

Guest Article

Battle Shi'ism: Martyrdom and Messianism in Urdu Shi'i "Music" Videos

This article seeks to explore the utilisation of music-like recitations, known as *nohay*, by Pakistani Shi'a Muslims in the face of sectarian violence as political resistance and constituting "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1985). Through drawing on themes of resistance, resilience, martyrdom, and Messianic expectation that abound Shi'i theology and history, I argue that Pakistani Shi'a Muslims consolidate their belief through devotional music and thereby resist violence in a highly charged sectarian context. The first section discusses the permissibility of music within Islamic law, with a specific focus on the rulings of two contemporary Shi'a scholars and the second section will analyse the contents of one *noha* video by Ali Safdar, a prominent Pakistani *nohakhawan*.

Legal Permissibility of Music

Music is a contested territory in Islamic law: what defines music, what sort is permissible, what sort is forbidden, and where instruments fit into the discussion are questions that have faced Muslim scholars for centuries, but a unanimous opinion is yet to be reached. Although, unlike Sunnis, Twelver Shi'as have a common school of legal thought (Momen, 1985), there are differing opinions amongst living scholars on how to address contemporary contexts and challenges.

The differences of opinion emerge out of the conditions scholars set to define and categorise what is "music," and consequently, end up differing delicately on what is permitted (*ḥalāl*) and what is forbidden (*ḥarām*). The purpose of this article is not to survey the various rulings of different schools and scholars (for this see al-Kanadi and Bhimji), but to complete the foundation of this brief study into Shi'i *nohay*, I will mention the opinions of the two most prominent Shi'i *maraja' al-Taqlid* ("sources of emulation" whose rulings are followed) on the topic as stated on their websites.

"Any music which is lahwī [amusing] and deviating people from the way of Allah which is suitable for gatherings of merry making is ḥarām... To distinguish the subject of a ruling depends on the view of the mukallaf [follower] as a part of common people" - Ayatullah Khamanei (Office of the Supreme Leader)

"If the music... is suitable for entertainment and amusement gatherings, it is not permissible to listen to it... However, singing praise [of the Prophet or [his family]] that is sung with a good tune but is not in ghinā' form is without problem." - Ayatullah Ali al-Sistani (Sistani.org)

It is thus within these frameworks religious Shi'a Muslims compose devotional music.

To summarise, there is variation within the Muslim world vis-à-vis music's permissibility: it is dominated by general hesitance among Muslim scholars and devout followers to consider music permissible, but according to the two most prominent contemporary Shi'i scholars, certain types of music are permissible particularly if they are in the praise of the Prophet Muhammad.

Nohay and Pakistani's Shi'as

Nohay is poetry of mourning, melodiously recited in an acapella manner often in groups, and particularly during the Islamic month of Muharram. Muharram is an annual mourning period observed by Shi'a Muslims globally to commemorate the anniversary of the martyrdom of the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, Husayn ibn Ali in 680CE (Hyder 2006).

Nohay are accepted by Shi'a Muslims as permissible, even encouraged. In this section I will analyse YouTube videos for one *noha* by a famous Pakistani reciter called Ali Safdar. Shi'a Muslims in Pakistan have faced historic persecution and particularly since the 1970s have faced increased marginalisation. The post 9/11 period and war on terror led to increased terrorist attacks in Pakistan and especially those targeting minority groups and target killings of Shi'a individuals such as doctors, scholars and poets (Rieck 2015) and Shi'as have mentioned these events in their *nohay*. All italic quotes below are verses from the *noha* and the translations are my own.

Resilience and Martyrdom

The 2012 *noha* "*Ishq-e-Haider Madad*" draws on historic Islamic battle stories, creating parallels between contemporary Shi'as who are faced with sectarian persecution and the early warriors and martyrs of Islam. In particular, this *noha* focusses on the character of Imam Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, who Muslims regard as a ferocious warrior in the early days of Islam and who Shi'as revere as the rightful spiritual and political successor to the Prophet Muhammad (Tabatabai 2010).

The opening lines of the *noha* begins with an obstinate declaration that "*Haider Haider*" (a title of Ali) *is our slogan, we have no fear of the blood shedders/ When the name of Ali is heard in the battlefield, life from every sword is taken.*" The imagery here evokes the physical and spiritual strength of Ali, whose very name is used to bolster the morale of the Shi'a listeners and intimidate the enemies who seek to kill them. The absolute resilience in face of persecution and death is amplified in a later line where the *noha* brings attention to Karbala, the place where Ali's son Husayn was killed: "*Go to Karbala and see how the killers have lost.*" This reiterates a common trope in Shi'a thought (Pinault 2016, Hyder 2006), that those killed at Karbala are not only martyrs, but their deaths inspired first, a political uprising that overthrew the regime, but more significantly, a spiritual revolution which is alive in the Shi'a of today who remember Husayn, mourn for him, and stand fearless in the face of injustice. Thus the implication is that whether the Shi'a are martyred without being able to defend themselves, be it in shootings or bombings, or they are given the opportunity to fight those who fight them, they will end up victorious and that there is no way for the anti-Shi'a parties to win.

Truth and Messianic Expectation

This *noha* often shifts from being directed to the enemies of contemporary Shi'as to Ali himself. In between the main stanzas, a sort of chorus is repeated in which the words vary but they all serve to praise Ali and put the listeners in conversation with him. These verses include recalling famous titles of Ali such as "*Lion of the almighty*," "*Manifestation of divine [power]*" which is subsequently followed by requests for him such as to "*Eradicate oppression*." There is a centuries long debate within Shi'ism as to the theological reality and legal permissibility of calling directly for a Prophet, Imam or saint to perform an act rather than asking God: proponents of this belief within orthodoxy argue that God has given such powers to these individuals (Modaressi and Tabatabai 1993). Whatever the case, this *noha* is popularising the idea that Ali can and should directly be called upon, but for the purpose of this study, the effect is that the listener is made to feel that this being, Ali, who is favoured by God is on their side, and by extension God and the entire universe in conspiring and working for their victory.

Addressing their killers, the *noha* "*[Just wait] we will show you what true jihād is*." Here the reciter delegitimises the ideology of the terrorist groups attacking Shi'as in Pakistan and claims that their understanding of "*jihad* "is incorrect and that it is the Shi'a who are on the truth. Within Shi'ism, offensive violent *jihād* is generally deemed impermissible and the presence of a divinely appointed leader required to legitimately initiate it (Sabbagahchi 2017). Several times the *noha* asks Ali for permission to fight and at a later point says, "*When [the Mahdi, his descendant] returns, his light will change the mountains of evil into the [sacred] valley of Toor/ Beware, followers of evil, there is not long left to go.*"

This belief in the Mahdi is pivotal to Shi'ism (Limba 2010) and vital in this *noha*. Imam Mahdi is believed to be a descendant of Muhammad and Ali who disappeared 1200 years ago and is set to return to bring justice to the world alongside Jesus son of Mary (Hussain 1982). Combining all this together we understand that the only reason oppressors are still dominant and hurting humanity, and particularly Shi'as is that the Shi'a are waiting for their promised Imam to return and to lead them to victory and to overthrow global injustice, but when he does return, their enemies "*will perish straight away*."

To conclude, the *noha* has two aspects: the material and the metaphysical. It firstly links the past war exploits of Ali, the revolutionary martyrdom of Husayn with the imminent arrival of the Mahdi who will come and overthrow regimes of injustice and transform the world into a sacred dwelling filled with peace instilling in followers a resilience that their deaths are actually a moral and spiritual victory, just like Husayn's, and that when the battle does come they will be unstoppable like Ali. The metaphysical realities of Ali, Husayn and Imam Mahdi are prominent and interlinked in this *noha*: references to supernatural powers and divine light consolidate the transcendent reality of Shi'ism and create an anticipation for imminent global revolution, cementing both belief and passion and thereby nullifying the attempts to terrorise Shi'as.

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