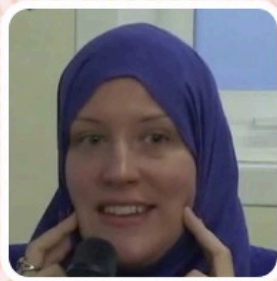


Racial Othering In Shii Sacred History: Jawn Ibn Huwayy And The Ethnicities Of The Twelve Imams

Racial 'Othering' In Shi'i Sacred History



**Jawn Ibn Huwayy The 'African Slave',
And The Ethnicities Of The Twelve
Imams - Amina Inloes**

Al-Islam.org

Author(s):

[Amina Inloes](#) [1]

This text is an examination of how we learn about different historical figures such as Jawn ibn Huwayy from the events of Karbala, and about our common perceptions and presumptions of race and the value we might place on historical figures based on these perceptions and presumptions. The author draws upon a variety of sources to encourage readers to consider and reconsider historical lessons from Karbala as well as attitudes related to ethnic identities of the 12 Imams' mothers. She also reflects on the responses of contemporary audiences to her own presentation of showing different images of the Imams that echo preconceived biases in the name of tradition and popular narratives.

[Get PDF](#) [2] [Get EPUB](#) [3] [Get MOBI](#) [4]

Topic Tags:

[Ahl al-Bayt](#) [5]

[Racism](#) [6]

Racial 'Othering' In Shi'i Sacred History: Jawn Ibn Huwayy The 'African Slave', And The Ethnicities Of The Twelve Imams

Amina Inloes

The Islamic College, London, UK

Originally Published in *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies*,

Autumn 2014, Vol. VII, No. 4

Abstract

This paper explores how Shi'i sacred history and hagiography communicate social norms about race. It problematizes the characterization of Jawn ibn Huwayy in the Karbala narrative as the African slave at the Battle of Karbala (680 AD/61 AH), and traces the evolution of a racialized portrayal of him in Shi'i texts. It also raises the question of whether Jawn ibn Huwayy actually existed, or whether he was a racialized construction built upon the stereotype of an African slave who entered communal memory later.

It contrasts the 'othering' of Jawn through his Africanness against the common perception of an Arabo-Iranian norm, reinforced through drawings of the twelve Imams with Arab or Iranian features. This norm is then challenged through presenting the Imams in an ethnic image which reflects their racial backgrounds (as reported in Shi'i narrations) to create cognitive dissonance and explore subconscious assumptions about race and divine authority in contemporary Shi'ism.

Keywords: Shi'ism; Karbala; Jawn ibn Huwayy; racism; sacred history; hagiography; sacred art.

Introduction: Sacred History And Social Norms In Shi'i Ritual

Practice

The narrative of the Battle of Karbala (680 AD/61 AH) is central to Shi'i sacred history¹ and communal identity². Ritual retellings of the Karbala narrative not only communicate historical facts but to convey core values of the faith. The practice of retelling the Karbala narrative in ritual settings has been found to act as a mechanism for integrating local cultural values into regional understandings of Shi'ism and reinforcing them³.

As Karen Ruffle observes in her study on South Asian Shi'i practice, 'Hagiography...mediates local social values and...reflects how followers have chosen to remember saints...[in] culturally meaningful forms that simultaneously express the prescriptive ideals of Islam as well as vernacular/local social values.'⁴ While the source texts detailing the Karbala narrative remain relatively fixed today⁵, the way that the narrative is told to communicate values continues to evolve⁶.

The practice of expressing this sacred history in a ritual setting – for instance, in a *majlis* or devotional poetry and sacred art⁷ – imbues it with a sense of sanctity, similar to a religious icon⁸. The expression of sacred history, therefore, becomes a powerful tool for communicating religious and social norms. But through sanctification, the expression of sacred history also becomes inviolable and something uncomfortable for the believer to question⁹, despite the fact that there are ambiguities in the historical records about the details of what happened in Karbala. Moreover, it is commonly understood that historically baseless stories have been introduced into the Karbala narrative, often to evoke a deeper sense of pathos.

One contemporary work to address the social ramifications of this is *Hamasih-yi Husayni* (better known in English as *Ashura – Misconceptions and Distortions*), a work based on Ayatollah Mutahhari's (d. 1979) speeches. This book not only addresses historical fabrications, but why Mutahhari feels they are socially unhealthy or in conflict with the core values of Islam. For instance, he objects to how the family of the Prophet is portrayed as leaving Medina like royalty – in glamorous litters, 'draped in silk and brocade' – in order to later contrast it with the pitiful condition of the women and children in captivity.

He objects to this not only because it conflicts with historical texts but, more importantly, because it implies that the family of the Prophet enjoyed a life of luxury, instead of eschewing royal trappings¹⁰.

(This was of particular importance in his era in Iran due to the Shah's indulgence at the expense of the masses.) While this fabrication – like others – is designed to evoke tears, in doing so, it promotes socially unhealthy values (in this case, classism and extravagance) which are against the core values of Islam.

Two significant areas where social ideals are communicated through Shi'i sacred history, particularly the Karbala narrative, are gender and race. Despite being immensely important, both are understudied. This paper will address the second – namely, race. Race is, of course, a complex and continually evolving concept. While, in nineteenth century Europe, it was believed that racial divisions had a scientific basis (with whites seen as genetically superior to blacks), today, it is understood that modern racial groupings are arbitrary and a social construct¹¹.

Nonetheless, it is my contention that – building on the ideas of Frantz Fanon – many Muslims, due to the legacy of colonialism and European cultural dominance, uphold the nineteenth-century European perception of race, and project it onto sacred history¹² – for instance, in grouping all blacks into a single race; in perceiving of Africa as impoverished and uncivilized; or in associating 'slave' with 'African'. (It is true that this association was present in some regions of the Islamic Empire; however, slaves at that time came from many regions and not only Africa).

Of course, this should not be taken to mean that racism did not exist during the classical Islamic era; but, rather, that the contemporary views about race among Muslims are an amalgamation of classical and modern views. Even the twentieth century Shi'i sociologist 'Ali Shari'ati, despite his egalitarian ethos, unintentionally reflects these prejudices in his discussion of Hajar, when he presumes she represented the 'transition from savagery to becoming civilized'; that she was the 'weakest and most humiliated of creatures'; that she was 'extremely poor and humbled', and was an example of how someone of the lowest social origins could be honoured by Allah.¹³

Jawn, The African Slave, In Communal Memory Today

These assumptions about Africa are communicated through the Karbala narrative in the treatment of Jawn (commonly Anglicized to John; the choice to Anglicize his name but not others also reflects an 'othering' in the English-language Shi'i tradition). Jawn is frequently described as 'the black slave' or 'the African slave' in Karbala. This identification is ubiquitous in speeches, *majalis*, poetry, and literature on Karbala; additionally, at a recent talk on this subject, I asked the audience – mostly educated Shi'is – to name the slave in Karbala and where s/he was from, and they identified 'John the African'. This is similar to how the ethnicity of Bilal, an Abyssinian companion of the Prophet, is emphasized, and how he is treated as the 'token black'.

There are good reasons to mention Jawn's (or Bilal's) ethnicity; for instance, to combat stereotypes against blacks or Africans¹⁴. This is particularly important today not only because of sizable Shi'i populations in East Africa and the West, but because of the growing number of black and African

converts to Shi'ism¹⁵. However, the immediate mention of his ethnicity with his name indicates that he is being treated as a minority – that is, he is primarily being viewed in terms of his race, in contrast to the unspoken norm of the Imam (al-Husayn) as the 'Arab' and 'free man'¹⁶.

The portrayal of Jawn as the slave in Karbala is ironic, and selective. First, at the time of the Battle of Karbala, Jawn was no longer a slave of Abu Dharr, since Abu Dharr had passed away nearly thirty years prior. Additionally, Jawn was hardly the only slave (or former slave) on the side of al-Husayn. At least ten individuals on the side of al-Husayn were slaves or freed-slaves, some of whom are major figures in the story, such as Taw'ah, the woman who hid Muslim ibn 'Aqil (the emissary of al-Husayn) in her house in Kufa when the governor was trying to kill him, and whose story is traditionally recounted every year¹⁷.

And yet, Taw'ah is rarely if ever referred to as 'the slave'. There were also even more slaves in the enemy camp. The ethnicities of these slaves are generally not mentioned, but at least two on the side of al-Husayn are said to have been Turkish. However, Jawn is the only one whose status as a (former) slave is emphasized, along with his ethnicity. In contrast, Salman al-Farsi (a companion of the Prophet) is never described as 'Salman the Persian slave', even though he had also been a slave¹⁸.

The emphasis on Jawn's ethnicity and his role as the slave – developed over time. Not only did it 'other' him and present him as an exclusion to the Arabo-Iranian norm, but it also served to communicate a negative racial portrayal of Africans. Today, there is a commonly retold account in which Jawn speaks of his black blood and bad smell, and the Imam prays for Jawn's face to be literally whitened. This narrative is given by a prominent scholar, 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Muqarram (1899–1971), whose work is considered to be one of the most reliable accounts of Karbala:

John, a slave of Abu Dharr al-Ghifari, stood before al-Husayn requesting him to grant him permission to fight. The Imam said, 'O John! You followed us seeking your good health, so you are excused.' But the old man fell on the Imam's feet kissing them and saying, 'I in the time of prosperity lick what is served on your tables; so, should I in the time of hardship betray you? My smell is surely bad; my lineage is lowly; my colour is black; so do bestow upon me a breeze from Paradise so that my smell will be good, my lineage will be honoured, and my colour will be whitened! No, by Allah, I shall never abandon you till this black blood mixes with yours!'

Al-Husayn, therefore, granted him permission. He killed as many as twenty-five men before he himself was finally killed. Al-Husayn stood by his corpse and supplicated saying, 'O Lord! Whiten his face, make his smell good, join him with Muhammed, and link him to the progeny of Muhammed!'

Whoever thereafter passed by the battleground was able to smell his corpse emitting a fragrance sweeter than that of musk¹⁹.

While al-Muqarram's work is generally well referenced, here, rather than citing a primary source, he cites 'Abd Allah Nur Allah al-Bahrani's Maqal al-'Awalim. Bahrani himself was a student of 'Allamah al-Majlisi (d. 1698), and since it is understood that, by the Safavid era, many fabrications had already been

introduced into the Karbala narrative, an earlier source is preferable.

The racial implications of this account are obvious. Jawn, who is presented as a paradigm of 'black', has a bad smell and a lowly ancestry, and wishes to become an 'honorary white' (or, rather, an honorary Arab) through literally being whitened (*abyaddat*), and being given a substitute lineage and a better smell. There is also a marked subservience and even sense of groveling between Jawn and the Imam (for instance, licking food scraps) which goes beyond the obedience to the Imam as a divine authority that one might expect in a Shi'i narrative.

It is all the more marked because one would assume that Jawn would have been given respect due to his advanced age. Jawn comes across as self-hating by describing himself as being of lowly lineage. This unspoken assumption of Jawn's lowliness is reinforced by a spurious narration in which Imam al-Sajjad (or sometimes Zaynab bint 'Ali) tells Yazid that he does not want any money in compensation for the murder of al-Husayn, because all the wealth in the world could not compensate for even a single drop of the blood of 'Jawn the slave', the implication being that Jawn is the least valuable of the Imam's companions²⁰.

It goes without saying that the subtext of this narrative contradicts the view found in the Qur'an and narrations about racial equality and the lack of supremacy of any race, to the point where in private conversation, Shi'i thinkers have said that it should be discarded merely on the premise – common in Shi'i scholarship and emphasized in Shi'i hadith – that if a narration conflicts with the Qur'an, it should be discarded²¹.

Of course, this account fulfils other narrative functions. It communicates a strong sense of pathos – Jawn wishing to fight for the Imam despite his advanced age; and his desire to serve and die for the Imam. The idea that Jawn would become an honorary member of the family of the Prophet through his loyalty to the Imam reinforces the belief that Salman al-Farsi was spiritually adopted into the family of the Prophet²², and that one can 'join' the family of the Prophet through *wilayah* (practical and spiritual allegiance)²³.

It emphasizes that the Imam did not force his companions to give their lives, and in fact discouraged them from doing so; but they did it willingly. It also communicates the belief that the bodies of martyrs, due to their sanctity, do not decay, and smell pleasant; as well as the association of a pleasant fragrance with the Prophet and Imams. And, it evokes tears – but, like the account mentioned above by Mutahhari about the Prophet's family, it does so by reinforcing values that are against the actual teachings of Islam.



Figure 1. Drawing of Jawn in an exhibition on Imam Husayn in London (graphic design by Sayed Mohammed Nawab).

A GIFT TO THE AWAITED MESSIAH
THE 12TH IMAM, THE MAHDI

JOHN & FIZZA

the AFRICAN Sacrifice
to KARBALA

حسين

THEATRICAL
PERFORMANCE
RUNNING TIME: 90 MIN

AN EVENING OF INTERFAITH THEATRE

SUN 5th JANUARY 6 PM
ISLAMIC CENTRE OF ENGLAND
140 MAIDA VALE
LONDON, W9 1QB
TICKETS £7 ADULTS
£4 CHILD (UNDER 8)

TO RESERVE YOUR TICKETS, TEXT
DATE, NAME, NO. OF TICKETS TO: 07958310657
EG: 5 JAN, CHRIS SMITH, 3 ADULTS 2 CHILD

ISLAMIC CENTRE OF ENGLAND

Figure 2. Advertisement for a theatrical performance featuring Jawn and emphasizing his ethnic background. (Photo from the Islamic Centre of England).

The Evolution Of Historical Portrayals About Jawn

An immediate question that arises, therefore, is how strong the historical evidence for this narrative is – when it appears, whether it is actually ascribed as a hadith, and whether it is given any source at all. In fact, there is little related about Jawn in early sources. One of the earliest sources, *the Maqatal of Abu Mikhnaf* (d. 774 AD), mentions him only as being present with the Imam on the night of ‘Ashura when the Imam was sharpening his sword and reciting a well-known poem about time²⁴.

In this account, he is referred to as Huwayy mawla Abi Dharr al-Ghifari (not Jawn). This account does not provide any information of significance about Jawn (or Huwayy) other than his existence and that he was a former slave of Abu Dharr, nor does it indicate his ethnicity. However, it does not demean Jawn in the way that the account above does. This account is also replicated in the *Tarikh* of Tabari (where he is also referred to as ‘Huwayy’)²⁵; as well as in *Kitab al-Irshad* by Shaykh al-Mufid (d. 1022 ad), only Shaykh al-Mufid gives his name as ‘Juwayn’²⁶. Despite their comprehensiveness, the story of Jawn’s ‘black blood’ appears in neither work, suggesting that this account entered communal memory later.

The first mention of the name ‘Jawn ibn Huwayy’ is in a *ziyarah* text to be recited when visiting the shrine of the martyrs in Karbala. This *ziyarah* text is attributed to the year 252 ah (c. 864 ad) and is said to have been transmitted (through a chain of narrators) from an early Shi’i scholar to Shaykh al-Tusi, and ultimately to Ibn Tawus (d. 1246/664), who is the one who says that it was first recorded in 252 AH²⁷.

Since this would have been during the lifetime of Imam Hasan al-‘Askari, it is plausible that it could have come from him; however, the text does not explicitly say that. (Ibn Tawus also includes it in a *ziyarah* for mid-Sha‘ban, and the first of Rajab, but this *ziyarah* does not have a chain of narration or source given)²⁸. This uncertainty about the actual origin of these *ziyarah* texts, therefore, leads to concerns about their reliability. The texts list the martyrs and simply say ‘Peace be upon Jawn ibn Huwayy mawla Abi Dharr al-Ghifari.’ That is, they treat Jawn in the same light as the other martyrs and praise all of the companions, including him, for their sacrifice²⁹.

The next mention of significance is a *rajaz* poem (that is, a spontaneous poem during battle) attributed to Jawn in the *Manaqib Al Abi Talib* by Ibn Shahrashub (d. 577 AH), which reads:

Kayfa yara al-kuffar darb al-aswad
Bil-sayf darban ‘an bani Muhammad
Adhubbu ‘anhum bil-lisan wa al-yad
Arju bihi al-jannah yawm al-mawrid

How do the disbelievers see the strike of the black –
A strike with a sword [defending] Bani Muhammad?
I will defend them with my tongue and hand;
I seek with it Paradise on the appointed Day.³⁰

Ibn Shahrashub concludes by saying that Jawn killed 25 of the enemy. This excerpt (like the one in *al-Muqarram*) does bring up the overarching question of how many quotations attributed to people during accounts of battle should be taken as literal quotations, or whether they were constructed as a literary device, since Arabic battle accounts focus heavily on dialogue³¹.

When dealing with figures in sacred history, this question is more pressing. Here, Jawn is identified as 'black' (*aswad*). This seems anachronistic since, in the early era of Islam, '*awsad*' was used to refer to Arabs, and '*habashi*' (Abyssinian) or '*zanji*' for Africans³². Additionally, it seems odd that Jawn would choose to 'other' himself as a racial grouping by identifying himself primarily in terms of his colour.

However, 'black' is not presented here in a pejorative way but instead is associated with being powerful, faithful, and loyal to the family of the Prophet (a paramount value in Shi'ism). The poem also seems to allude to the narration from Imam 'Ali that one should fight against injustice with one's hand, tongue, or heart. It also distinguishes between 'black' and 'unbelievers', and presents 'black' on the side of belief. So, while Jawn's portrayal here is racialized, it does not yet introduce negativity due to his race.

The next jump in the portrayal of Jawn emerges in the work of Ibn Tawus (d. 1246/664) and Ibn Nama al-Hilli (d. 1247-8/645)³³. This was, incidentally, after the Mongol invasion, an invasion which is thought to have changed racial ideals, and made Asiatic features more desirable. Ibn Tawus relates:

Then Jawn the freed slave (*mawla*) of Abu Dharr came forward to fight, and he was a black slave. And so al-Husayn, peace be upon him, said to him, 'You have permission [to leave] from me. You have followed us seeking wellness (*'afiyah*), so do not cut yourself off from the world in our path.'

And so he said, 'O son of the Messenger of Allah, I in ease should lick your bowl, and in difficulty I should abandon you? By Allah, my scent is fetid, and my lineage is ignoble, and my colour is black, so breathe on me with Paradise³⁴ so that my scent becomes fragrant, and my lineage becomes noble, and my face is whitened. No, by Allah, I will not abandon you until this black blood of mine mixes with your blood.'

Then he fought, may Allah's pleasure be upon him, until he was killed³⁵.

This account appears to be the source of what we have today. No source text, chain of narration, or attribution is given, so it is not clear where it is taken from. However, there is no particular reason to think that either scholar fabricated it. It seems reasonable that this story was probably part of an oral tradition which was extant at the time of these scholars, and which perhaps had been recorded in some books as well. A subsequent narration attributed to Imam al-Baqir adds that 'everyone takes their dead away from the battlefield and buries them, but Jawn had nobody to do so [that is, because he was not related to the Arab tribes].

So, his mutilated body was seen after ten days and was giving off a scent of good musk'³⁶.

In the past couple centuries, some biographical works have also asserted that Jawn was an early Shi'i

from Nawbah (Nubia), who was purchased by Imam ‘Ali and given to Abu Dharr al-Ghifari. When Abu Dharr was exiled to Rabadah in 652/32 by ‘Uthman on account of his support for ‘Ali, Jawn stayed with him until Abu Dharr died. Then, Jawn returned to Madinah, and – voluntarily, as a Shi‘i – chose to serve ‘Ali, al-Hasan, and al-Husayn, until he accompanied al-Husayn to Iraq and was killed³⁷.

However, no early sources are given for these details (one book simply attributes them to ‘*ahl al-siyar*’ or ‘biographical experts’), and so their authenticity cannot be established³⁸. His name is also inscribed today in the shrine of Imam al-Husayn in Karbala in the list of martyrs.

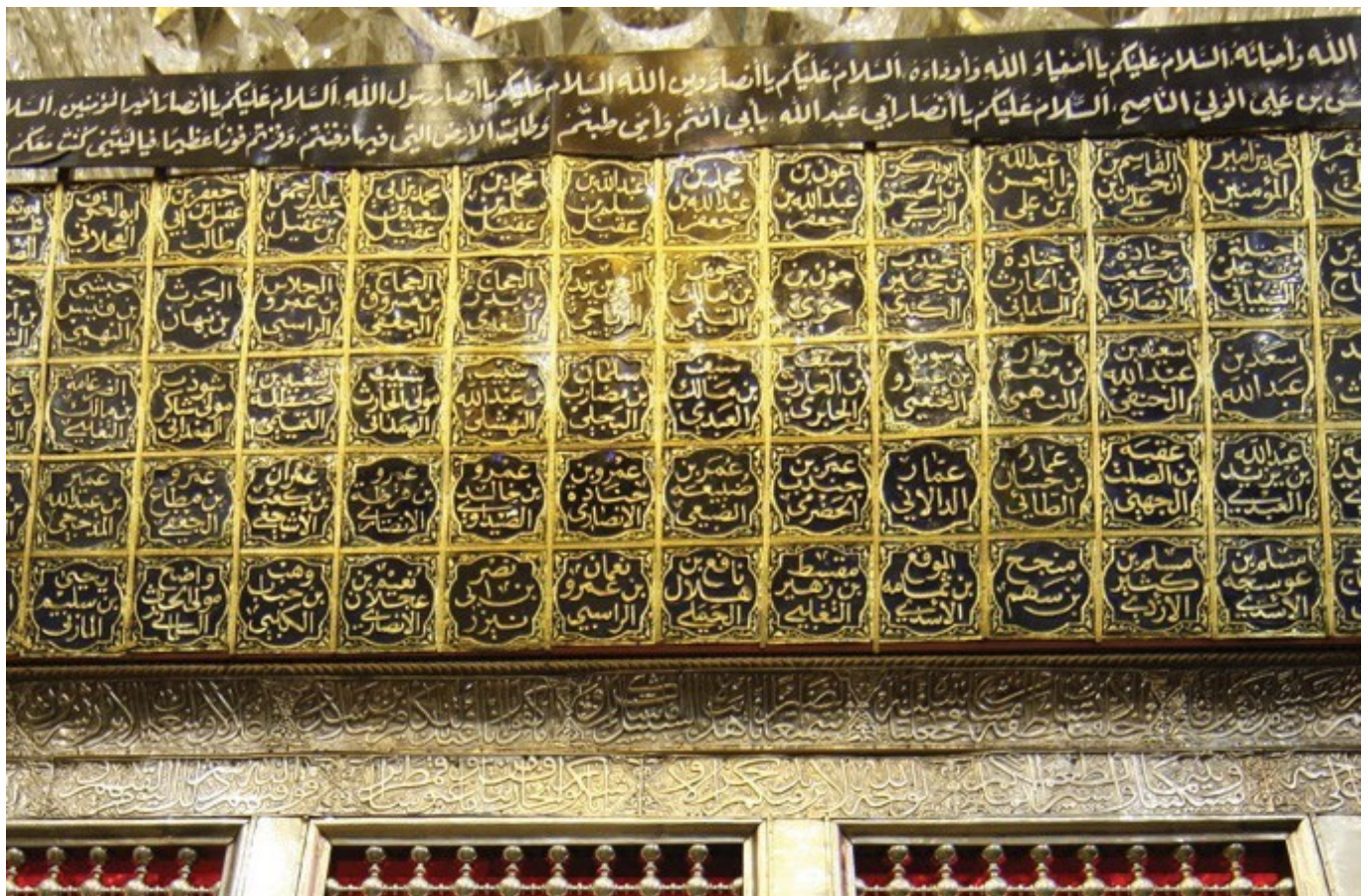


Figure 3. The names of the martyrs in the shrine of Imam al-Husayn in Karbala. Jawn ibn Huwayy’s name is in the second row slightly to the right of the middle. (Photo from al-‘Atabah al-Husayniyyah)

Did Jawn Exist?

The paucity of information about Jawn in early sources, combined with the fact that the earliest mention of him is as Huwayy (and Juwayn) introduces the question of whether or not Jawn ibn Huwayy actually existed, particularly since he is sometimes conflated with another Jawn on the side of Imam al-Husayn³⁹.

In his *Rijal*, Ibn Dawud al-Hilli (d. after 1307/707) implies doubt about the existence of Jawn ibn Huwayy; it may not be coincidental that Ibn Dawud al-Hilli lived approximately at the same time as the first extant record of the story of the ‘black blood’, and hence would have been engaging with the same perceptions

of Jawn in Shi'i communal memory⁴⁰. While the name 'Jawn' itself was a common Arabization of 'John' used at that time, it also seems coincidental that *jawn* is an Arabic word meaning 'black'⁴¹, particularly since the later accounts (which are anachronistic in their use of *aswad*) racialize their portrayal of him.

Most *rijali* works either simply list his name or just mention that he was one of the martyrs in Karbala⁴². The contemporary biographical work *Mu'jam al-Rijal* by Ayatollah al-Khu'i identifies Jawn ibn Huwayy as a companion of Imam al-Husayn on the basis that he is listed in the *ziyarah* texts discussed previously⁴³. Therefore, it seems that the question of whether Jawn actually existed largely hinges on whether or not someone chooses to accept the validity of these *ziyarah* texts. While it seems reasonable that there was a Huwayy (or Jawn) mawla Abi Dharr (of unknown ethnic origin) in Karbala, as related by Abu Mikhnaf, it is possible that the Jawn who is known today – that is, the elderly African slave who was a Shi'i and chose to serve in the house of al-Husayn – did not actually exist but was a racialized construction built up in communal memory as stereotypes of Africans evolved in the Islamic empire. In any case, the question of whether Jawn actually existed is secondary to this discussion, because this discussion is about the persona of Jawn as he is seen today, and there is no doubt in contemporary Shi'i communal memory that Jawn gave his life in Karbala.

What Colour Is Shi'i Religious Authority?

The 'othering' of Jawn as a racial minority is done with a mental picture of the normative Shi'i race being Arabo-Iranian (despite substantial Shi'i populations elsewhere). This is in keeping with a common view whereby Islamic orthodoxy is pictured as being brown and male⁴⁴; in the Shi'i tradition, a typical contemporary image of an authority figure is an Arab or Iranian man with a beard and turban (preferably black)⁴⁵. A picture of authority which significantly challenges this image, as will be seen, can result in cognitive dissonance and even hostility.

One practice which reinforces this norm today is the custom of painting the Imams with Iranian or Arab features, and often as identical – which is theologically symbolic, but physiognomically unlikely⁴⁶. The power of sacred art – like sacred history – to reinforce racial norms should not be neglected since sanctity is invested in these pictures by their use in devotional and ritual settings⁴⁷. While these pictures are common today, Ingvild Flakerud traces them to a single prototype popularized in nineteenth century Iran⁴⁸. She notes that in order to be popularly accepted, a portrait of Imam must be 'accessible and acceptable to the viewers'⁴⁹, and that it must reflect the facial characteristics of a 'noble man'⁵⁰ – that is, it must not clash with preconceived notions about what nobility should look like. Conversely (as will be seen), a portrait of an Imam which seems ignoble will invite rejection and contempt⁵¹.



Figure 4. Rugs picturing Imam al-Husayn for sale to pilgrims outside the shrine of Imam al-Husayn in Karbala. Note the white and essentially Iranian features of the Imam. (Personal photo, taken December 2013).

While Shi'a themselves occasionally debate whether or not the Imams should be portrayed, the main opposition to the way they actually are portrayed has been ethnic: the frequency of Iranian features has upset some contemporary Iraqi artists who have made a conscious decision to paint the Imams with distinctly Arab features instead⁵². This may be a reflection of the view that the Imams are commonly perceived as being Arab. This is because, in Shi'i sacred history, ethnic and religious identity are seen as being transmitted patrilineally, and so since the Imams were descended from an Arab forefather ('Ali ibn Abi Talib), they are all considered Arab even if, according to modern conceptions of race, the percentage of 'Arab' racial heritage that later Imams had was negligible. It may also be a reflection of the view that an Arab is defined as one who speaks Arabic, as opposed to being of 'Arab' racial heritage in the modern sense.

Hence, a useful thought experiment is to envision what the Imams might actually have looked like by calculating the racial background of the Imams in modern terms – using modern racial groups (such as 'African'), and giving equal weight to the racial contributions of both the father and mother. (This is not meant to argue against the view that race is a social construct, but rather to demonstrate that picturing the Imams as racially Arab – or Persian – is farfetched. It is also intended to draw attention the hidden conflicts that arise when a modern conception of race – as discussed above with respect to Jawn – is combined with traditional assumptions about ethnic identity in the Shi'i sacred narrative.) This is not a

straightforward task due to the lack of information and conflicting narrations on the mothers of the later Imams. While Shi'i narrations agree that the later Imams were all born to slave-women, they diverge regarding basic information such as their mothers' names⁵³. This can be taken as a reflection of the less information we have about the Imams at that time due to persecution. It can also be taken as a sign of the increased marginalization of women from Islamic society during the 'Abbasid era. It may also reflect the diminishing importance of matrilineal descent in the Abbasid era, since it is thought that in the early Islamic era, matrilineality had more social import⁵⁴.

Matrilineality, ironically, is very important in the Shi'i context, since the Imams are descended from the Prophet via his daughter. However, most (although not all) Shi'i scholars have treated matrilineality as an exception rather than the norm in defining who is and is not a *sayyid* (i.e. descended from the Prophet)⁵⁵.

By using the most likely accounts of the origins of the Imams' mothers, the following chart emerges. Obviously, there are oversimplifications in the chart – but the purpose of the chart is to invite contemplation, rather than to offer precise figures on the Imams' racial composition.⁵⁶ While the goal here is not to present a definitive analysis of the origins of the mothers of the Imams, for the sake of reference, the opinions on their ethnic origins will be given in the footnotes. (The father of each Imam is the preceding Imam, with the exception of Imam al-Husayn who is also a son of Imam 'Ali.)

Imam	Mother's Origin	Imam's Ethnic Composition
'Ali	Arabia ⁵⁷	100% Arab (Hijazi)
al-Hasan	Arabia ⁵⁸	100% Arab
al-Husayn	Arabia ⁵⁹	100% Arab
al-Sajjad	Iran or India ⁶⁰	50% Arab, 50% Iranian or Indian
al-Baqir	Arabia ⁶¹	75% Arab, 25% Iranian or Indian
al-Sadiq	Arabia ⁶²	87.5% Arab, 12.5% Iranian or Indian
al-Kazim	North Africa or Ethiopia/Somalia ⁶³	50% African, 44% Arab, 6% Iranian or Indian
al-Rida	North Africa ⁶⁴	75% African, 21.9% Arab, 3.1% Iranian or Indian
al-Jawad	Egypt/Sudan ⁶⁵	87.5% African, 10.9% Arab, 1.6% Iranian or Indian
al-Hadi	North Africa ⁶⁶	93.8% African, 5.4% Arab; 0.8% Iranian or Indian
al-'Askari	Egypt/Sudan ⁶⁷	96.9% African; 2.7% Arab; 0.4% Iranian or Indian
al-Mahdi	Anatolia or Egypt/Sudan ⁶⁸	98.4% African, 1.4% Arab; 0.2% Iranian or Indian; or 50% Anatolian, 48.4 % African, 1.4% Arab; 0.2% Iranian or Indian

Table 1. Racial compositions of the twelve Imams based on Shi'i narrations.

The immediate thing that emerges from this chart is that the later Imams have very little Arab inheritance, and virtually no Iranian inheritance (even if that account is accepted), despite the fact that the Imams are perceived as appearing either Arab or Iranian. The other thing that is apparent is that the later Imams would most likely have had a mixture of different African features. This chart also challenges popular hagiographical accounts about the origins of the mothers of Imam al-Sajjad, Imam al-Kazim, and Imam al-Mahdi.⁶⁹

The mother of Imam al-Sajjad. In Shi'i popular piety, the mother of Imam al-Sajjad is said to be a Persian princess named Shahrbanu or Shahzanan. She is said to be the daughter of Yazdagird III, the last Sassanian king (r. 632–51 AD), and to have been captured during the reign of 'Umar ibn al-Khattab. Foreseeing her role, Imam 'Ali insists she should be able to choose who to marry (as opposed to being sold into slavery), and she selects al-Husayn. Amir-Moezzi, who has written extensively on the Shahrbanu legend, feels that it serves to link the Imams to pre-Islamic Persia. In his words, 'from Imam Zayn al-'Abidin onwards, the Shi'ite Imams will be the bearers of a two-fold light: that of *walaya* from 'Ali and Fatimah (thus of Mohammad) and the glorious light from the ancient kings of Persia, as transmitted by Shahrbanu.' Today, she is described as the 'sacred link' between the Arabs and the Persians – although no one, to my knowledge, has ever mentioned a 'sacred link' between the Arabs and the Sudanese through the parentage of the Imams.[70](#)

This is despite the fact that early sources describe the mother of Imam al-Sajjad as a slave-woman from Sind.[71](#) Additionally, Amir-Moezzi notes that none of the sources which had a keen interest in the fall of the Iranians mention this marriage or that any member of the Iranian royal family was captured by Muslim troops.[72](#) It also seems highly coincidental that Shahrbanu's original name – Shahzanan – is the Farsi version of the title given to Fatimah al-Zahra (*sayyidat nisa' al-'alamin*).

The issue here is not where the Imam's mother was from – either origin (India or Iran) can be defended – but rather why this story should be preferable. The impetus for promoting an ethnic connection between Iran and the Imams in the Safavid period is apparent; however, this story was adopted by the ninth century ad, over five centuries before the advent of the Safavid dynasty. Amir-Moezzi observes that this legend is 'highly charged in doctrinal, ethnical and political terms' and takes it as a 'challenge to a kind of Sunnite Arabo-centrist "orthodoxy"'; however, that does not explain its eventual adoption by Sunnis as well. Ayatollah Mutahhari also holds that this story emerged as part of the pre-Islamic belief in the divine nature of the Persian kings.[73](#)

There could be a simpler explanation for why this account was popularized. While – as Mutahhari mentions in his discussion of portrayals of the departure of the Prophet's family from Medina – the Prophet's family eschewed the trappings of royalty, it seems that both here and in the account of the mother of the twelfth Imam, there was a popular preference to hear stories of royalty, and a feeling that it was somehow superior or fitting for the Imams to be descended from worldly kings as a sign of their noble status. In this light, the narration attributed to Imam al-Baqir that al-Sajjad is the 'son of the best two (*ibn al-khiyaratayn*)'[74](#) – that is, the best of the Arabs and the best of the Persians – seems morally and theologically problematic, because surely simply being the daughter of royalty does not make one the 'best' of a nation, at least not from an Islamic standpoint.

The mother of Imam al-Kazim. The next point of cognitive dissonance is with respect to the mother of Imam al-Kazim, who is generally agreed to have been Hamidah 'the Berber'. She is often seen today as being from North Africa, since 'Berber' in Arabic immediately brings to mind North Africa. However,

historians have also noted that, in antiquity, 'Berber' was used to refer to the Horn of Africa (modern-day Ethiopia/Somalia), and it has been argued that mediaeval Arab geographers also used 'Berber' to refer to that Horn of Africa. For instance, *The Cambridge History of Africa* asserts that there 'seems to be no doubt now that the Arab geographers had particularly the Somali in mind when they spoke of the "black Berbers" of the Horn'.⁷⁵ It has also been observed that since the Berbers in North Africa were Muslim, taking them as slaves was problematic; and that North Africa was more distant and inconvenient for taking slaves from; therefore, it is more likely that she would have come from (or through) the Horn of Africa.⁷⁶ In other words, there is a good possibility that Hamidah was Somali.

Therefore, I decided to group both North Africa and the Horn of Africa together as 'African' – after all, they are both on the same continent. However, upon seeing this, some people emphasized to me that it was important to distinguish between North Africa and the Horn of Africa, because North Africans are 'whiter'. (One thing that was not mentioned but I suspect was a factor is that, today, North Africa is considered 'Arab' and contiguous with the Middle East (MENA)). This is, of course, precisely what I was aiming to demonstrate – why it is that people from North Africa were considered to be different from, and better than, people from sub-Saharan Africa, to the point that the idea that Imam al-Kazim's mother could have been Somali or Ethiopian caused offence.

The mother of Imam al-Mahdi. As in the case of the fourth Imam, there are two competing accounts of the origin of the mother of the Mahdi. Modern Shi'i hagiography strongly prefers the account which says that the mother of the twelfth Imam was a Roman (Byzantine) princess named Narjis, who was a descendant of Simon, the disciple of Jesus. She dreams of the Virgin Mary and Fatimah al-Zahra, who convinces her to convert to Islam and to allow herself to be captured by Muslim invaders. She is then captured and sold as a slave, and refuses to accept any other master until she is sold to the tenth Imam, who gives her in marriage to the eleventh Imam, at which time she bears the Mahdi in secret.

Jassem Hussain objects to the authenticity of this narration on the following grounds: (1) there was no major battle between the 'Abbasids and Byzantines after 856/242, nor is there any historical record of the Byzantine emperor asking for his daughter to be freed; (2) early Imami authors who were contemporaries of the narrator do not refer to it in their works, and the narrator was accused by Najashi and Ibn Dawud of doctrinal extremism (*ghuluww*); and (3) other narrations indicate that she was a black slave-woman, including a narration in *al-Kafi* – considered to be the most reliable Shi'i book of hadith – which specifies that she was from *Nawbah* (Nubia).⁷⁷ Additionally, al-Saduq himself also relates other narrations that she was a black slave-girl. Similarly, Amir-Moezzi also dismisses the view that she was a Byzantine princess as 'undoubtedly legendary and hagiographic'.⁷⁸

Despite the greater evidence for her being from the Sudan, the story of her being a Roman princess prevails. It seems that, again, the idea of her being of royal descent is preferable to her being an unknown slave. It may simply have been preferable because it is a more engaging story. Hussain suggests that this account was preferred because it made the mother of the Mahdi 'of noble ancestry

and high social status', and also because it connects the Mahdi with Jesus, as *Ahadith* about the end of times do. Nowadays, it is possible that it is preferable because of the association of Rome with Europeans, and European colonial dominance and the European racial hierarchy.

The possibility that she was not a Roman princess, however, was only the first source of cognitive dissonance. The next was the decision to identify her as 'Anatolian'. 'Anatolian' is, in and of itself, a limited but reasonably accurate description of the Eastern Roman/Byzantine Empire at the time (around 869 AD), which was centred in Constantinople. While 'Greek or Anatolian' would have been more accurate, the intent behind that was to call attention to the assumptions associated with 'Roman princess' today. This phrasing caused considerable consternation for people who had the mental image of her being a white European (Roman, Christian, royalty – the image of a Disney princess comes to mind), and saw the idea of her being Anatolian – with the racial implication of 'brown like us' – as erroneous; for instance, it elicited confused responses such as 'I thought she was a Roman princess'.

Therefore, I decided to take the 'thought experiment' a step further and to revise a commonly circulated picture of the twelve Imams by replacing their faces with faces of individuals who roughly matched the ethnic outlines in the chart above. The resulting picture initially gave me pause, because I had never seen a picture of the Imams with a variety of ethnicities, and I had especially never seen black Imams. However, after becoming accustomed to the photo, I began to appreciate the inclusive sense of sharing in all the peoples of the world that the multi-ethnic picture of the Imams represented.



Figure 5. A traditional picture of the twelve Imams, followed by the revised picture.

The figure in the box in the lower left is an impression of how the twelfth Imam might look if his mother was Byzantine (as opposed to Sudanese). Imam 'Ali is in front, followed by Imam al-Hasan on the left, then Imam al-Husayn on the right, and then Imam al-Sajjad behind him on the left, and so on.

I then shared that picture online (anonymously) to gauge the responses prior to giving my talk (mentioned towards the beginning of this article), with the intent of reporting the responses in the talk. I also shared the chart of ethnicities (above) to prepare the audience to consider the multi-ethnic backgrounds of the Imams when viewing the picture. As I expected, the majority of responses were hostile and disbelieving.

Many responses included profanity and abuse towards the anonymous artist (myself), such as 'curse this bastard', and condemned the artist for making a mockery of the Imams. Some people also made jokes about popular African-American celebrities such as Ice Cube. One person even accused me of being a 'racial supremacist'. In keeping with Flaskerud's findings, it seems that the revised picture – although historically more accurate – conflicted with racially based preconceptions about what features are considered 'noble' and appropriate for an Imam. Only a minority of respondents were able to take a meta-look at the discussion, to identify the racial prejudices that were apparent in these responses; they were the few who were able to discern the entire point of the exercise – to ask why it was seen as a

mockery to have a picture of African Imams, but not a mockery to have a picture of Persian Imams – especially since this is most likely what the Imams would have actually looked like.

An Introspection

I would like to close with some reflections on how this brief inquiry affected me. As a Shi'i who has been exposed to this sacred narrative in a ritual setting – including the account of Jawn's 'black blood' and the frequent mention of him as 'the African slave' – I realized that I had subconsciously shared in, and even perpetuated, the 'othering' of Jawn with the implication that Africans should all be grouped together, or should be identified as slaves. While I had personally dismissed the likelihood of the validity of the 'black blood' story, and had engaged in private conversations about it, I had never realized how inaccurate it was to portray Jawn as the slave in Karbala. The possibility that Jawn ibn Huwayy might not have even existed was deeply jarring, and made me realize the subconscious assumption that I had brought to this discussion: namely, that his existence was unquestioned. Additionally, having seen countless drawings of the Imams (in which they all look identical, and Arab or Persian), and accustomed to the view that Arab ethnic identity is patrilineal and/or associated with language, I realized that I too on some level shared the subconscious belief that the Imams – and, by extension, Shi'i authority – should match that picture.

This is despite the fact that I was aware of historical inaccuracies in the popular account of Karbala, including discrepancies over the biographies of the martyrs. Not only was I aware of the ethnic roots of the Imams, but as a member of a minority ethnicity within the Shi'i community, I am acutely aware of ethnic marginalization. So, if I was experiencing cognitive dissonance, it is not at all surprising – although it is disheartening – that Shi'a who had never questioned the historical accuracy of the sacred narrative, or who assumed that the story of Jawn and his 'black blood' came clearly from *hadith* – would react negatively to something which conflicted with their preconceptions about race and divine authority. All in all, this exploration highlighted to me the importance of raising awareness of the way that Shi'i sacred history, and sacred history in general, is used to communicate portrayals of race (and gender), especially with respect to drawings of the Imams. This is, to my knowledge, the first paper to directly address this subject, and I hope that future individuals will build on it.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Mahfil Ali of London for inviting me to speak on this subject – an informally arranged talk that blossomed into something much bigger. I would also like to thank (in alphabetical order) Dr. Rula Abisaab, Prof. Hamid Algar, Shaikh Mohammad Saeed Bahmanpour, Dr. Amir Dastmalchian, Dr. Jassem Hussain, Dr. Rebecca Masterton, Shaikh Ayyub Rashid, Shaikh Yahya Seymour, Prof. Liyakat Takim, Dr. Mahdi Tourage, Miqdaad Versi, and Shaikh Mohamed Zakariya for their insights into this matter; Prof. Ian Netton for gently permitting me to take time off of other pressing tasks to write this paper; as well as Prof. Francesca Stavrakopoulou of the University of Exeter for suggesting that I look

into ideological criticism as a methodology. Of course, the standard disclaimer applies that this paper reflects my views and not theirs.

1. 'Sacred history' is being used here in the sense of 'history that is retold, often in a devotional setting, to instill religious faith.'
2. In his study on Iraqi Shi'i rituals, Yitzhak Nakash takes it as a truism that '[p]erhaps no other single event in Islamic history has played so central a role in shaping Shiite identity as the martyrdom of Husayn and his companions at Karbala, whose evocation informs the annual rituals of remembrance in the month of Muharram.' Yitzhak Nakash, 'The Muharram Rituals and the Cult of the Saints among Iraqi Shiites', in *The Other Shiites: From the Mediterranean to Central Asia*, ed. A. Monsuitti, S. Naef, F. Sabahi (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 115.
3. For instance, Yitzhak Nakash found that, in Iraq, 'The Arab tribal value system of Shiite society was encapsulated by Shiite religion, not permeated by it...The poetry used in the recitations reflected the moral values and ethnic attributes of the various Shiite communities...The attributes of ideal manhood of the Arabs (muruwwa)...played a dominant role in shaping their moral values and world view. The strong Arab tribal character of Shiite society in Iraq was evident in two major genres in Iraqi colloquial poetry.' Yitzhak Nakash, 'Muharram Rituals', 115 & 117.
4. Karen Ruffle, *Gender, Sainthood, and Everyday Practice in South Asian Shi'ism*. (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 2-3.
5. 'Relatively' in the sense that scholars and historians occasionally disagree about the authenticity of various historical narrations, and thus may choose to omit some of them.
6. As Ingvild Flakerud says, 'The battle at Karbala as a historical event has become mythologized. As Gustav Thaiss has pointed out, it is not unusual to find, "under conditions of social change that meanings of interpretations of myth tend to be modified as each generation reinterprets the past in terms of its own current premises and values"... Today, the battle at Karbala is attributed cosmic, as well as spiritual and societal dimensions.' The role of the Karbala narrative in political and revolutionary discourse in the twentieth century also cannot be neglected. Ingvild Flakerud, *Visualizing Belief and Piety in Iranian Shiism* (London & New York: Continuum International, 2010), 82 & 84.
7. Yitzhak Nakash identifies five ways in which this ritual is effective: majalis (which he translates as 'memorial services'), ta'ziyah (theatrical re-enactments of the Karbala narrative), self-flagellation (which includes poetry communicating values), public processions (which include poetry and slogans), and visiting shrines. This paper will also look at a sixth form of Shi'i expression – visual art. Yitzhak Nakash, 'Muharram Rituals', 115.
8. The question of the impact of sacred icons, as well as the role of sacred icons in the Shi'i tradition, is explored throughout *The Art and Material Culture of Iranian Shi'ism*, ed. Pedram Khosronejad (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012).
9. This approach in this paper is derived from the work of David Clines, who heavily employed a methodology termed 'ideological criticism' to explore the communication of social ideology in scripture, particularly with respect to institutionalized power dynamics associated with gender, race, and social class. The main focus of ideological criticism is asking 'What is the slant, or the subtext of the text', 'With what ideology and morals is it presenting us?' and 'What could this text tell us about the historical or social context of the text?' See David Clines, *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995); David J. A. Clines, 'Contemporary Methods in Hebrew Bible Criticism', in *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: The History of its Interpretation III/2*, ed. M. Sæbø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 1-24.
10. Ayatullah Murtada Mutahhari, 'Ashura – Misconceptions and Distortions, trans. Ali Quli Qara'i, in *al-Tawhid XIII*, no. 3.
11. This understanding has been prevalent since the 1970s. For a discussion of it, see Edouard Machery & Luc Faucher, 'Social Construction and the Concept of Race', in *Philosophy of Science LXXII* (December 2005), 1208-1219.
12. Hamid Dabashi explores the internalization of colonialist prejudices by Muslim immigrants in *Brown Skin, White Masks*.
13. This is in contrast to Judaic legend, which describes Hajar as a daughter of royalty; and Shi'i tradition does not say much about her origins at all. 'Ali Shari'ati, *Hajj (The Pilgrimage)*, trans. A. Behzadnia, N. Denny (Costa Mesa, California: Evecina Cultural & Education Foundation, n.d.).
14. A pamphlet called *John the Black Martyr of Karbala* appears to have this as its goal. Kwamina A. Muhammadi, *Selected Bibliographies on John, the Black Martyr of Karbala, Iraq in 61 H./680 C.E.* (Chicago: The Open School, 1989). This

pamphlet accidentally conflates this Jawn with Jawn ibn Malik, another companion of al-Husayn.

[15.](#) See Abbas Jaffer, 'Conversion to Shi'ism in East Africa', in *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* VI, no. 2, 131–154.

Conversion to Shi'ism has particularly gained momentum in Nigeria, and the killing of an Egyptian Shi'a convert in Egypt in 2013 by a mob of Wahhabi extremists made international news. BBC News, 'Egypt mob attack kills four Shia Muslims near Cairo', in *BBC News Middle East*, 24 June 2013 . Accessed 3 December 2014.

Conversion to Shi'ism among African-Americans is discussed in Liyakat Takim, *Shi'ism in America* (New York & London: New York University Press, 2009). The prejudice that black converts to Shi'ism in North America face is discussed in detail in Amina Inloes & Liyakat Takim, 'Conversion to Shi'a Islam among American and Canadian Women', in *Studies in Religion* XLIII, no. 1 (2014) . Accessed 2 December 2014.

[16.](#) One children's book asserts that 'Among those not related to Husayn were sixteen slaves. Most of them were from Ethiopia'. It is not clear what sources the author is using to conclude that the slaves were mostly from Ethiopia, and one wonders if it is simply an assumption. Liakat Dewji, *Tears for Karbala* (n.p.: n.d.). This, in turn, appears to have been the source for a children's programme on a popular Shi'i television channel, in which a child asserts, 'Did you know that among those not related to Imam Husayn, were 16 slaves? Most of them were from Ethiopia.'

The Islamic Centre of England put on a theatrical performance entitled 'John and Fizza: The African Sacrifice to Karbala' in January 2014. The advertisement reads 'The selfless sacrifice made by black Abyssinian personalities such as John and Fizza at the epic of Karbala have great lessons for us to learn amidst a world full of racial discrimination and injustice.' (See their website at)

Apparently, the actor who played Jawn was actually of South Asian descent and coloured his face black, which, given the derogatory American and British theatrical custom of blackface, sends conflicting racial messages.

[17.](#) In addition to Jawn and Taw'ah, other slaves or freed-slaves on the side of al-Husayn in the Karbala narrative include unspecified slaves in the household of al-Husayn in Medina defending him at night and departing with him to Kufa; Sulayman, a slave of Imam al-Husayn who delivers a letter to Kufa; a Turkish slave with al-Hurr al-Riyahi; Sa'ad, a slave; Salim, who joined the Imam with his master; Wadih, a Turkish slave who said 'Who can be as lucky as I when the son of the Messenger of Allah puts his cheek on mine?'

Before dying, and who may or may not be the same as another companion identified as a Turkish slave who was a reciter of the Qur'an; Aslam, a slave of al-Husayn; a slave-girl of Muslim ibn 'Awsajah who mourns him; and a slave belonging to Rabab (the wife of al-Husayn). Note that in the case of Wadih, the words ascribed to him are similar to how Jawn is described, which leads to the question of whether the two accounts were interpolated. This small list is taken from a survey of 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Muqarram, *Maqatal al-Husayn* (A). It should also be noted that several other people are recorded in biographical works as having been a mawla of Abu Dharr.

[18.](#) Sarah Bowen Savant observes Salman al-Farsi's identity as a Muslim rather than as a Persian was initially emphasized; however, from the second half of the fourth/tenth century onward, there was a renewed focus on his Persian identity, and he became adopted as a 'site of memory for Persians'. Sarah Bowen Savant, *The New Muslims of Post-Conquest Iran: Tradition, Memory, and Conversion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 62.

[19.](#) Diacritics and Arabic honorifics removed from the citation for ease of reading. 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Muqarram, *Maqatal al-Husayn: Martyrdom Epic of Imam al-Husayn*, trans. Y. Jibouri (n.p.: n.d.), 203. Other contemporary accounts by Shi'i scholars which provide this story include Ayatollah Muhammad-Sadiq Najmi, *Muhammad-Reza Fakh-Rohani, From Medina to Karbala in the Words of Imam al Husain*, 2nd ed. (Birmingham: Sun Behind the Cloud Publications, 2012), 257–258; and Seyed Mohammad Bahrulloom, *The Tale of the Martyrdom of Imam Hussain* (a.s.): "The Kerbala Epic", trans. N. al-Khafaji (London: AB Cultural Institute for Arabic & Islamic Research 1997), 23.

[20.](#) I have not yet come across this narration in any primary sources of Shi'i hadith, but it is often recited orally on the occasion of Arba'in (the fortieth day after 'Ashura) in the Arabic-language tradition, and can be found ascribed to Imam al-Sajjad in popular Arabic-language describing the events that occurred at Yazid's palace.

- [21.](#) See M. Rayshahri, *The Scale of Wisdom: A Compendium of Shi' i Hadith* (London: ICAS Press, 2008), 258; 'Abd al-Hadi al-Fa'ali, *Introduction to Hadith*, trans. N. Virjee, 2nd ed. (London: ICAS Press, 2011), 142, 164, 178.
- [22.](#) Salman minna ahl al-bayt. For instance, see al-Shaykh al-Saduq, *'Uyun Akhbar al-Rida I* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-A'lami lil-Matbu'at, 1984), 70 (hadith number 282).
- [23.](#) See Maria Marissa Dakake, *The Charismatic Community: Shi'ite Identity in Early Islam* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2007) for a deeper discussion of concepts of wilayah and identification with the Imams. This is also explored in esoteric Shi'i hadiths which describe the Imams and their followers as being created from the same substance. See Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism* (Albany: State University of New York, 1994), 38.
- [24.](#) Abu Mikhnaf, *Kitab Maqtal al-Husayn* (n.p., n.d.), 110.
- [25.](#) Al-Tabari, *Tarikh al-Umam wa al-Muluk IV* (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-A'lami lil-Matbu'at), 318. Since Tabari used Abu Mikhnaf as a major source for his account of Karbala, it is not surprising that it is there. The translator of the English edition of Tabari's *Tarikh* adds in a footnote that no mention of Huwayy is made anywhere else. I. K. A. Howard (trans.), *The History of al-Tabari Vol. 19: The Caliphate of Yazid b. Mu'awiyah A.D. 680-683/A.H. 60-64* (Albany: SUNY, 1990), 117 n. 387.
- [26.](#) al-Shaykh al-Mufid, *Kitab al-Irshad II* (Beirut: Mu'assasat Al al-Bayt, 1993), 93.
- [27.](#) al-Sayyid Ibn Tawus, *al-Iqbal bil-A'mal al-Hasanah III* (n.p., n.d.), 78; see also 'Allamah al-Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar XLV*, 64-65.
- [28.](#) al-Sayyid ibn Tawus, *al-Iqbal bil-A'mal al-Hasanah III*, 341.
- [29.](#) The ziyarat is mentioned in 'Allamah al-Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar XLV*, 71.
- [30.](#) Here, he is referred to as Juwayn ibn Abi Malik mawla Abi Dharr. Muhammad ibn 'Ali ibn Shahrashub, *Manaqib Al Abi Talib III* (Najaf: al-Maktabah al-Haydariyyah, 1956), 252.
- [31.](#) See Hugh Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests: How the Spread of Islam Changed the World We Live In* (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2007), 27.
- [32.](#) Thanks to Dr. Jassem Hussain for pointing this out.
- [33.](#) Najm al-Din Muhammad ibn Ja'far ibn Abi al-Baq'a' Hibat Allah ibn Nama al-Hilli, *Muthir al-Ahzan* (Najaf: Haydariyyah, 1950), 47.
- [34.](#) A literal translation of this latter phrase – fa-tanaffas 'ala [presumably 'alayya, although it is not indicated in the text] bil-jannah – is awkward. Bahrululoom (*The Tale of the Martyrdom Epic of Imam Hussain*, 23) translates the full expression as 'I look forward to that day in heaven when you breathe [on] me making my smell pleasant, my pedigree honourable, and my complexion white.' Yasin Jibouri (*Maqtal al-Husain*, 203) favours 'so do bestow upon me a breeze from Paradise so that my smell will be good, my lineage will be honoured, and my colour will be whitened!'
- [35.](#) 'Ali ibn Musa ibn Ja'far ibn Muhammad ibn Tawus, *al-Luhuf fi Qatla al-Tufuf* (Qum: al-Anwar al-Huda, n.d.), 64-65. The account by al-Hilli is similar. Also recounted in 'Allamah al-Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar XLV*, 21-22.
- [36.](#) 'Allamah al-Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar XLV*, 22.
- [37.](#) These details are given in 'Ali al-Namazi al-Shahrudi (d. 1405 ah), *Mustadrak Safinat al-Bihar II* (Qum: Jami'at al-Mudarrisin, n.d.), 137. In *A'yan al-Shi'ah*, al-Sayyid al-Muhsin al-Amin attributes this biographical information to Absar al-'Ayn fi Ansar al-Husayn (written by Muhammad ibn Tahir al-Samawi, d. 1370 AH); however, Absar al-'Ayn only says that Jawn remained attached to Ahl al-Bayt after Abu Dharr's death, and went to Karbala with al-Husayn. Muhammad ibn Tahir al-Samawi, *Absar al-'Ayn fi Ansar al-Husayn* (n.p.: Markaz al-Dirasat al-Islamiyyah, n.d.), 176; al-Sayyid al-Muhsin al-Amin, *A'yan al-Shi'ah IV* (n.p.: n.d.), 297.
- [38.](#) In his survey on Jawn ibn Huwayy in historical texts, Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din concludes that nothing more is known about Jawn except that he was black and elderly. al-Shaykh Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din, *Ansar al-Husayn* (n.p.: al-Dar al-Islamiyyah, 1980), 80.
- [39.](#) Namely, Jawn ibn Malik al-Tamimi, who is said to have deserted the army of Yazid and joined al-Husayn on the day of 'Ashura.
- [40.](#) The possibility that Jawn might not have existed is alluded to in *Rijal ibn Dawud*, in which Ibn Dawud al-Hilli states that 'apparently (al-zahir) he [Jawn] was killed with him [Imam al-Husayn] in Karbala, unknown (muhmil)'. Muhmil is an unexpected expression for one of the martyrs of Karbala. Ibn Dawud al-Hilli, *Rijal ibn Dawud* (Najaf: al-Tiba'ah al-

Haydariyyah, 1972), 67. In A'yan al-Shi'ah, al-Muhsin al-Amin argues against Ibn Dawud's view and considers it erroneous to imply uncertainty about Jawn's being a martyr in Karbala. al-Muhsin al-Amin, A'yan al-Shi'ah IV, 297.

[41.](#) Jawn is a complex word, and can also mean 'white' or 'red' in some contexts, although its general connotation is 'black'.

[42.](#) For instance, Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Tusi, Rijal al-Tusi (Qum: Jami'at al-Mudarrisin, 1415 ah), 100; al-Sayyid Mustafa al-Tafrishi, Naqd al-Rijal I (Qum: Mu'assasat Al al-Bayt li-Ihya' al-Turath, 1376 ah), 376; Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Mazandarani, Muntaha al-Maqal fi Ahwal al-Rijal II (n.p.: Mu'assasat Al al-Bayt li- Ihya' al-Turath, n.d.), 299.

[43.](#) al-Sayyid Abu al-Qasim al-Khu'i, Mu' jam Rijal al-Ahadith V (n.p., 1992), 149.

[44.](#) The dynamics of race and Islamic authority are discussed in Mahdi Tourage, 'Performing belief and reviving Islam: Prominent (white male) converts in Muslim revival convention' in *Performing Islam I*, no. 2, 207–226. Anecdotally, I know one Shi'i scholar who, although Arab, has white skin and blue eyes, and has been accused of pretending to be a scholar in his country of origin. It has also been reported that Shi'i sayyid scholars of African descent have been assaulted for wearing black turbans in certain countries because the idea that they could be both sayyid and black was incompatible in some people's minds. Although it will not be the topic of this paper, the question of gender and perceptions of religious authority is also of contemporary relevance – despite the inclusion of women in Shi'i sacred history, and the existence of female Shi'i scholars and seminaries, presenting a woman as a figure of religious authority can also cause cognitive dissonance.

[45.](#) The question of what constitutes an image of Shi'i authority is rarely addressed, but for actual images representing Shi'i authority that convey gender and racial norms for what Shi'i authority should look like, see the photographs in the chapter on the hawzah in Yasser Tabaa & Sabrina Mervin, photos by Erick Bonnier, Najaf: *The Gate of Wisdom: History, Heritage & Significance of the Holy City of the Shi'a* (Paris & Amman: UNESCO, 2014) as well as the photographic essay on the hawzah entitled 'Behind a Hawza in Front an Image' composed by Massimiliano Fusari as part of the Hawzah Project and as a result of his fieldwork, which was exhibited at the British Museum and elsewhere, and is currently available at [http://www.britishmuseum.org/pressroom/press-releases/2014/04/01/behind-a-hawza-in-front-an-image](#). Accessed 18 December 2014.

[46.](#) The portrayal of all of the Imams as identical reflects the Shi'i belief that all of the Imams shared the same essence and were created from the same light; for instance, a famous narration reads, 'The first of us is Muhammad, the middle of us is Muhammad, and the last of us is Muhammad.' 'Allamah al-Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar XXV*, 363 (hadith number 23).

[47.](#) As Seyyed Hossein Nasr emphasizes, 'a work of sacred art leaves an indelible mark upon the human soul.' See Hamid Enayat, in 'Shi'ism and Sunnism', in *Shi'ism: Doctrines, Thought, and Spirituality*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Hamid Dabashi & Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 65–83; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 270. See also Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 'Shi'ism and Art', in *Shi'ism: Doctrines, Thought, and Spirituality*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Hamid Dabashi, & Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 334–340.

[48.](#) Flakerud adds that until the reign of Nader Shah (d. 1747) in Iran, displaying portraits of sacred figures in ritual settings, especially places of prayer, was considered taboo. Ingvild Flakerud, *Visualizing Belief and Piety in Iranian Shiism* (London & New York, Continuum International, 2010), 21, 28, 54.

[49.](#) Ingvild Flakerud, *Visualizing Belief and Piety in Iranian Shiism*, 32.

[50.](#) Ingvild Flakerud, *Visualizing Belief and Piety in Iranian Shiism*, 39.

[51.](#) The discussion of the role of sacred art in reinforcing conceptions of race is by no means limited to Shi'a; it has been explored much more deeply in the present era with respect to portrayals of Jesus. I would like to take a moment to quote some observations on the 2014 film *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, in which all the protagonists – including Moses – were cast as white, while the servants, criminals, and lower class Egyptians were cast as black: 'I spent three months studying abroad in Ghana – in the villages and more impoverished areas of the country for the majority of that time – and I saw how so many "missionaries" were conflating "converting people to Christianity" with "convincing them that they're uncivilized and need to be westernized."

This all came with billboards of a blonde-haired blue-eyed Jesus. Churches where traditional African garb was replaced with suits and ties in 90-degree weather because that was somehow the proper way to worship. I remember distinctly walking around with a White classmate of mine—he was blonde with a beard and sandals on – as he got stopped by a Ghanaian who couldn't believe how much he looked like Jesus. I spoke to one taxi driver who explained that Judas was the only Black person in the Bible....'

The same dynamics apply to any visual portrayal of sacred history – and, indeed, this observation has parallels in Shi'a filmmaking. It also applies to ta'ziyah, where the villains are sometimes identified by having their faces darkened with make-up (see Figure 1); similarly, in Shi'i art depicting Karbala, the evil nature of the villains is often represented by painting them in darker colours. For instance, it was observed that in the Shi'i-produced Yusuf-i Payambar series, the protagonists were cast as Iranian despite the fact that the story takes place in Egypt. (Thanks to Mohamed Zakariya for this observation).

It also applies to ta'ziyah, where the villains are sometimes identified by having their faces darkened with make-up (see Figure 1); similarly, in Shi'i art depicting Karbala, the evil nature of the villains is often represented by painting them in darker colours. Quotation from David Dennis, Jr., 'You Probably Shouldn't Go See Ridley Scott's Pretty Racist 'Exodus' Movie', in Medium . Accessed 11 December 2014.

[52.](#) Adnan Abu Zeed, 'Despite Controversy, Religious Art Increasingly Popular in Iraq', trans. Sahar Ghousoub, in al-Monitor, 25 November 2014 < <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/11/iraq-religious-images-controversial-but-popular.html#>>. Accessed 1 December 2014. Yitzhak Nakash also observes the tendency for Shi'a in Iraq to (visually) cast the Imams in their own image. Yitzhak Nakash, 'Muharram Rituals', 115. The impact of this can be seen in the reaction from a young Shi'i who saw the table of the ethnicities of the Imams (Table 1) and told me, 'I thought all the Imams were Iraqi.'

[53.](#) The ethical question of slavery in the Islamic heritage, as well as the ramifications of the Imams owning slaves, is important but will not be the focus of inquiry here. However, Kecia Ali comments on how the custom of concubinage in the 'Abbasid era influenced the development of a dominant jurisprudential paradigm in which wives are seen in a similar light to slaves in *Sexual Ethics in Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006). She also suggests that the practice of taking slave-women instead of (or in addition to) wives became more common in this era because the Muslim rulers and elite were mimicking Sassanian culture.

[54.](#) Teresa Bernheimer, *The 'Alids: The First Family of Islam, 750–1200* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 37.

[55.](#) One of the exceptions being al-Sharif al-Murtada (d. 1044/436), who held that a child whose mother is sayyid but whose father is not should be considered a sayyid on the grounds that the Imams were descended from the Prophet through Fatimah al-Zahra. See Teresa Bernheimer, *The 'Alids*, for a discussion of this question, including al-Sharif al-Murtada's view. Of course, the question of whether the Prophet Muhammad intended his descendants to be seen as a special social class is itself a valid question.

[56.](#) The information on the mothers of the Imams here is primarily taken from the series on the biography of the Imams by the contemporary scholar Baqir Sharif Qarashi, a detailed, and well-referenced series on the lives of the Imams; at any rate, one can say that it is a reliable source for presenting the contemporary scholarly view on this matter. Exceptions are in the cases of the mothers of the fourth, seventh, and twelfth Imams, where additional sources are used in the subsequent discussion due to the significance of the disagreement over their origins.

[57.](#) It is commonly accepted that Fatimah bint Asad was a member of the Bani Hashim and was the mother of Imam 'Ali. However, for references, see Mufti Ja'far Husayn, *Biography of Imam 'Ali ibn Abi-Talib*, trans. S. Bilgrami (Qum: Ansariyan, 2006), 87.

[58.](#) That Fatimah al-Zahra, the daughter of the Prophet, was a member of Bani Hashim and the mother of al-Hasan and al-Husayn is also commonly accepted.

[59.](#) See above note.

[60.](#) One set of narrations says that his mother was an Iranian princess; another set of narrations says that she was from Sind. A third view is that she was from Kabul. Baqir Sharif Qarashi lists the possible names of the mother of Imam al-Sajjad as Salamah (with a long a in the middle), Salafa, Ghazlah, Salamah (with a short a), Sadirah, and Shahrbanawayh. He goes to considerable effort to argue for the veracity of the Shahzanan story, discussed below. Baqir Sharif al-Qarashi, *The Life of Imam Zayn al-'Abidin*, trans. J. Rasheed (Qum: Ansariyan, 2010), 1–7.

[61.](#) The mother of Imam al-Baqir is identified as Fatimah bint al-Hasan, from Bani Hashim. Baqir Sharif al-Qarashi, *The Life of Imam Muhammad al-Baqir*, trans. J. al-Rasheed, 1.

[62.](#) The mother of Imam al-Sadiq is identified as Umm Farwah bint al-Qasim ibn Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr. Baqir Sharif al-

Qarashi, *The Life of Imam al-Sadiq*, trans. M. Asadi (Qum: Ansariyan, 2007), 22.

[63.](#) The mother of Imam al-Kazim is said to have been a slave-girl named Hamidah. She is most commonly said to be 'Berber' (see discussion below) and was the daughter or sister of Salih al-Barbari; alternate views are that she was Byzantine or Andalusian. Baqir Sharif al-Qarashi, *The Life of Imam Musa bin Ja'far al-Kazim*, trans. J. Rasheed (Qum: Ansariyan, 2005), 53-55.

[64.](#) The mother of Imam al-Rida is said to have been a slave-girl named Taktum, Khayzaran, Arwa, or Najmah; and most likely from North Africa. One account says that she had belonged to Hamidah (the mother of Imam al-Kazim), who gave her in marriage to her son; other accounts say that Imam al-Kazim purchased her and gave her in marriage to his son.

[65.](#) The mother of Imam al-Jawad is said to have been a slave-girl named Khayzaran, Sabika, Sukaynah al-Nawbiyyah, or al-Muraysiyyah. It is not fully clear where she is from, but it is mentioned that she was Coptic (i.e. Egyptian) and a kinswoman of Mariya al-Qubtiyyah (a wife of the Prophet); the appellation 'Nawbiyyah' indicates that she was from Nawbah (Nubia, i.e. southern Egypt/northern Sudan). Baqir Sharif Qarashi, *The Life of Imam al-Jawad*, trans. A. Al-Shahin (Qum: Ansariyan, 2005), 28-29.

[66.](#) The mother of Imam al-Taqi is said to have been a slave-girl named Sumanah al-Maghribiyyah, Mariya al-Qubtiyyah, Yadash, or Hawit. 'Maghribiyyah' and 'Qubtiyyah' suggest she was from North Africa, perhaps Egypt. Baqir Sharif Qarashi, *The Life of Imam al-Hadi*, trans. (Qum: Ansariyan, n.d.), 22.

[67.](#) The mother of Imam Hasan al-'Askari is said to have been a slave-girl named Salil, Sawsan, Hadithah, or Haribah; and to have been from Nawbah (southern Egypt/ northern Sudan). Baqir Sharif al-Qarashi, *The Life of Imam Hasan al-'Askari*, trans. A. al-Shaheen (Qum: Ansariyan, 2005), 16.

[68.](#) The mother of Imam al-Mahdi is said to have been a slave-girl named Sawsan, Rayhanah, Narjis, Saqil, or Khamt. A popular account says that she was a captured Byzantine princess descended from one of the disciples of Jesus. Baqir Sharif al-Qarashi, *The Life of Imam al-Mahdi*, trans. S. Rizvi (Qum: Ansariyan, 2006), 31-32. Another account, which will be discussed subsequently, says that she was a slave-girl from Nubia (southern Egypt/northern Sudan). Jassem Husain, *The Occultation of the Twelfth Imam: A Historical Background* (London: Muhammadi Trust, 1982), 67-69.

[69.](#) It has been brought to my attention that some Iranians, particularly in rural areas, believe that the mother of Imam al-Rida was Iranian; since this does not seem to be prevalent outside of Iran, and is not commonly argued historically, I did not bring it up here, but it would be an interesting line of inquiry as well. I am grateful to Rula Abisaab for bringing my attention to this matter.

[70.](#) Baqir Sharif Qarashi defends this view with considerable vigour. See *The Life of Imam Zayn al-'Abidin*.

[71.](#) Sources cited by Amir-Moezzi include Ibn Sa'd and Ibn Qutaybah.

[72.](#) In her fascinating work on how Islamic identity developed in Iran, Sarah Bowen Savant observes: '...I am reluctant to accept the importance of an original 'Abbasid courtly context. Instead, I think that we have a more complicated negotiation of her memory that began in the late third/ninth century and continued over the course of several centuries.' Sarah Bowen Savant, *The New Muslims of Post-Conquest Iran: Tradition, Memory, and Conversion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[73.](#) Ayatollah Mutahhari also objects to this story: 'The issue of al-Imam al-Husayn's marriage to Shahr Banu, daughter of Yazdgerd, and the birth of al-Imam al-Sajjad ('Ali ibn al-Husayn) (A) to an Iranian princess and the attribution of the Imams of his lineage to the Sasanid dynasty provided a convenient excuse to some fanciful persons with a motive to interpret the Iranians' inclination towards the Household of the Prophet (S) as a result of its relation with the Sasanid dynasty, and to interpret the Shi'i belief in the Divine right of the Imams of the Prophet's Family as a remnant of the ancient Iranian belief in the Divine origin of the sovereignty of the Sasanid emperors, for it is an acknowledged fact that the Sasanid kings believed themselves to belong to a heavenly race having a superhuman status or that of demi-gods, and this belief of theirs was supported by the Zoroastrian creed.' Ayatullah Murtada Mutahhari, *Islam and Iran: A Historical Survey of Mutual Services*, Part 2, trans. W. Akhtar, in *al-Tawhid* VI, no. 2 (1989). On the other hand, the late scholar 'Allamah Tabataba'i presents the view that Shahrbanu was the mother of Imam al-Sajjad as normative. Muhammad Husayn al-Tabataba'i, *Shi'ite Islam* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1977), 201.

[74.](#) Al-Kulayni, *al-Kafi* (Tehran: Dar al-Kutub al-Islamiyyah, 1377 AH (solar)) I, 467.

[75.](#) Roland Oliver (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Africa: Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 136.

See also Walter Raunig & Steffen Wenig (eds.), *Afrikas Horn* (Verlag: Otto Harrassowitz, 2005), especially page 130, where Wolbert Smidt also identifies the Berbers as living on the Somali coast.

[76.](#) Thanks to Prof. Hamid Algar for this observation.

[77.](#) Jassem Husain, *The Occultation of the Twelfth Imam*. Referring to al-Kulayni, al-Kafi I, 323.

[78.](#) Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, 'Islam in Iran VII. The Concept of Mahdi In Twelver Shi'ism', in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* XIV (London: Routledge, 2007), 136-143. . Accessed 2 December 2014.

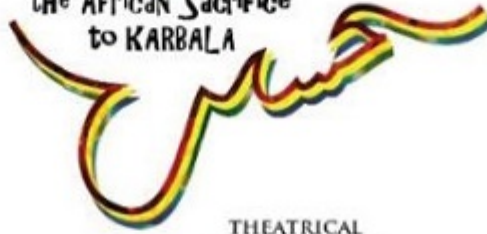
Image:



A GIFT TO THE AWAITED MESSIAH
THE 12TH IMAM, THE MAHDI

JOHN & FIZZA

the African Sacrifice
to KARBALA

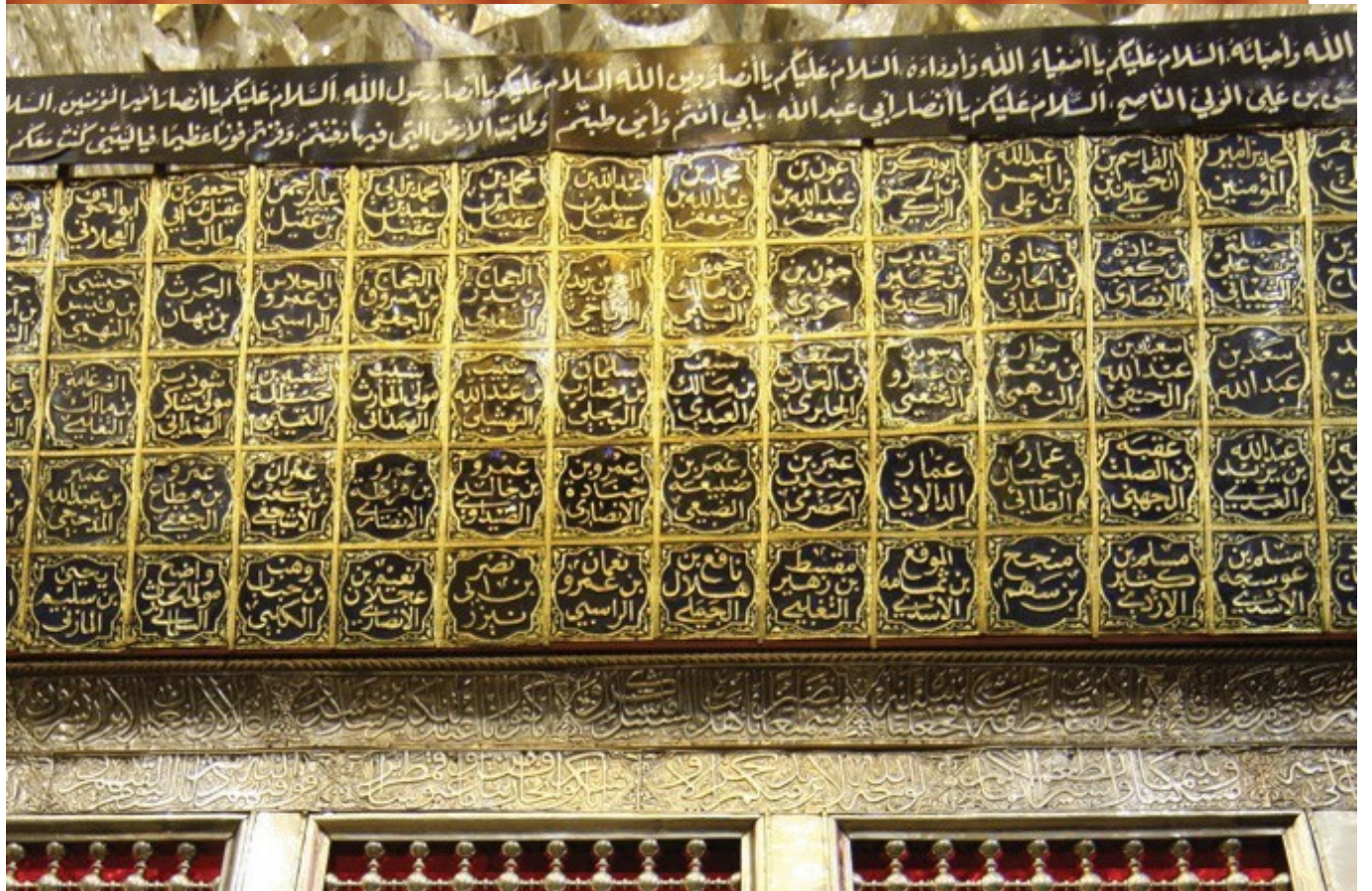


THEATRICAL
PERFORMANCE
RUNNING TIME: 90 MIN

AN EVENING OF INTERFAITH THEATRE

SUN 5TH JANUARY 6 PM
ISLAMIC CENTRE OF ENGLAND
140 MAIDA VALE
LONDON, W9 1QB
TICKETS £7 ADULTS
£4 CHILD (UNDER 8)

TO RESERVE YOUR TICKETS, TEXT
DATE, NAME, NO. OF TICKETS TO: 07958310657
EG: 5 JAN, CHRIS SMITH, 3 ADULTS 2 CHILD





Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/racial-othering-shii-sacred-history-jawn-ibn-huwayy-and-ethnicities-twelve-imams-amina-inloes>

Links

[1] <https://www.al-islam.org/person/amina-inloes>

[2] <https://www.al-islam.org/printpdf/book/export/html/132287>

[3] <https://www.al-islam.org/printepub/book/export/html/132287>

[4] <https://www.al-islam.org/printmobi/book/export/html/132287>

[5] <https://www.al-islam.org/tags/ahl-al-bayt>

[6] <https://www.al-islam.org/tags/racism>