’is differ in their views on religious authority in the ummah, they consider it their responsibility on select days, such as Youm-e-Quds, to set aside their differences and to stand as one Muslim community against common political threats.

On a few occasions, such as the Eid that marks Muhammad’s birth (Mawlid al-Nabbi), Shi’is and Sunnis in Leh unite as one community to honor a shared Prophet and their shared Qur’an. This specific Eid is celebrated inside Leh’s Sunni Mosque, where a mixed audience of Sunnis and Shi’is listened to Ladakhi and Urdu language speeches by both Sunni and Shi’i leaders regarding the Prophet Muhammad’s legacy. I observed and recorded speeches from the 2013 commemorations. Apart from the oneness of God (tawhid), a doctrine foundational to both Sunnis and Shi’is, these speakers mentioned few theological concepts; instead, they emphasized the Prophet Muhammad brought morality and humanity back in the world. If God had not sent Muhammad and the 124,000 Prophets before him, one speaker argued, “peace would not be in the world”. The themes of aman (peace) and insanayat (humanity) reoccurred in all the speeches. Although Sunnis and Shi’is often have contradictory and conflicting views about post-Prophetic religious authority and Islamic history, peace and humanity are ideals that could easily appeal to this inter-sectarian audience.

This call for peace and unity is likely a strategic move to distance local Muslims from sectarian violence and militant actives taking place in other parts of the world. In between speeches, groups of Sunni and Shi’i school girls separately sang Urdu language nāts, a genre of lyrics praising Muhammad. The final speaker was the head Imam of Leh’s Sunni community who re-expressed
sentiments given earlier by a Shi’i leader when he said, “If one takes on the title of Muslim, and if one then denies others their rights and they oppress others, then there is no value to their Islam… that person does not understand Islam”. His speech followed a common practice of emphasizing the Prophet as having taught universal ideals of brotherhood, human rights, and justice. These ethical principles provide a shared set of values for the mixed Sunni and Shi’i audience. Again, it is important to emphasize that these calls for sectarian unity take place in the context of both contentious local politics and aspirations for a local Muslim minority to connect with broader pan-Islamic movements.

A Moral Minority in a Global World Order

Shi’is in Leh view their community as a persecuted and moral minority within a global world order in which ‘wahhabi groups’ (a blanket term used by Shi’is in Leh for those Islamic groups and regimes considered inimical to Shi’ism) and ‘Western Superpowers’ target them. In modern times they remain persecuted by wahhabi influence backed by ‘Western Superpowers’. A group of Shi’i college students I interviewed complained these wahhabis do not recognize Shi’is as Muslims; instead, wahhabis persecute Shi’is calling them ‘Kafirs’ (disbelievers in Islam). One student complained the wahhabis deny their humanity: “They think the Shia are like dogs. If you have four pieces of bread stacked on top of each other, and if one Shi’i eats the top one, they [the wahhabis] will say to throw the other three away because a dog has eaten from this stack of bread”. Another student complained that while the wahhabis are fringe groups shunned by virtually all Muslims, their influence flourishes with support from ‘superpowers’ like America: “Before America, there was not this degree of violence [between Muslims]. Now we are cutting each other’s throats. Now Americans are putting tensions between us. Divide and conqueror [sic] is their policy”. This student echoes beliefs I heard a number of Shi’is in Leh express. ‘Western superpowers’, they argue, fuel tensions between Muslims and prop up wahabis regimes such as Saudi Arabia. Some Shi’is contend that regimes like the Saudi government fund wahabis. One Shi’i elder insisted to me that “Saudi Arabia wants to eradicate Shi’ism from the world,” and to this end “they pour money like water into countries” to fund anti-Shia propaganda and finance anti-Shia terrorist groups.

Shi’is in Leh view themselves as part of a global Shia community perpetually victimized and viciously targeted by Western superpowers on the one hand, and on the other hand terrorist groups funded by Muslim governments, such as Saudi Arabia, who are purportedly governed based on wahhabis ideology.

Locals believe, however, that this suffering and persecution is the price they must pay for following God’s orders at Ghadeer. Just as Ali’s supporters were a moral minority subjugated by an unjust majority, modern Shi’is love Ali and ahl-e bayt in spite of wahhabis attack. One anonymous source in Leh’s Shi’i community argues for the moral superiority of Ali’s followers over those who opposed him:

You have two have two groups [of Muslims]: those who followed Muhammad with their heart and those who followed Muhammad in name only. Those who followed with their heart accepted all of Muhammad’s orders because Muhammad’s orders were God’s orders. When Muhammad ordered at Ghadeer that Ali be made his successor, they followed. But another group chose to make their own successor... One group wanted to follow God and the other wanted to follow the votes of people. The two groups became enemies of one another. Those who followed God were weak. Even today those who follow truthfulness are weak. They will remain weak... So the majority oppressed the minority who wished to follow God’s path... They wished to eradicate them because they thought if this minority is finished off, ‘we can do whatever we wish,’... Those on the side of truth can not be eradicated. They might become weak and oppressed. They have been like this since the beginning. But they will not be eradicated.14

The Ghadeer narrative is used to divide Muslims into two groups: (1) those who proved their obedience to God by following Ali and (2) those who disobeyed God by electing their own successor. The source above emphasizes that Ali’s supporters were in the minority while detractors enjoyed a decisive majority. Here, he introduces another common binary opposition in Shi’i polemical narratives: minority/majority. The minority holds greater authority over the majority on theological grounds because they follow the Imams, God’s chosen successors, whereas the majority follows ordinary men. Yet, the above source points out that the minority is comparatively weaker. He points to the fact that the majority is numerically larger and hence holds more power than the minority, allowing the majority to wield earthly power over the minority. The hidden subtext in the speaker’s words is that the minority/majority dichotomy is homologous to the Shi’i/Sunni opposition. Here again the idea of an elect few is
foundational to their identity as a minority community. The theology of the ‘elect few’, of course, can be found in other minority traditions such as Calvinism and modern millenarian movements. This theology provides minorities and marginalized groups with rhetorical and doctrinal support against a perceived hostile majority (Kaplan 1997).15

These discourses, moreover, reflect how locals view their religious identities as increasingly intersecting with a sense of Iranian nationalism. In the aftermath of the Revolution, Khomeini and his Iranian supporters sought to disseminate their Revolutionary ideology globally even to relatively remote areas like Ladakh. Iran’s post-revolution regime, as Islamic studies scholars Esposito and Piscatori argue, “combined a religiously rooted brand of Iranian nationalism with a belief in a transnational mission to spread their version of revolutionary Islam” (Esposito and Piscatori 1990: 3). This Iranian nationalism and its revolutionary theology likely entered Leh through two main outlets: (1) Ladakhi scholars studying in Iran and (2) various forms of media such as printed texts, television channels, and social media. I argue that the appeal of the Iranian Revolution to Shi’is in Leh and perhaps in many other areas largely stems from Khomeini’s use of the two most significant events in Shi’i historical consciousness—Ali’s succession at Ghadeer and Hussein’s death at Karbala—to present his ‘Islamic Revolution’ within the ceremonial frameworks of both Eid al-Ghadeer and Ashura, thereby using sentiments and symbols from Shi’is’ most prominent Eid and mātam to promote his revolutionary ideology.

Local leaders often praise Khomeini’s seminal work, the Guardianships of the Jurists or Wilayāt al-Faqīh. As stated earlier, the concept of wilayāt refers to the special guardianship and divinely selected governance of the Muslim by the lineage of Imams beginning at Ghadeer. Khomeini argues that at Ghadeer, God established that the ideal Islamic government rules based on the wilāyat of the Imams. Without an Islamic government, Islamic laws cannot survive, for “were God not to appoint an Imam over men to maintain law and order...religion would fall victim to obsolescence and decay” (Khomeini 2002: 33). The problem is that the current Imam is hidden and is thus incapable of directly governing. According to Khomeini, while the Twelfth Imam remains hidden, Islamic scholars must administer and preserve God’s laws through the institutions of Islamic nation states like Iran. These Islamic governments will necessarily face persecution by unjust nations, just like Yazid’s regime attacked Imam Hussein at Karbala. Now, Islamic governments like Iran, which stand for Imam Hussein’s principles, will be targeted by Yazid-like political regimes such as America, who wish to spread tyranny in the world. For these reasons, Khomeini warns his supporters that “we [Iranians] are under the aegis of God and the banner of monotheism...Such a declaration will surely be met with opposition in the world... We too should follow the example set by Hussein, so that we too shall be ready to embrace martyrdom” (Khomeini 1995: 16-17).

Because Shi’is in Leh view Khomeini’s revolution in terms of Ghadeer and Ashura, they have a temporal and narrative basis for supporting Khomeini and Iran: Ali’s right to rule may be usurped, but now Iran represents a nation governed by scholars administering the will of the Imams. The Iranian Revolution established Iranian clerics (mujtahids) as heirs to the Ghadeer tradition. Shi’is in Leh lament that they could not fight with Hussein against Yazid. Now, however, they can symbolically stand with a government following Hussein’s principles, and Shi’is in Leh can protest against the American and Israeli governments for purportedly seeking Iran’s destruction. Shi’is to some extent view the Iranian Revolution as a modern Ghadeer and a modern Ashura because from this revolution they received a new wilāyat in the form of the guardianship from the mujtahids and new battle of Karbala in the form of struggle against super powers supposedly opposing the guardianship of the mujtahids. Thus the concept of the guardianship or wilāyat of Ali takes on a new significance for locals as they enter into broader political discourses taking place in a global public sphere.

Conclusion

Throughout the history of Islam, Muslims have turned to the ideal of ummah as a unifying force. The ummah, ideally, constitutes one community of believers with a shared Prophet and a holy book coexisting as one community under one God. All members of the ummah are ideally united into a collective where social distinctions are irrelevant. Yet, as this case study demonstrated, for some groups in the Himalaya, such as the Shia in Leh, a sense of alterity remains intricately tied to community-building. Locals use public ceremonies such Eid al-Ghadeer, along with interconnected narratives and religious doctrines, to celebrate and justify their presence as a minority group in relation to Buddhists, the Sunnis in the ummah, and to other nations and religions. Local and national politics, socio-economic changes, and global based reform movements challenge traditional ideals of identity and place. The perceived sanctity of being a minority provides locals with a shared sense of history, community, and moral
purpose within the context of modernity. During public ceremonies narratives, rhetoric, and performances build heterogenous visions of collective community all modeled after religious ideals pertaining to a minority status. This case study of Eid al-Ghadeer in Leh, Ladakh demonstrates the significance of examining the strategic processes whereby those within the modern Himalayan ummah deem minority-hood sacred.

Endnotes

1. I follow conventions often used by other scholars for implementing various forms of the Arabic term Shi‘ite, literally meaning party or faction. For describing individuals and groups I use the term Shi‘i and Shi‘is. I also use Shi‘i as an adjective, for example, Shi‘i ceremonies. Shia is a noun referring to Shi‘i Muslims as a single group or collectivity.

2. Data in this article come from 16 months of fieldwork I conducted in the region from 2012-2013 with the support from the American Institute of Indian Studies. I worked with both Buddhists and Muslims in the region incorporating methods of participant observation of religious ceremonies, recording oral histories, and interviews with various locals.

3. The term ‘sheikh’ in Leh usually refers to Shi‘i men who have completed higher scholastic training at religious institutions in Iran or Iraq.


5. In the Charismatic Community, Maria Massi Dakake demonstrates how the early Shia used wilāyat as a source of prestige for their community.


7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.


12. Field notes, Leh, Ladakh, 7 July 2013.

13. Ibid.


References


