“Carnivalesque” is perhaps the best, if not the only way to describe what was going on that hot summer afternoon in 2008. In front of the graves of the Prophet’s wives at the Bab al-Saghir Cemetery right outside of the wall encircling the Old City of Damascus, Shi’i pilgrims could buy Viagra, sex-enhancement creams, and massage oils. Sexual mores were normally strictly guarded in Syria and medicines were usually available only at pharmacies. Yet, there in one of Syria’s most historically and religiously significant cemeteries, makeshift vendors sold an array of sex-related items.

Figure 1: Vendor’s table at the Bab al-Saghir Cemetery.

The History of Shi’i Pilgrimage in Syria

Until 2011, hundreds of thousands of Iranian pilgrims visited Syria annually. They came to visit Shi’i religious places, such as the shrines of Sayyida Zaynab and Ruqayya, the Umayyad Mosque, and the Bab al-Saghir Cemetery. Shi’i sacred monuments have a long history in Syria. We have a report about the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab from the thirteenth century Andalusian traveler Ibn Jubayr (d. 1217 CE). Ibn Batuta (d. 1368/69) mentioned Zaynab’s mausoleum a hundred years later.1 Yet despite their historic presence, Shi’i pilgrimage to Syria has been a rather recent phenomenon. In the first half of the twentieth century Sayyid Muhsin al-Amin (d. 1952), the main mujtahid of Damascus at the time, worked tirelessly to make Syria a destination for Shi’i pilgrimage. He raised money for renovations and wrote multiple books to promote Twelver Shi’ism in Syria.

From the 1970s onwards, the Twelver Shi’i community in Syria grew exponentially. Fleeing persecution by the Ba’ath in Iraq, thousands of Shi’is came to Syria. Among them was Sayyid Hassan Shirazi (d. 1984) who established...
1983), who founded the first Shi‘i seminary near Sayyida Zaynab in 1973. The shrine of Zaynab gained such prominence in the 70s, that when ‘Ali Shari‘ati died in 1977, his body was flown to Syria to be buried in a small graveyard adjacent to the mausoleum. By then the Syrian government had already begun to purposefully promote Twelver Shi‘i places and rituals, because it wanted to identify as Shi‘i. The Syrian President Hafez al-Asad faced staunch opposition by the Muslim Brotherhood. They accused him of being a non-Muslim because of his ‘Alawi background. In response, Hafez al-Asad obtained a fatwa by Sayyid Musa al-Sadr, the founder of the Lebanese Amal Movement, stating that ‘Alawis are Shi‘is and therefore Muslims. This move helped Asad cement fruitful relations with Shi‘is in Lebanon and allowed him to become close allies with post-revolutionary Iran – despite the fact that Iran is a theocracy and Syria is nominally secular.

After 1979, the Iranian state became the main sponsor of Shi‘i shrines and sanctuaries in Syria. The mausoleum of Sayyida Zaynab was renovated and the tomb of Sayyida Ruqayya was entirely rebuilt with Iranian funds. The architectural styles employed were unmistakably Iranian: decorations incorporated mirrors and floral designs. Signs were in both Farsi and Arabic. Having paid for these shrines granted the Iranian government certain rights. For instance, Friday sermons were said by representatives of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah ‘Ali Khamenei. At Sayyida Ruqayya, the dominant language even became Farsi due to the masses of Iranian pilgrims.

Pilgrimage to Syria became particularly popular from the beginning of the 1980s, when the Iran-Iraq war broke out and the shrine-towns of Najaf and Karbala became inaccessible to Shi‘is, especially Iranians. In the 1990s, sanctions did not ease the situation. New violence followed the 2003 American war in Iraq and guaranteed that Shi‘i pilgrims would keep coming to Syria. Other pilgrims included Lebanese Shi‘is and Shi‘is from the eastern Arabian Gulf. The latter came during the summer months when their children were on vacation and the heat made life in the Gulf unbearable. However, Iranian pilgrims far outnumbered other visitors. They came all year around to visit shrines and to go shopping.

Pious Consumerism

Iranian spending enabled new markets to flourish and caused vendors to attend Farsi classes at Iranian Cultural Centers. As anthropologist Fariba Adelkhah explains, Iranian pilgrimage tours not only enabled the pious to visit historical sites in and around Damascus, they also participated in smuggling blankets and other consumer goods from Syria and Turkey into Iran. The Iranian demand even fuelled the establishment of black markets, such as the one in the otherwise deserted Bab al-Saghir Cemetery.

The Bab al-Saghir graveyard is named after the close by “Small Gate” and is located right outside of the southern wall of the Old City of Damascus. It is a historic cemetery and houses the remains of the Prophet’s wives, Umm Salama and Umm Habiba. It also boasts the graves of Bilal (the African muezzin of the Prophet), Umm Kulthum (a daughter of Imam ‘Ali), Fudha (a handmaid of Fatima al-Zahra), Asma (the wife Ja‘afar Tayyar, a brother of Imam ‘Ali), ‘Ubay ibn Ka‘ab (the husband of Halima, the wet nurse of the Prophet), and the first Umayyad Caliph, Mu‘awiya. After having visited the Prophet’s friends and family, Shi‘i pilgrims often visited Mu‘awiya’s grave in order to curse him. Sometimes, they even threw stones at him. Concerned about the reaction of local Sunnis, the Syrian government built a metal fence around Mu‘awiya.
In front of the gate leading to Umm Salama and Umm Habiba, vendors sold Viagra, lubricants, and other creams to assist men in getting and maintaining erections. The merchandise was spread out on folding tables standing between the gate and minivans stacked with cloth and blankets that were also for sale.

At the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab, pilgrims could buy black “Indian stones” (or hajar hindi). Customers were told to dissolve small bits into boiling water and drink the concoction. This would increase their size and endurance. Men that did not have wives with whom they try out the pills, gels, or Indian stones, could marry “temporary wives.” An elderly man in a white turban, who spent his days sitting by the men’s entrance to the tomb of Zaynab, was a well-known procurer. Neither the old man, nor his male clients considered it “prostitution.” They called it mut’a, temporary marriage for pleasure, or sigheh in Farsi.

Carnivalizing Pilgrimage

How should academics approach this phenomenon? Many religious Shi’is might consider the sale of Viagra and the arrangement of mut’a relations a sinful aberration, a corrupt practice to be disregarded and abolished. A female sharia teacher at Ayatollah Shirazi’s seminary defended the practice of mut’a in principle. However, the seminary students I spoke with denounced the practice and wished it did not exist.

Figure 2: The tomb of Mu’awiya, the first Umayyad Caliph.
Historically speaking, these practices could be seen as modern incarnations of traditional aspects of shrine visitation. One might recall that ancient Mesopotamian temple prostitutes who served the Sumerian goddess Inanna. A prohibition in the Book of Deuteronomy in the Old Testament implicitly acknowledges the existence of prostitution at Canaanite temples to Astarte. The Greeks practiced temple prostitution. And according to the Roman historian Eusebius, the Phoenicians engaged in temple prostitution until at least the fourth century when Emperor Constantine outlawed it.

Officially, prostitution is illegal in Syria. The sale of sex-enhancement medication is generally restricted to clinics and pharmacies. However, the sheer number of pilgrims combined with the presence of impoverished Shi‘i Iraqi refugees, which exceeded two million between 2003 and 2008, made Shi‘is difficult to police. Furthermore, as is the case with Syrian refugees in Jordan, Iraq, and Turkey today – in 2007 approximately 50,000 Iraqi refugees in Syria unfortunately had no choice but to turn to prostitution to survive.

These practices were exacerbated by the economic and political situation. Yet, they were also symbolically related to death rites because they resembled Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the “carnival.” According to Bakhtin, medieval societies celebrated the carnival as a time outside of their everyday, structured lives. It allowed people to exist briefly beyond the control of the state and the church. It relativized institutionalized authorities and inverted social norms.

The time pilgrims spent in Syria constituted a Bakhtinian carnival. Beyond the watchful eyes of their society, visitors were temporarily “liberated” from conventional rules. For instance, normally conservative Iranian women do not travel long distances without a male escort. However, for the purpose of pilgrimage, thousands of Iranian women travelled hundreds of miles alone. No one batted an eye. Fariba Adelkhah writes that women, who otherwise would not have attained positions of power, often headed Iranian tour groups. These women advertised, organized, and negotiated the logistics of the journey. They bossed around male tour guides and bus drivers, whose jobs included cooking and cleaning up after female pilgrims. In short, pilgrimages were carnivalesque because they allowed for inversions in gender roles and hierarchies.

Visiting burial grounds mirrored the carnival because it reminded visitors of death and made them aware of the transience of their quotidian concerns. As Bakhtin explains, the carnival fosters “an attitude towards the world which liberates from fear.” He echoes a popular Arabic saying, which advises: “If your chest becomes tight, visit graves!” In other words, visiting the dead will take your mind off of your problems.

By relaxing the social order, the carnival facilitates licentious behavior. It celebrates excess and physical taboos including sex, blood, and death, which Bakhtin calls “grotesque.” The grotesque was particularly salient in Syrian Shi‘i places during Muharram, when Twelver Shi‘is mourned the martyrdom of Imam al-Hussayn and the number of pilgrims multiplied. Crowded streets and hospitality tents encouraged men and women to mingle. On ‘Ashura, bare-chested men marched around the shrine in self-flagellation processions. Accompanied by the rhythmic beating of drums, hundreds of men hit their chests and cut their heads with swords. Even pious women did not refrain from ogling the men. Like Bakhtin’s carnival, Muharram death rites included the public parading of grotesque bodies. The flagellants’ bleeding bodies drew everyone’s attention to carnal matters: pain, death – and implicitly to life and sex.

Of course, only a few pilgrims actually engaged in temporary mut’a marriages. Most were probably uninterested in buying Viagra. My point in analyzing these practices is not to portray them as essential to Shi‘i piety. Rather, my case study answers the call of anthropologist Michael Taussig, who critiques recent scholars of popular religion for whitewashing pilgrimage of its transgressive aspects. Analyzing
Shi’i piety in Syria shows how religious pilgrimage provided spaces and time for devotees to invert rules, especially those related to gender norms and sexual conduct.

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3 Mervin, “Sayyida Zaynab, Banlieue de Damas ou Nouvelle Ville Sainte Chite?”


8 Fieldnotes, Spring 2009.

9 Fieldnotes, Fall 2009.


13 Adelkhah, “Moral Economy of Pilgrimage and Civil Society in Iran,” 41-44.

