

‘Live has an atmosphere of its own’: *azadari*, ethical orientation, and tuned presence in Shi‘i media praxis

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Among producers of Shi‘i Islamic media in Pakistan, the quality of being live as an atmosphere capable of mediation has gained efficacy along with changes in media for religious dispensation. Central to the importance of live recordings are the ways they are perceived to most effectively mediate the ethical, ritual, and transhistorical contours of *azadari*, a word that describes the ways in which the personages held in esteem by the Shi‘a are mourned and commemorated. What are these qualities of being live that see recordings attributed the qualities of a good, moral atmosphere? By building on ethnographic research into the relationship between Shi‘i practices of *azadari* and their technological mediation, this article aims to provide greater insights into what atmosphere can do for anthropology, with the suggestion that it acts as a way of recognizing different thresholds of intensity and change.

With his exuberant charm and sonorous voice, Hasan Mir,¹ a producer of religious media in a Shi‘i Muslim-majority neighbourhood in the Walled City of Lahore, spoke to me with a vitality that bordered on joy of his life’s work spent publicizing the mourning of his community for the Ahl-e Bait (the family of the Prophet Muhammad). Since returning from expatriate labour in the Gulf in the 1980s, he had used recording technology to document ritual and commemorative gatherings. Doing so greatly elevated his status within his community as a headman of sorts, responsible for the mediatization of Shi‘i traditions of publicity and disclosure. His small store was one of the first independent producers of Shi‘i religious media in Pakistan. Many of his peers built their reputations taking increasingly more professional film crews to record Shi‘i rituals and commemorative events, including *majlis* (mourning gathering), celebrations, and longer programmes of oration featuring a multitude of different reciters and recitation ensembles delivering laments, elegies, and panegyric poems in remembrance of the Ahl-e Bait. Others established professional studios, releasing video discs of recitations complete with dramatic visual effects and post-production soundscapes that, in turn, have made the careers of ‘superstar’ reciters. Hasan Mir took a different route. He claims to have been the first to focus the act of recording on

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the processions of ritual mourning taking place in his neighbourhood, to document something of the intensity and spirit of the event. He refers to these as ‘*azadari* recordings’. The praxis of *azadari*, a word formed of a dual Persian-Arabic root, refers to the *doing of mourning* and describes the ways in which the personages held in esteem by the Shi’a are publicly mourned, venerated, and made present in everyday life as sources of inspiration, love, and ethical emulation.

As we talked over his extensive back catalogue of *azadari* recordings, I was struck by an audiocassette that I was surprised to find remained popular in the neighbourhood (Fig. 1). Hasan Mir does not remember when he recorded it – for him the processions are timeless and never change – but its contents suggest he did so deep amid a crowd in the period shortly before and after the dawn prayer that signals the beginning of the Day of Ashura. The sobs of the recorder mingle with the lamentations of those whose bodies rustle beside the microphone. Proximate voices are barely audible, the thumping of palms on chests muffle amplified pronouncements, a melodic lament rises and falls, and the unedited cassette abruptly ends. The distinction between the recording subject and its object are collapsed; contingency dominates within the recursive confines of a well-established ritual event. Hasan Mir told me what his customers find so special about this recording are the ways it captures his community’s *mahaul*, an Urdu word commonly translated into English as atmosphere, but which also describes a sense of immersion formed through the subjective adjudication of the moral and social qualities of a particular setting. Picking up the tape, he told me, ‘This is the *live* recording. The public are reciting, and we are there recording it onsite. *Live* has an atmosphere of its own.’²

At the same time as describing their merits, he remained hesitant to recommend to me any more of his *azadari* recordings. He told me that these live recordings ‘have a lot of noise in them’, adding, ‘It is for the people who have attended the programme; they have the whole atmosphere in their minds. They have watched it with their eyes and listened to it with their ears. That is why they want to buy the *live* recording’. These dynamics are also by no means nostalgic. While many like Hasan Mir have struggled to compete with the widespread availability of similar material on the internet, others have smoothly transitioned to organizing and broadcasting online events in which being live remains central.

These exchanges presented an analytical problem that I hope to go some way towards resolving in this article. Understood as a local category of adjudication, how could I reconcile my ethnographic interest in the *mahaul* or atmosphere of these recordings, while taking seriously the insistence that its distinct moral contours could not be mediated beyond the direct experience of its participants, and therefore to me? In what follows, I ask: what are the qualities of being live that speak not only to temporality or spatial presence, but also to a kind of moral atmosphere?

During the writing of this article, its subject was amplified to a central subject of anthropological concern. I had just returned from a research trip to Lahore when many countries began to implement lockdown measures as a means to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. As forms of communal prayer and commemoration became subject to social distancing measures, many around the world, mourning the loss of the atmosphere of places of worship and of fellow congregants, turned to technologies for temporal co-presence for the simulation of group worship. In this article, I propose an analytical frame through which to understand the changing contours of online religious phenomena by exploring ethical orientation to the live in terms of what



Figure 1. Copies of an undated recording of a Shi'i mourning procession in Lahore. October 2017.
(Photo: Timothy P.A. Cooper.)

I call *tuned presence*. While the live has become central to Shi'i media praxis, the conditions of achieving ritual efficacy through *tuned presence* have long been central to Shi'i mediations in the Indian subcontinent. Engagement with what media producers consider to be the positive values of being live also helps consider a question pertinent for anthropology: what do we talk about when we talk about atmosphere? In what follows, I explore the possibility that identifying the affective limits of atmosphere

becomes a way of giving expression to different thresholds of intensity and change, such as the ambient contours of ethical orientation.

Media, atmosphere, and thresholds of sensation

The activities of independent producers like Hasan Mir can be traced to the late 1970s, when home recording technology allowed for the documentation of events of personal, social, and ritual significance. Suddenly, a wide cross-section of a given society could create, edit, and document the world around them using tools previously associated with media like film, radio, and television. Following its introduction, anthropologists saw home recording technology as an emancipative and democratizing tool (Manuel 1993) and a potentially radical counterpoint to state broadcasting, in which an 'unofficial culture' could thrive through 'small media' (Sreberny & Mohammadi 1994: 178). For Pakistan's Shi'i minority, by the 1980s increasingly the target of polemical and physical attacks, home recording technology provided a means of self-recognition.

Ever since, the debates regarding media and Islam have revolved around the relationship between the democratization of religious authority and Foucauldian paradigms of ethical self-cultivation. Recent literature in the anthropology of media and religion has seen attention shift away from self-cultivation and towards mediation as an object of material and social agency. The question of the place of the live resonates with what Brian Silverstein, in the circulation of Sufi media in Turkey, calls 'disciplines of presence' (2008: 141). The important work of scholars such as Matthew Engelke (2007) and Birgit Meyer (2011) has shown that changing media dispensations have brought to greater prominence the theoretical problem of presence in religious worship. Meyer's work posits that, contrary to genealogies of how religion is taken as a subject of anthropological study, such as the European Protestant view of religion as inward and individual, faith and its affects can be elemental, ambient, and unruly. Such an approach is grounded in how mediation brings about what she calls the 'genesis of presence' (2014: 206). Like Meyer, Patrick Eisenlohr understands immediacy as a product of mediation. Eisenlohr's work perceptively observes that those engaged in the consumption of *na'at* recitations in praise of the Prophet Muhammad in Mauritius feel themselves caught between the promises of making tangible religious presence and the moral dangers residual in their circulation (2009: 281). At the same time, the circulation and moral reception of these recordings produces 'atmospheres' of contact and contagion that give the act of praising divinity through sound reproduction an efficacious 'sonic presence' (Eisenlohr 2018: 3). In these terms, atmosphere is not subordinate to divine spirit, but a product of bringing the transcendent out of the everyday. In calling for an ecological approach to material religion rooted in atmosphere, Bruno Reinhardt is right to argue that religious media should not always be considered to mediate divine presence, but rather provide a means of becoming attuned to the ways divinity should be recognized and how it should be met (2020: 1532).

It is fitting that Hasan Mir suggested a sense of feedback between recorded media and moral experience by describing the esoteric qualities of live recordings as marked by 'noise'. Atmospheres are often described sonically. In his study of the circulation of Japanese genres of noise music, David Novak explores how listeners become absorbed in the 'sonic atmosphere' (2013: 22) of extreme volume in ways that divide a communal experience of intensity into 'private thresholds of sensation' (2013: 43). By translating the intensity of volume into the intensity of coexistent pieties often in competition not only in terms of sound, such 'thresholds of sensation' become important parts of

both potential conflict and the ambiguity that keeps conflict at bay. To take Novak's image of the threshold further, one of the results of the widespread adoption and adaption of recording technologies was the demarcation of moral thresholds to align physical communities of pious sentiment with the networks brokered by the circulation of media. For Hasan Mir, this threshold took the form of the esoteric and moral atmosphere of live recordings. As Phillip Auslander (2008) has shown, the recording of performance creates a category of remediation he calls 'liveness'. *Live* in the sense it is used in this article roughly corresponds to two conceptual transformations of the term. The first refers to the oxymoronic description of something as a 'live recording' as an affective frame that simulates certain atmospheric qualities of participation rather than simply registering temporal or physical co-presence. The second use of the term is as it is employed to describe live broadcasts in which audiences and the object of viewing are temporally but not spatially co-present. Recent digital technologies, on the other hand, have the ability to respond in real time and thus make different kinds of demands on their participants to engage with them as events (Auslander 2012: 7). In these conditions, the fluid employment of the term situates efficacy in feedback, in which the atmospheric conditions of liveness are posited as spaces of potentiality where persons participate without the full force of intention.

By describing the live as possessing an atmosphere 'of its own', Hasan Mir also acknowledged the coexistence of other atmospheres. For some anthropologists, the question of atmosphere is central to the contours of public and private religion. Matthew Engelke has studied how the contours of 'ambient faith' are seen by Christian groups as a potentially powerful agent (2013: 37), while Naveeda Khan describes battles between neighbourhood mosques in Lahore over defining the 'rightful atmosphere for prayer' (2012: 146). In the writings of German philosopher Gernot Böhme, atmospheres are defined as 'tuned spaces' (2017: 162), sensitive to minor shifts in tone. In aesthetic discourse – literature, art, and architecture – to describe something as possessing an atmosphere, an aura, or a mood is to express something slippery and evasive, yet integral to its effects. This leads atmosphere to bare the paradox of what Tim Flohr Sørensen calls the 'clause of subjectivity' (2015: 64): that is, the extent to which atmospheres rely upon a subjective interlocutor and proffer merely the experience of their mediation, an insight that has led to exciting work on their role as instruments of change (Bille, Bjerregaard & Sørensen 2015).

The use on the part of my interlocutors of the term *mahaul* to describe the ambient qualities of live recordings differs from received understandings of atmosphere. Seemingly distinct from the Hindustani words *mahal* (palace) and *muhalla* (neighbourhood), *mahaul* is an Arabic root word, literally referring to what is *around* or *about*, that has been adopted comparatively recently into Urdu. I heard the term applied in two closely connected ways. First, it referred to a terrain that possesses the ability to act upon the world. The tactile earthiness of the term is somewhat reminiscent of the concept of *terroir* in environmental discourses: the habitat, contributing factors, and unique sense of place that can come to be embodied in a crop yield and shape the product from which it is made. Similarly, *mahaul* is a product of human cultivation and disturbance; it is an affective weight that transforms space and time. Second, in its metalinguistic form, *mahaul* describes what might be called a *moral atmosphere*. Unlike other possible synonyms – context or character, for example – *mahaul* is an avowedly social formation, referring closely to the cultural dynamics of value stratification, which describes the ways in which tone or mood are shaped by the principles of right and

wrong. In this way, it resonates with Jason Throop's focus on intermediary varieties of experience (2009), in which 'moral moods' express the state of 'being affected and attuned' (2014: 71) to a state of urgency and the potential for change. Jarrett Zigon's work similarly argues for a phenomenological approach to ethics and morality (2010: 5) that centralizes 'attunement' as the 'foundational capacity that allows relationships to assemble' (2014: 22).

I was better able to understand these data on the media – and mediation – of moral atmosphere through two particularly compelling essays. In the first, Kabir Tambar explores how followers of the Shi'i Islamic heterodox tradition of Alevism in Turkey attempt to transform the affective conditions within which they might perform their practices. Tambar argues that the organization of communal mourning calls for ethnographic attention to the 'iterability of affect' (2011: 485) as the ability to repeat, mediate, and circulate contexts conducive to emotional efficacy. Yet as Yasmin Moll argues in her work on television preachers in Egypt, when the technical grounds of such forms of mediation happen to be media usually associated with secular entertainment or Western modernity, moral thresholds of usage need to be demarcated in order to assuage anxiety over finding the right contours in religious uses of media. Moll explores how 'media claiming a pious mandate' (2018: 242) pave the way for a system of evaluation that manifests where dividing lines lie. Thinking about the circulation of sensation in this way recalls Webb Keane's notion of 'semiotic transduction' (2013: 10) that mediates the relationship between divine spirit and earthly beings through the written sign, or the way Eisenlohr argues that 'sonic transduction' allows atmospheres to be mediated and felt (2018: 9). In both these senses, transduction describes the transferral of one force of energy into another. We can therefore see the live predicated on the affordances and disturbances of co-present forces joined together in a moment of transformation. As Liana Chua (2015) has shown, the issue of co-presence is central to the doing of ethnography, which must be understood as contingent on the prevailing ways being present to one another is enacted.

To discuss atmosphere in terms of media containers is also to consider the reification of affect into something that can be moved, circulated, and transferred. In his work on media and natural ecologies, John Durham Peters draws attention to how digital media have amplified the presence of the 'stranger' (2015: 6). A similar sentiment is evident in Böhme's work on atmosphere. In a dialogic sense, minor shifts in tone might cause disturbances, or the '*tearing open*' (2017: 107, original emphasis) of an atmosphere communally produced yet traversable by others. Indeed, the appearance of a stranger turns an atmosphere into a more perceptible human infrastructure. As that very stranger who trespassed on the mediation of moral atmosphere, I will not attempt to describe the constitution of the live in the ways that it captured my imagination. In the following sections, I will instead draw upon accounts from producers of Shi'i media regarding how they perceived the live to be shaped by the deployment of tools for recording and distribution, before exploring their most recent instantiation, as digital collectives that utilize social media platforms and technologies of co-presence.

***Azadari* and ethical orientation**

The practices contained within the project of *azadari* both are central to Shi'i devotion in the Indian subcontinent and express the most significant theological difference between Sunni and Shi'i Muslims. The Shi'a believe that authority over the Muslim community should be wielded in the first instance by the close family of the Prophet

Muhammad, the Ahl-e Bait, and their direct descendants. The largest branch of Shi'i Islam and the denomination of those discussed in this article, the *ithna ashariyya* or Twelver Shi'a, believe that these descendants, the twelve Imams, have been divinely ordained as exemplary human leaders. In the formative event in the history of Shi'ism, the battle of Karbala in 680 CE (61 AH), Hussain, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, was killed along with many members of the Ahl-e Bait, and his surviving household was humiliated. The annual commemoration of the sufferings at Karbala begins on the first of the Islamic month of Muharram and reaches its climax on the tenth day with the commemoration of Hussain's death. Known as the Day of Ashura, the event is marked by demonstrations of *azadari*, including mourning gatherings, processions, and bodily expressions of grief. The commemorations that begin on the first of Muharram last for around fifty days, to the day of *arba'een* (or *chelhum*, as it is known in Pakistan) in the month of Safar, which marks the fortieth day of mourning after a death. The period of heightened commemorative activity that begins on the first of Muharram fell both at the start and end of a year-long period of ethnographic field research in Lahore between 2017 and 2018, affording me the opportunity to experience several of the different ways of participating in this atmosphere of communal mourning.

Azadari has been understood in nuanced ways by scholars studying the dynamics of Shi'i piety. Mahmoud Ayoub's work explores the role of suffering as a doctrine of redemption in Shi'i Islam, through which mourning constitutes a horizon of faith and existential striving that resists strictly theological categorizing. Ayoub describes 'fulfilment through suffering' (2011 [1978]: 23) or the praxes of mourning that *does* as much as it *feels*. Syed Akbar Hyder well captures the contours of *azadari* as 'institutionalized devotion and mourning' (2006: 9), while Vernon Schubel understands *azadari* in Pakistan as a frontier that distinguishes Shi'i Muslims from their Sunni co-religionists but remains open to any with love for the Ahl-e Bait (1993: 77). In the nineteenth century, Lahore became a hub of public *azadari* through processions funded by landed Shi'i families who founded the famous Muharram procession that takes place to this day in the Walled City of Lahore. At this time, *azadari* formed a spectacular disavowal of societal pressures that had necessitated *taqiyya*, the precautionary concealment of one's devotional practices for reasons of safety or communal preservation (Rieck 2018: 9). Following the changes and upheavals in the Indian subcontinent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these issues went full circle, from dissimulation to a decisive form of detachment known as *tabarra*: a vocalized act of distancing oneself from the enemies of the Ahl-e Bait. Owing to their crucial differences in theology, Sunni Muslims tend to associate this performative detachment with the severe transgression of insulting the companions of the Prophet. For many Shi'i Muslims, however, the performative work of *tabarra* is part and parcel of expressing *tawalla* (attachment, to the Ahl-e Bait), both of which come together in public forms of confessional disclosure.

In Pakistan today, the public nature of iterations of *azadari* divides opinion among many who pertain to the country's majority Sunni sect of Islam. For some, *azadari* elicits shared feelings of injustice committed against the family of the Prophet; for others, its rituals can feel like a provocative demonstration of alterity, particularly with respect to the practice of *matam*. While the word refers to an act of mourning, the compound Urdu verb *matam-dari* denotes a processional demonstration, communal weeping, light or vigorous chest-beating, and, in the case of Hasan Mir's neighbourhood, *zanjeer-zani*, the act of self-flagellation with curved blades referred to in Pakistan as *zanjeer*

(lit. chain). According to Sunni jurisprudence – and some Shi'i authorities – bloodletting and mourning of this kind are explicitly forbidden in Islam. Outside of Pakistan, it is more common to see a bond of chains without affixed blades used for a milder expression of rhythmic, communal grieving during Muharram. Yet despite attempts to marginalize *zanjeer-zani* or render *azadari* impermissible, these practices are not peripheral to the public place of Islam in Pakistan. The material and visual culture of Shi'i worship is a wellspring for the distinct character of popular religiosity in a country where they form the largest minority (estimated at around a fifth of the population) and the largest Shi'i population outside of Iran (where it is the de facto state denomination).

On the one hand, then, *azadari* is an answer to a deeply theological question. On the other, performing *azadari* is an emotional project in the here and now. In his compendium *Azadari ki taarikh* (The history of *azadari*), Maulana Sibte Hasan Hanswi, quoting from a Shi'i authority with whom he coheres, states that 'whoever cries or makes other people cry over Hussain ... will achieve a higher status in both worlds' (1941: 74). The atmosphere that live possesses is precisely this ephemeral interface through which the devotional environment of Shi'ism in South Asia becomes characterized by the promise and precarity of different forms of co-presence. In this way, the centrality of the live in Pakistani Shi'i media refers to a number of different activities which make up the object of recording, each possessing their own forms of participation, appraisal, and adjudication.

To briefly sum up and ground this concept, first, I think of *azadari* as a mode of ethical orientation. While strictly didactic lessons on comportment are rare, moral pedagogy in events of commemoration such as the *majlis* is engineered by making equivalence between the here and now and divine sources of emulation. Karen Ruffle argues that this power of equivalence is locative, linguistic, and material, related to the intensities of co-presence with fellow congregants (2009: 504) and to the felt absence of the Imams and the Ahl-e Bait as manifested by ritual objects (2017). Through these paralleled lives, the Ahl-e Bait are transformed into 'socially, culturally, and morally relevant figures through whom one can cultivate an idealized self' (Ruffle 2011: 4). *Azadari* is intimately connected to the cultivation of what I often heard described as the atmosphere or aura of '*Hussainiyyat*' (lit. Hussain-ness). This moral atmosphere aims to manifest something of the agency and personhood of Hussain and his family at Karbala and translate them into values such as resilience, honour, and sacrifice. Indeed, the identification and efficacy of atmospheres also appears widely throughout scholarship on Shi'ism. Ayoub argues that only the 'proper emotional atmosphere' (2011 [1978]: 160) of the *majlis* can serve as the basis of the reception of divine spirit. The cultivation of a contingent and unruly atmosphere has been identified as the reason *majlis* orations draw such passionate feedback from participants (Howarth 2005: 59-60). The variability of response to these moods and energies is described by Richard Wolf as 'emotional texture' (2014: 52), which, like the sense of touch, is experienced differently by each participant. This motif of tuning atmosphere so as to make participants more porous to intercession also appears in Schubel's evocation of the *majlis* orator as one who 'evocatively recreates the atmosphere of Karbala' (1993: 103).

Second, *azadari* provides a bridge between an emotional atmosphere and divine spirit. One of the purposes of the *majlis* as an event of commemoration is to express condolence to Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, over the death of her sons and the injustices faced by her family (D'Souza 2014: 27). Many believe

that having one's prayers answered relies on providing condolence to the Ahl-e Bait. This gives the recitation of a lament or the shedding of tears a transformative quality (Bard 2005: 147) that ensures prayers are more directly mediated to Allah. In this transhistorical plane, to act on behalf of divine others and emphasize presence has an active quality. That is why ritual mourners declare, 'I am here Hussain [*labbaik ya Hussain*]'. By this project of creating, through the dynamics of co-presence with fellow congregants, an atmosphere ethically attuned to the reception of divine spirit that may include commemoration and ritual but also other modes of orientation, transhistorical identification with *Hussainiyyat* is engendered.

I also want to suggest that the mediatization of *azadari* as ethical orientation and interface of worship has expanded the traditional understanding of the term to become a capacious bracket for a range of activities. While *azadari* might be spread in a similar way to how proselytizers communicate religious messages, in its application in present-day Pakistan I found the term refers more closely to the cultivation of a particular environment which it has the power to cleave as well as thrive more effectively within. During the days approaching Ashura in Pakistan, for example, it is an established practice that most people, regardless of religious affiliation, avoid celebrations and secular media such as music and film. Television broadcasters participate in creating an atmosphere conducive to public mourning with solemn tones and dark colours. The place of technologies of mediation in these dynamics operates on the understanding that *azadari* as a project of ethical orientation increases the intensity of its resonance in the creation of atmospheres porous to the engagement of others. If *azadari* in Pakistan is manifested in two primary ways – the commemorative environment of the *majlis* and in demonstrative form as enacted through public procession – I would like to suggest the appearance of a third. *Azadari*, as an atmospheric project that pervades everyday life, attempts to infuse the lives of others with an ethical orientation towards Hussain and the Ahl-e Bait, and provide an interface for various kinds of temporal and divine co-presence.

Recording live

For Hasan Mir, the quality of being live refers intimately to the moral space through which *azadari* flows. It is not only for economic purposes that Shi'i media traders are to be found along procession routes, beside Shi'i shrines, and in Shi'a-majority neighbourhoods. They are intricately woven into the congregations and prayer unions of their *muhalla*, a term which describes an urban quarter and that carries with it the implications of a religious or caste identity. In Pakistan and North India, a *muhalla* less rigidly describes particular borders or streets and is more porous to the changes in social or corporate groups identified by profession or religious denomination. The largest procession that passes through Hasan Mir's *muhalla* is taken out on the ninth and tenth of Muharram every year, following a route through the small alleyways of the neighbourhood. Throughout the year, large plastic posters advertise Hasan Mir's store with an image of him performing ritual flagellation with a tangle of extravagantly long blades (Figs 2 and 3). Despite this self-publicity, he is careful to emphasize that he is not a Syed: someone who can trace a genealogical link to the Prophet Muhammad and the Ahl-e Bait and who usually enjoys increased respect among his or her community. Instead, the status he enjoys at the head of processions and as the bearer of devotional battle standards has been built through the deployment of recording media through which his community adjudicate their own participation in *azadari*.



Figure 2. Posters of Hasan Mir performing self-flagellation, erected outside his shop, captioned with a salutation to Imam Hussain. September 2018. (Credit: Timothy P.A. Cooper.)



Figure 3. Posters of Hasan Mir performing self-flagellation, erected outside his shop, captioned with a salutation to Imam Hussain. September 2018. (Credit: Timothy P.A. Cooper.)

During Muharram, local police officers are tasked with wandering around to ensure no outsiders take photographs or make videos of the mourners. At a time of such public piety, many are afraid of being photographed and blackmailed, such is the disapproval felt towards such devotion by some non-Shi'i Pakistanis. Only authorized individuals like Hasan Mir, and groups known and respected within the community, are permitted to record the processions. These local anxieties relate to broader and considerably more widespread instances of marginalization and violence against the Shi'a in Pakistan over the last four decades or more. Continually embattled groupings, such as the Hazara communities in and around Quetta, face assassinations and targeted violence, even while Pakistani Shi'a are represented at the highest levels of society. In the early 2010s, urban violence against Shi'i communities reached its apex. Public commemorations such as Ashura became flashpoints for random and opportunistic attacks on large crowds, congregations of mourners, or those displaying more publicly than usual their religious affiliation.

As a young man back in the late 1970s, Hasan Mir did not leave home without his signature double-cassette deck, making sound recordings of *matam-dari* and processions wherever he came across them among Lahore's sprawling neighbourhoods, before going home and making one copy at a time to swap or sell to fellow recording

enthusiasts. As he was engaged in pious work, his parents approved of his pursuits. This desire to record was further entrenched during his time in the early 1980s as an expatriate worker in Saudi Arabia, whose stance towards public displays of pluralism is far less accepting of minority expressions. He found that the Shi'i minority were only permitted to engage in physical expressions of ritual mourning such as *matam-dari* and *zanjeer-zani* in a private hall, if at all. His account of the reasons for dedicating himself to recording – recounted as ever with a wide grin and in a taut baritone – are worth quoting at length:

In short, I am a *matami* [a mourner], I am a *zanjeer zan* [one who self-flagellates]. When people came from outside Pakistan, just like you, they would say, 'I have just watched this oration and I would like a recording of it', but there was not a single shop in the *muhalla*. So, I asked around if anyone has any recordings and they had nothing. I thought to myself, 'What is all this? Over here you can find everything. We have *zanjeer* for sale, why are there no cassettes available here?' The following year I had to go to Saudi Arabia. I missed all this very much. I, who used to do so much *azadari*, was now stuck in a desert with Arabs for eight whole years. During that time, I only came to Pakistan once for a holiday. The local atmosphere we have here doesn't exist over there. I decided that when I leave Saudi Arabia I will open a shop just for this purpose.

Here Hasan Mir equates the sale of Shi'i audio and video with the public sale of, and, by extension, public flagellation with, *zanjeer*. His urge to record and publicize the *azadari* of his community was a result of the residual shock of the prohibitive attitude he found himself subjected to while working in Saudi Arabia, and his ability to spread *azadari* once back in Lahore. In this way, home recording served as an invitation to participate in the production of the atmosphere of a pious locality which outside forces would be less likely to trespass upon or regulate.

When he found that videocassette recorders were cheaply available in Saudi Arabia whereas their legality in Pakistan was left ambiguous by the military regime of General Zia-ul-Haq, Hasan Mir brought back five recorders, multi-deck audiocassette duplicators, and some 800 audio- and videocassettes. Forgoing meals and cigarettes during his time abroad, he would also work overtime to buy as much hardware as he could, sending boxes of tapes back with colleagues returning to visit their families in and around Lahore. Even today, he keeps a few blank audiocassettes from the time as mementoes, still sealed in a crisp blue Sony brand wrapping. The first procession he recorded on video was the Ashura that fell on 6 October 1984. In the grainy video, as a stirring lament is recited in a dense crowd, men can be seen holding up recording technology: cassette recorders, microphones, and video cameras. As the lament comes to an end, there are more recording devices than there are voices in recitation. Evidently, others had been eager to record the *mahaul* of the community for at least as long as there had been the hardware to do so. As technological obsolescence gathered pace in the first decades of the twenty-first century, Hasan Mir's recordings became dogged by a litany of failed experiments: new telescopic tripods became unfastened from their hinges and sent the camera spinning; smoke machines clouded out congregants; the little blue lights, first of digital camcorders, then of video-enabled smartphones, flashed in the foreground of his shots.

As I enquired further about his focus on atmosphere as the object of recording, Hasan Mir was keen to draw a distinction between what I understood as open and affective liveness. He explained that his neighbourhood is demarcated both by a municipal threshold – of the *muhalla* – and a moral threshold – of the Shi'a who define the *muhalla*. He told me that when the famous Ashura processions are broadcast live

on national television, the camera crews, unfamiliar with the community, frame their shots in accordance with where they believe the action is taking place and how it should be rendered visible. Hasan Mir's recordings, by contrast, 'include everything', as he described it, in ways that must be externally authorized by the affective encounters of those on his side of the threshold. By the terms of this distinction, the live that Hasan Mir strives to capture could also be evidence of its incommensurability.

There was also a third category, one resistant to being recorded live due to the threat of onward circulation outside of the kinship group. One evening, Hasan Mir sat me down and raised his fingers to his lips, motioning for me to listen out to the sounds of a woman's event celebrating the birthday of Fatima in a courtyard behind his store. Overhearing voices in proximity has come to be understood as a necessary consequence of urban living but, as circulation obscures its audience, in this case an audience of unknown men, the recording, storage, and reproduction of women's mourning commemorations is layered with many complications. While women commonly record gatherings to share with their family and friends, they are never circulated in the marketplace. Hasan Mir told me that this sense of responsibility is a necessary response to an inherent flaw in recording technology, in which the miniaturization of capacious media is also the concealment of consent.

#AzadariNoCopyright

Hasan Mir often finds himself an unintentional stockist to traders outside his community, who buy one disc from his store and extract the content for digital delivery or make hard copies for sale. This kind of unauthorized copying does not bother him. He began his store specifically for the proselytization of his faith. His guiding sentiments are well expressed by the motto '#AzadariNoCopyright' that his son Haider has tags on Twitter whenever reposting videos of famous Shi'i reciters. Despite the tendency for digital circulation to appear infinite in its possibility for reproduction, and thereby stand in for the absence of governmental archival initiatives, many collectors of rare recordings of Shi'i recitations will often caption uploads to YouTube with a passionate call for people to save and disseminate the recordings because of the collector's lack of storage facilities or the frequency with which their data storage devices fail.

Despite his pride in the family business, Haider was quick to acknowledge that his father's live recordings were beginning to be eclipsed by social media platforms such as Facebook Live. He told me, 'If I want to see a procession that left yesterday, I won't record it and save it on my mobile. I'll switch on my internet data and watch videos I have been tagged in'. Haider was aware that the ability for a platform to both mediate the live and archive the recordings for future consultation directly appropriates the twin roles of recording and guardianship that characterize the social place of the Shi'i marketplace media trader (Figs 4 and 5). I found his sentiment echoed by one of Hasan Mir's oldest rivals, a store run by a man named Tahir Jafri situated in the market beside the Muslim shrine of Bibi Pak Daman, a commodity zone which is a prominent centre of prayer and public leisure for local Shi'a.

Tahir Jafri had been recording, storing, reproducing, and disseminating *majlis* recordings for thirty-five years. Before he and his elder brother established their shop beside the shrine in 1983, the market consisted solely of an individual who sold sweet goods to devotees, through whom the Jafri brothers began to sell their cassettes on commission. Between then and 2020, as many as a dozen similar stores came and went, leaving Jafri's the oldest in the market. As the cassette and video trade became more



Figure 4. Shi'i media stores in Lahore. December 2017 and February 2020, respectively. (Photo: Timothy P.A. Cooper.)

saturated in the late 1980s, Tahir Jafri decided to build up a reserve of materials by recording television transmissions such as the annual *Sham-i Ghariban* (Night of the Dispossessed) broadcast on the state-run Pakistan Television Corporation (PTV) on the night of Ashura. Jafri would frequently express to me his displeasure that PTV did not archive the orations given by Rasheed Turabi, considered by many to be the greatest Shi'i orator of the twentieth century. Filling the gaps in state-led conservation, many trader-collectors of Shi'i media like him took it upon themselves to record events



Figure 5. Shi'i media stores in Lahore. December 2017 and February 2020, respectively. (Photo: Timothy P.A. Cooper.)

broadcast live. This, in turn, conferred on the ability to reproduce liveness an efficacy derived from the efforts of mediation and guardianship.

These days, when he is not busy loading customers' microSD cards with curated devotional content, Jafri can be found digitizing his capacious library of recordings dating back to the early 1980s. His small store has become so intimately engaged in the careers of popular reciters – many of whom learned their craft by imitating the famous names featured on their recordings – that he could have easily established a



Figure 6. Recordings of *majlis* orations in Tahir Jafri's shop. April 2018. (Photo: Timothy P.A. Cooper.)

studio to record the more polished elegies associated with the bigger stars (Figs 6 and 7). However, his customers always insisted on the live. He told me,

When you are listening to a *live* recording, you enter that atmosphere completely. In the studio, you would not be able to get that. When you listen or watch the *live* recordings, you can sense the reaction of the people who are sitting there listening to it and you feel as if you are sitting among them.

An important factor in the live, for Jafri, is the spark of co-presence. This relates to his affection for the unruliness of 'noise' that makes perceptible the participation of fellow congregants as co-producers of atmosphere. Jafri remembers that the first wave of audiocassettes of laments that he stocked in his store were recited by women, who recorded the cassettes at home and reproduced them in small batches. He told me,

The recording was not done in a studio; they were just sitting in their house and recorded it live on a tape player, but you could hear the sounds of the home in the background. They read it with such style. So sorrowful! It sold in great numbers.

For him, contemporary female reciters who produce video discs of laments backed by dramatic green-screen animations do not boast an equivalent sense of what he calls the *aqeedat* (devotion, piety) of the first wave. Perhaps this is indicative of his interpretation of the live as an act of attunement, of tuning technology to the spaces where efficacious experiences take place, which, for him, enthusiastically includes the sonic presence of fellow female congregants but not necessarily their making visible the act of ritual mourning or commemoration.

While Jafri struggled to maintain his place as a trader and guardian of primarily analogue recordings of reciters and orators, he was aware that those businesses that have survived have done so by transforming their activities into a blended on- and offline initiative in which the live remains central. Gesturing towards the shrine where frequent prayer gatherings are held, he told me of a *majlis* currently being broadcast on Facebook by a local 'azadari network', and described the change in modes of participation: 'Previously it would only be those present inside the *majlis*. Now the audience includes the *live people* [live log]'. He also described an entire movement within



Figure 7. Tahir Jafri's waiting bench, used by customers since the cassette era while they wait for requested content to be copied from master copies, is also a place of discussion and debate over newer styles of devotional recitation. May 2018. (Photo: Timothy P.A. Cooper.)

his community opposed to the entanglement of social media and live broadcasts of *majlis*, groups he describes as 'extremists' or 'lovers of limits'. While not counting himself as one of this group, Jafri's reservations about the new contours of live as mediated co-presence contrasts with his particular affinity for the live as the successful mediation

of the moral atmosphere of communal worship. This recalls the ways I understood Hasan Mir's distinction as that between open and affective liveness. For Jafri, the liveness of online broadcast loses what he calls its 'spirituality' (*rohaniyat*) by mediating the participation of co-present others rather than simulating the affective dynamics of being among them. In his engrossing work on the Shi'i *majlis* in Hyderabad, Toby Howarth argues that the purpose of these commemorative orations is not simply to activate mourning, but to trace other contours (2005: 169) such as delineating lines of ethical orientation or setting out the virtues of figures of veneration and emulation. This is all part of the atmospheric project of *azadari* and its mediatization, in which attunement is central to the efficacy of ritual, and a desire for iterating presence leads to the consumption of media that stand as witness to that iteration. The cultivation of the live as a figure of ethical orientation finds echoes in what Charles Hirschkind describes as the traditions of 'ethical self-discipline' (2001: 623) in the circulation of cassette sermons in Egypt. While for Hirschkind media have the ability to cultivate piety, the live is predicated on the spark of otherness that occurs in friction with attempts to make affect communicable. These kinds of moral atmospheres are created without the full force of intentionality that arises from thinking of Islam as a discursive tradition alone. Instead, there is something improvisational about such multi-sited environments in which dispersed stakeholders' attitudes to permissibility must be taken into account, and through which a difficult balance must be struck between proscription and practice.

***Azadari* networks and tuned presence**

To explore the question of how it might be possible to understand the staging or reproducibility of affect, Kabir Tambar examines associations who work towards 'creating contexts for the cultivation of devotional emotions' (2011: 485). This idea of a collective joined on the basis of 'creating contexts' is an interesting one and evokes David Pinault's monograph on the Shi'i collectives in Indian Hyderabad he called the men's mourning 'guilds' (1992: 86). The study of such collectives has provided much of the richest work on the anthropology of Shi'ism, which has focused on forms of 'activism' through which 'piety politics' are contextually defined (Deeb 2009: S112; see also Hegland 2003). In India and Pakistan, the practices usually associated with *azadari* are led by groups known in Lahore as *matami anjuman* (mourning unions or associations), who also engage in charitable work, provide a sense of corporate identity, and amplify the piety of their community. It is common for such religious mobilizations to deploy the circulation of media as a way of blending religious activism and entertainment (Eisenlohr 2015; Mirza 2015) at the same time as building on established traditions of Shi'i disclosure and publicity. As Tahir Jafri mentioned, the pious labour associated with the Shi'i marketplace media trader has coalesced with the work of Shi'i mourning associations to form what for the sake of brevity will be described as '*azadari* networks', to borrow the term used by both Jafri and the Facebook page (240k followers) administered in Pakistan by Afaq Haider Khan and Shafqat Hussain. These contemporary media hubs with their multiple interfaces employ new technologies to mediate co-presence and virtual participation. They utilize widespread smartphone ownership and internet connectivity to host participative content on Facebook Live, communicate through messaging platforms such as WhatsApp, and broadcast live and archived prayer gatherings on YouTube.

On a research visit to Lahore in February 2020, I travelled a few kilometres south of Hasan Mir's store to Karbala Gamay Shah, the Shi'i place of worship where the

procession that begins from Hasan Mir's *muhalla* ends on Ashura. I was there to talk with another of the more prominent media traders to survive into the digital era. As I passed through the long alleyway that acts as an efficient security bottleneck, my phone vibrated to tell me that one of the *azadari* networks I was following on Facebook was broadcasting a live *majlis*. Opening the video on my phone, I saw that the broadcast was coming from inside Gamay Shah, 100 metres from the gates I was about to enter. I turned up the volume on my phone as I caught the rising sound of the gathering taking place ahead. At the entrance, enormous plastic posters advertised gatherings being held across the city, all of them organized, hosted, and broadcast by a local *azadari* network. The posters featuring the latest 'superstar' reciters drew the attention of some young boys who gathered excitedly, pointing out which faces they knew and which they did not (Fig. 8). As soon as I passed an imperceptible threshold, the video on my phone froze. As the centre of Shi'i religious life in Lahore, the Gamay Shah complex is fitted with signal blockers to forestall any potential of a co-ordinated terrorist attack. Behind the shrine there was a garden where families tucked into large pots of hot food provided for them by the wealthy patrons of the event. In the main gathering, a reciter ended with a lament while babies slept on their mothers' laps, so close to the high-gain amplifiers yet so quietly attuned to the ear-splitting volume. In this space of exception, attunement, and intimacy, the reciter beckoned for displays of emotion, prayed for the families of the organizers, and called for participation from the *live people* watching elsewhere, using a term that has recently become firmly integrated into the vocabulary of the Pakistani *majlis*.

This new form of dispensation in the sphere of Shi'i media provides an extension of the category of live to persons. For the *live people*, such broadcasts can be watched on a smartphone and alongside it, in the comments bar, viewers can participate virtually. The Facebook Live interface separates viewers from participants in a way that corresponds closely to the way people participate in a *majlis*. In the *mosaib*, the tragic Karbala narrative that makes up the last section of most orations, participants register the intensity as they would in person, either through a crying emoji or by written exclamations expressing sorrow. A lack of these kinds of participation at in-person events often draws the ire of reciters. Now, reciters will remind those assembled to demonstrate even greater passion so that the *live people* can benefit from the atmosphere. So, too, in comments on Facebook Live videos, recognition is important, with viewers writing in the comments box the names of the other members of their household who are present and watching. When watched after its occurrence as an archived video, comments are joined by a timecode highlighted as a link. When subsequent viewers click on the timecode and are taken to the moment in the video when the user registered their participation, the live once again becomes an affective iteration (Fig. 9).

Remember that Hasan Mir locates the atmosphere of being live in the social, through the presence of moral selves, attuned and alert to the possibilities of divine spirit. Mirca Madianou describes how media technologies, with their ability to provide such a sense of 'ambient co-presence' (2016: 183), allow for a more or less total submersion in the rhythms and routines of everyday life. Coming even closer to Hasan Mir's transhistorical sociality, what Aisha Beliso-De Jesús calls 'co-presences' (2015: 9) describe assemblages that constitute the felt presence of being joined by other sensations and ways of sensing. These provide a flattened hierarchy through which presence is experienced, so that the face-to-face adherent feels no more genuine an experience



Figure 8. Young boys discuss their favourite reciters featured on posters for upcoming events at Karbala Gamay Shah in Lahore. February 2020. (Photo: Timothy P.A. Cooper.)

than the transnational adherent whose practices are mediated by technology (Beliso-De Jesús 2015: 11). These co-presences are not simply created by media assemblages but already exist as religious mediations. Consequently, positing the participation of *live people* reacts with the semantic form of *mahaul* as emanating from a space, and from actions within that space, to form an efficacious chain that evokes and responds to transhistorical presence.



Figure 9. A Shi'i mourning procession in London broadcast through Facebook Live. October 2018. (Photo: Timothy P.A. Cooper.)

As this article has argued, Shi'i media in Lahore have long been marked by a preference for the live as the successful, but esoteric, mediation of a moral atmosphere. On a social media site open to all, moral thresholds are less easily demarcated than they are temporally or spatially within and between neighbourhoods. *Azadari* networks reify these thresholds by blurring the boundaries of on- and offline activity and breaking down the distinction between physical and spiritual co-presence in communal worship to make certain kinds of media a witness to the iteration of presence to divinity. Like their forebears, the practices of *azadari* networks also define the congregational aspect of worship by the extent to which one is co-present with those similarly attuned to an ethical and affective sphere of call and response. I would like to describe this as *tuned presence*, being confined neither to proximate or virtual categories of presence, and instead contingent on Böhme's understanding of atmospheres as vulnerable to the dissonant other (2017: 162). This kind of presence describes the experience of finding ways to connect esoterically to fellow congregants on an interface that is open to all. Tuned presence, then, describes the experience of being connected to others through shared investment in an affective environment.

The mundane miracle of affect

A few weeks after attending the event at Gamay Shah, the extent of the global spread of COVID-19 had sent many countries of the world, including Pakistan, into lockdown. In the first few days of these measures being in force, when congregational prayers continued to take place despite warnings, Hasan Mir's community were commemorating the death anniversary of the seventh Shi'i Imam, Musa al-Kadhim, in the month of Rajab. For the next week, while anxiety raged over COVID-19 and its impact on communal worship, a Facebook Live video of a miracle that took place during

the procession circulated widely among *azadari* networks. It was captured as part of a Facebook Live broadcast from a single smartphone. Like the audiocassette that began my conversations with Hasan Mir, it was recorded deep amid a throng of mourners, on the very same streets, the sights and sounds rough, contingent, and proximate. Around ninety seconds of the video were widely uploaded and annotated on YouTube as a proof of Shi'i faith. Those who circulated it on Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp groups appended their own captions that explained how, due to the fears around the outbreak, the symbolic coffin of Imam Musa could not be brought out in procession. People still gathered, and as the intensity of the video built, the camera turned towards the coffin viewed through a window. Lying alone in a prayer hall, the heavily garlanded coffin appeared to begin floating in thin air. The message of the video's circulation was clear: despite crisis and upheaval, the atmospheric conditions and spiritual force of *azadari* prevail.

This vignette underscores one key distinction that I have yet to draw. Unlike the miracle of the floating coffin, the live is not evidence of the presence of divinity, but rather the presence of moral selves, affected, initiated, and receptive to spiritual intercession. Compared with the evidence of a miraculous event, the live is the mundane miracle of affect. Religious media, particularly those which mediate co-presence, succeed when maintaining the possibility of something unruly yet capable of reproduction.

I realized that the question I posed in the introduction in relation to my own ethnographic interest in the affective conditions of the live was actually a question of whether affect can itself be subject to mediation. This is what Keane and Eisenlohr describe as the mediatory power of transduction – in this case, the transferral of energy from ritual onto storage media – that strives to make its manifestations communicable and open to adjudication. By engaging with the conceptual basis on which videographers, media traders, and collectors adjudicate their own and others' participation in *azadari*, I understood that the affective frame of being live is a way of manifesting ambient frontiers. These frontiers, or moral thresholds, serve to shield the Shi'a from regulation, at the same time as allowing for traditions of publicity and disclosure so as to reach those with love in their hearts for the Ahl-e Bait. Perhaps this helps us to understand the conceptual labour that atmosphere can undertake for anthropology: that is, to provide an open-ended way of drawing equivalence with our interlocutors' attempts to perceive different thresholds of intensity and change.

Eager to mediate the conditions that *azadari* might suffice, Shi'a in Pakistan have been quick to adopt new technologies into religious practice. Yet these have not been adopted without consideration of ethical conduct: their adoption has long operated on the affective and discursive production of moral thresholds which divide their practices from those of actual or imagined others. One of these is the atmosphere of the live, which for one media producer describes the enchantment of technologies for its reproduction, while for another its efficacy is as a value that qualifies the act of guardianship that follows mediation. The inheritors of this tradition invite the participation of *live people* who are not always temporally or spatially co-present but who share a sense of *tuned* presence. While the impact of physical distancing brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped the contours of what counts as communal worship, studying the slow cultivation of changes taken in tandem with crisis and technological change provides a model for understanding how co-presence can achieve and derive efficacy.

Postscript

Shortly preceding publication of this article, I was saddened to learn of the tragic death of the young man anonymized here as Hasan Mir's son Haider. To all who knew him he was a kind soul, devoted to his family, his faith, and his community. During the short time in which I was lucky enough to have known him, I found him to be a deeply intelligent, thoughtful, and welcoming man. *Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un*.

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NOTES

¹ In the accounts that follow, all my interlocutors appear under pseudonyms and their likenesses are pixellated in accompanying images.

² When explicating the immediacy of Shi'i recordings, producers, consumers, and participants used the English word *live*. While Urdu does not possess a definite article, I felt that what my interlocutors were articulating was the semantic function of the word on its own terms, as 'the live', rather than its usual function as a descriptor anchored to modify another term, such as live broadcast or live recording.

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« Le *live* a une atmosphère qui lui est propre » : *azadari*, orientation éthique et présence accordée dans la praxis médiatique chiite

Résumé

Parmi les producteurs de médias islamiques chiites au Pakistan, la qualité du direct en tant qu'atmosphère capable de médiation a gagné en efficacité parallèlement aux changements des médias pour la transmission religieuse. L'importance des enregistrements en direct dépend de la façon dont ils sont perçus pour transmettre le plus efficacement possible les contours éthiques, rituels et transhistoriques de l'*azadari*, un mot décrivant les façons dont les personnages estimés par les chiites sont pleurés et commémorés. Quelles sont ces qualités du direct auxquelles les enregistrements se voient attribuer les qualités d'une bonne atmosphère morale ? À partir d'une recherche ethnographique sur la relation entre les pratiques chiites de l'*azadari* et leur médiation technologique, cet article vise à fournir un meilleur aperçu de ce que l'atmosphère peut faire pour l'anthropologie, en suggérant qu'elle agit comme un moyen de reconnaître différents seuils d'intensité et de changement.

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