



Bara Imambara—the world’s largest Shi’a Ithna ‘Ashari structure focused around the events of Muharam—is located in Lucknow, India and contains countless models of Imam Husayn’s tombs (*ta’ziya*; *ta’but*) and replica standards carried by Imam Husayn and his family at the Battle of Karbala (*‘alams*), which are used in processions on the day of ‘Ashura

Photos: Rizwan Mawani

“Al-Ma’ Wahid, Zahru Alwan: The Water is One, but the Flowers are Coloured”

PLURALISM AND PIETY IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

By Rizwan Mawani

AS THE SUN BEGINS TO SET ON THE ROOFTOPS OF ALEPPO, SYRIA, the traditional souk is still abuzz with market stalls selling all goods imaginable. In the shadow of its Ayyubid Citadel, the market’s labyrinthine alleyways finally give way to the 14th century Zawiyah Hilaliya, a two-floor wooden structure in which the names of God have been recited at least twice a

week continuously for close to 700 years. Every Wednesday and Saturday afternoon before *maghreb*, hundreds of Sufis gather here in unison, regardless of their *tariqah*, to dedicate themselves solemnly to God through the repetition of His name (*dhikr*) and the recitation of special prayers. The building’s second floor balcony contains a cascade of small



In Istanbul's Galata district, the Mevleviya Sufi *tariqah* known more popularly as the Whirling Dervishes, gather for their weekly *sama'* in which their meditation takes the form of collective rhythmic movement

two-metre-square rooms around its perimeter known as *khalwas* for those who wish to cloister themselves in solitude for up to forty days in meditative retreat.

Straddling two continents, the city of Istanbul sees Turkey's second largest Muslim community—the Alevis—numbering as many as 20 million, come together every Sunday for a private gathering at the Shahkulu Cemevi in the Asian district of Uskudar. Here, men and women pray not only side-by-side but sit interspersed on their knees reciting prayers and, accompanied by a stringed lute, singing praise (*nefes*) for Allah, Prophet Muhammad and Imam 'Ali, whose names are written upon the walls. Below these can be found pictures depicting the likenesses of the first Shia Imam as well as that of Haji Bektash-e Vali, the *pir* believed to have introduced Alevi Islam to Turkey from Persia.

Elsewhere in the Muslim world, in countries such as Iran, Lebanon, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Bahrain, India, Pakistan and Iraq, millions of Shia Ithna 'Ashari Muslims gather on Thursday nights in specially designated mosques to recite the *du'a-e Kumayl*, a prayer believed to be given by Imam 'Ali to one of his companions, and to offer *salam* to their Imams by turning in the direction of their tombs. Prostrating upon the *turba* or *mohr*, clay fashioned from the mud of Karbala, the Shia Ithna 'Ashari join the day's prayers into three sessions and collectively gather in the morning, afternoon and evening.

Muslims of the Nizari Ismaili persuasion from Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Syria, Eastern and Central Africa solemnly gather at the Davis Road Jamatkhana in Montreal every evening to offer supplications and participate in a centuries-old tradition of poetry dedicated to their Imams in any



Indonesian Muslims gather to pray at Masjid Panjunan in the Northern Javanese city of Cirebon, where Chinese porcelain adorns the *qibla* wall. Here the imam leads a supplication (*du'a*) following the afternoon prayers.



Imam Maryam (right) and congregants pose for a photograph outside Lulan Women's Mosque in Lanzhou, China. In the country's Khabeh province and among its diaspora, a centuries-old tradition continues in which women-only mosques led by female *akhun* who are trained and paid by the state



A man finds solace amidst the crowds at the Holy Shrine of Hazrat-e Masumeh, the sister of the eighth Ithna 'Ashari Imam, Reza b. Musa, in the Iranian city of Qum on the anniversary of her death



The Zikris, whose highest concentration is in Pakistani Baluchistan, gather together three times daily at their zikr-khanas. Here a woman can be seen praying at a woman-only zikr-khana in Karachi's Lyari neighbourhood.

number of languages spoken by the congregants. Attending individually or as families, the Jamatkhana, in addition to offering opportunities for prayers, also facilitates social interactions and provides a site for the religious formation of the community.

In cities and towns all across the world—from Karachi and Tehran to Jakarta and Dakkar, Muslims find ways to express their devotion through acts of piety, not only in mosques but also in spaces as diverse as khanqahs, imambaras and Jamat-khanas. Each of these structures has its own characteristics, but at the same time shares a commitment to providing spaces for Muslims to congregate and practice their faith.

Venturing into the Muslim world, one sees that in addition to the mosque or masjid, there are other centres of Muslim piety and likewise, alongside the namaz or salat one also hears the offering of dhikrs, *du'as*, *munajats* and *nefes*. For the Muslim world extends not only across languages and cultures but also through interpretive communities and modes of piety. Shi'i and Sunni faithful of all persuasions comprise the *Ummah* as do Nurbakhshi, Druze and Zikri Muslims, many of whom have their own spaces for collective prayer. The beauty and richness of this diversity was poignantly echoed in the words of a Hamadhsa Sufi shaykh late one afternoon at an outdoor café in Morocco's spiritual capital, Fes, when he proudly said to me, "*al-ma' wahid, zahru alwan*," "the water is one, but the flowers are coloured." ♦

Rizwan Mawani is a Toronto-based Cultural Consultant. He recently completed a four-year 16-country research project working with more than 50 Muslim communities for The Institute of Ismaili Studies.