Female Leadership in Iranian-Arab Shi'a Rituals from Khorramshahr, South-western Iran

Talieh Wartner-Attarzadeh (University of Music and Performing Arts, Graz)

Abstract: *Islamization of Iran over the centuries has caused the marginalization of women. After the Islamic revolution of 1979 and with the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the position of women in society changed fast. Iranian women struggled to recover elements of their freedom, social roles, cultural rights, and artistic activities that had been encouraged and supported by the last Iranian monarchy, the Pahlavi Dynasty (1925–1979). While women's cultural activities in music and dramatic arts reduced, Iranian women from religious Shi'a families developed and expanded private cultural activities, among them several religious rituals, which are public to all women from their cities. Many of these rituals involve musical and theatrical elements. They are led by at least one female leader who guides the ritual attendees and performs the ceremony. While in some traditions, female leadership is assigned a completely political role, in many local cultures, this kind of leadership is predominantly related to artistic or religious activities. This chapter deals with the female leadership in local ritual traditions practiced by Iranian-Arab-Shi'a women from an ethnographic perspective. It explores how female leaders have or have not been able to adapt, sustain, and develop their practices. The main focus is on the women's rituals from Khorramshahr city in the south-western Iranian province of Khuzestan.*

Keywords: *Iran, Shiism, rituals, women, leadership.*

Persian nationalism and the Islamization of Iran over the centuries have caused the marginalization of women and non-Persian ethnicities. After the Islamic revolution of 1979, the position of women in Iranian society changed fast. While women's cultural activities in music and dramatic arts reduced, Iranian women from religious Shi'a families developed and expanded private cultural activities, among them several religious rituals. These religious rituals were strongly suppressed during the reign of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979). They were perceived as old-fashioned, non-Persian and therefore not required in a progressive society. In the post-revolutionary time, the new government began to promote any form of Islamic arts. Therefore, anthropologists like Azam Torab (1996: 235) refer to this period as "religious revival".

Religious rituals have deep roots within the Iranian history. They involve a rich variety of poetic, musical and theatrical elements. There is a large and varied range of female rituals by different ethnicities across the country[1]. They differ from each other, depending on each region, geography, languages and religious beliefs of the ethnic groups. Most of the female rituals are led by at least one female leader who guides the ritual attendees and performs the ceremony. To some extent, the leading role of women performing rituals can vary. While in some traditions, female leadership is assigned a completely political role, in other traditions, especially local cultures, this kind of leadership is predominantly related to artistic or religious activities. This chapter explores the female leadership in local ritual traditions practiced by Iranian-Arab-Shi'a women minority from an ethnographic perspective. The main focus is on the women's rituals from Khorramshahr city in the south-western Iranian province of Khuzestan.

Shi'a Women's Rituals in Khorramshahr

Khorramshahr is a south-western Iranian port city located on the Iraqi border. The intermingling of Arab and Persian cultures and cultural exchanges with Iraq influenced the culture of Khorramshahr over the years. The majority of people living in this city are Iranian Arabs, a minority group in mostly Persian Iran. Therefore, the languages used in everyday life and in many rituals are Arabic and Persian. The female Shi'a ritual scene in this city consists of a considerable amount of joyful and mourning rituals, family rituals, and Qur'anic sessions.

Iranian Shi'a and many family rituals are held for men and women separately[2]. One can find some exceptions, where both sexes can attend the ritual at the same time, like the procession rituals of the sacred month of Muharram, which take place on public streets. In Muharram rituals, Shi'a people commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hossein, the third Imam of Shi'a Islam, who was martyred by the Umayyad caliph Yazid Ibn Mu'awiya (Aghaei 2005; Akhavi 1983; Kasi 1918; Nakash 2007). Shi'a Muslims around the world believe that Hossein, as the grandson of the Prophet Mohammad, should have become the next Caliph. Hossein's claims to the caliphate were not recognized by the former Caliph, Yazid and caused him to lead a rebellion against the impious tyranny of the Sunnis (Akhavi 1983: 208). These conflicts and disagreements of Imam Hossein with the caliph as well as the resistance struggle led to the catastrophe of Karbala[3] in 680 and the

1 Studies on Iranian women's cultural lives include: Aghaie 2005; Ansari and Martin 2002; Bahramitash and Hooglund 2011; Beck and Nashat 2004; Goldin 2009, 2004; Hemmasi 2017; Hendelman-Baavur 2019; Huang 2014; Kalinock 2004, 2003; Khosronejad 2015; Kousha 2002; Molana and Sadat 2020; Najmabadi 2005; Ohanlelham 2020; Soomekh 2012.

2 Iran is a country with over 85 million inhabitants and various gender categorizations exist in the country. Yet, all other gender and sexual categories are taboo subjects in Iran and nobody speaks about them. Moreover, I did not focus on other gender groups during my research. Therefore, I will refer only to the two broad male and female categories that are the normatively connected to masculine and feminine genders in the country.

3 The former desert of Karbala in central Iraq is now a pilgrimage city, which is visited by Shiite Muslims throughout the year, especially during the mourning month of Muharram.

tragic death of many Shi'a saints, among them Imam Hossein. Hossein's death is the culmination of historical events within Shi'a Islam.

Procession rituals are held with the active participation of men as performers and women as audience. While men practice their rituals in public places, women's rituals are invisible and take place in private houses. Pious women dedicate a large room in their houses to religious purposes and call it *hosseiniyeh*. This spiritual space with its male designation is a female platform, which offers women a place for religious and artistic activities, socialization, and even representation of their wealth and power relations as each ritual is strongly combined with socio-economic aspects. Hierarchical structures mould every ritual. At the top of this hierarchy are the ritual leaders, followed by hosts and guests.

Pre-wedding ceremonies, weddings, birthday celebration of saints or *mowludis*, the celebration of arrival from pilgrimages, Qur'an sessions, food rituals and mourning rituals are some religious events that take place in a *hosseiniyeh* (*mollāyeh* Um[4] Hamid, personal communication, 7 February 2022)[5]. Shi'a weddings[6] and pre-wedding ceremonies consist of two male and female sections. Women ululate, clap and sing joyful non-instrumental religious songs, sung solo by a ritual leader. Her verses are repeated by the audience like a call and response.

Pre-wedding ceremonies like henna feast are also accompanied by joyful religious songs. Women put henna on the bride's hands, who is dressed in red. During these ceremonies the most performed songs are those praising the Prophet Mohammad or his daughter Fatimah-Zahra, also sung for *mowludi*, a well-known Islamic festivity that is the birthday celebration of Shi'a saints. Rituals like celebration of Mecca pilgrimages, Quran readings, and mourning rituals consist of ceremonial votive gatherings with food and drink consumption, melismatic recitation of the Quran and prayers, all led by a female preacher. Some mourning rituals, especially the commemorations of martyrdom of Shi'a saints, are tied with highly artistic performances of ritual leaders. In Khorramshahr these mourning rituals are well-known in two genres, *rowzeh* and *ta'ziyeh*.

While each *rowzeh* includes narrations, metrical and non-metrical songs, flagellations, and prayers, *ta'ziyeh* resembles a theatre piece with musical performances about the Battle of Karbala. Both rituals are organized by female ritual hosts for their female audience. Hosts are responsible for invitation of ritual leaders. Although the hosts have to put a lot of effort into the whole arrangement and payment for the events, ritual leaders are the ones without whom the ceremonies cannot take place. They are the main performers of each ritual and play the role of a singer and a conductor at the same time. The contemporary female ritual practices in Khorramshahr are shaped and preserved in their current forms by these preachers and leaders, known as *umlāli*. They learnt their

4 Married Arab women of Khorramshahr who have children are always named with "um" (mother of) and the name of the first son, or the oldest child if they do not have sons. This type of name designation in the region is a form of respect and valuing the women's position in society as being a mother.

5 In this chapter, the names of all the people I interviewed have been replaced with other names.

6 Studies focused on Shi'a wedding ceremonies include: Goldin 2004; Khosronejad 2020; Koutlaki 2020; Shanneik 2017; Zarei and Sadri 2012.

leading and performing skills from the older generation of *umlāli* and will pass it to the next generations.

The word *umlāli* is the plural of the word *mollāyeh*, an Arabic word stem from *al-mawlā*, "lord".[7] There are also men who serve in this same kind of role in men's religious scene. The male counterpart of *mollāyeh* is *mollā*. One should not mistake a *mollā* or *mollāyeh* for *mullās* who are considered as low-level clerics in Iran.[8] Both terms *mollā* and *mollāyeh* are religious titles. People with these titles are known to be responsible only for reciting the Quran or religious songs in Shi'a events. Religious Iranians have always associated with and sought guidance and advice from preachers of this sort. They are spiritual clerics who, like mentors, show the people – unofficially – the right way to live to enhance one's religious life.

In Khorramshahr, *umlāli* are highly respected women. They are regarded as virtuous women working for the sake of God and Shi'a saints. This appreciation can be seen in all rituals and all over in the city. Being recognized as a *mollāyeh* and holding such a religious title manifests the faithfulness of one's entire family. Moreover, they make a valuable contribution to the preservation of their local culture, which is appreciated by people from the city. Therefore, *umlāli* can play a beneficial role in the social status of their families because religion and religious gatherings are part of life-time celebrations that play a vital role in the community of pious Shi'a Muslims of Khorramshahr.

Shi'a Rituals and Iranian Society

In the majority's opinion, practicing sacred rituals contributes to a healthy society. Islam reached Iranian territories in the earliest phase of its spread. Contemporary Iran has been moulded by Islamic culture for more than 1400 years. Although Persians were originally not Muslims, over the centuries they embraced Islamic religion as an essential element of their identity as individuals and as a group. The rules of Shi'a Islam are deeply embedded in the structures of society. In the 16th century, Iranian monarchs declared Shiism as the official religion of the country. Shi'a traditions and rituals as well as the clergy started to play central roles in society. A discussion of Islamic morality and its realization in society is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, suffice it to say that over the centuries the integration of the moral aspects of the religion as well as political factors helped to establish Islam as a predominant presence in every aspect of social life.

The Islamic revolution helped re-establishing religion at the centre of society, after the western-oriented and laic reign of the Pahlavi dynasty. The wide acceptance of the new government as a keeper of tradition, religion and sovereignty supports the practice, development, and preservation of Shi'a religious activities both by men and women. The practice of Shi'a rituals by Muslim women reinforces the main goals of the government and thus, perpetuates the religion. The fact that Shi'a Arab women belong to the country's majority religion plays a major role in how they maintain their religious lives. Also, the fact that their mother tongue is the language of Islam and of the Prophet Mohammad

7 https://www.britannica.com/place/Iran/Religion (accessed 13 June 2022).

8 https://www.britannica.com/place/Iran/Religion (accessed 13 June 2022).

is another reason why Iranian Arab women can move more easily in their religious scene, while the situation seems to be completely different for the women of non-Shi'a minorities. Indeed, the government offers Shi'a men and women of all ethnicities freedom to practice their religion. Although we are dealing with private women's rituals that are invisible to the broader Iranian public, the practice or existence of these events are publicly visible and to some extent audible within a local context. Everyone in Khorramshahr is aware of women's rituals. Announcing flags are hanging above the front doors of the *hosseiniyehs* and one can see the women in groups on the streets going to their rituals. Moreover, one can hear blurred sounds of the religious sounds from the *hosseiniyehs*, due to the acoustics and architecture of the buildings.

Female Leadership of *Umlāli*

Umlāli function as ritual leaders[9] in every sense. They plan, among other things, when the ritual should begin and end. They say how participants are supposed to behave. For example, in the mourning rituals of *rowzeh*, many of them warn the guests to keep their heads down. Some even ask the participants to hide their faces behind their headscarves. Keeping the head down is a sign of modesty and high respect. In some rituals, guests are also asked not to look in the eyes of a *mollāyeh* who is performing. Therefore, many women cover their eyes with their hands or behind their scarves.

In joyful rituals such as weddings or *mowludis*, *umlāli* decide if women should dance or not, or if they should take off their scarves or not. They guide the participants in the way they find more appropriate. Dancing has always been an ambiguous debate in Islam. Therefore, one must be careful with that art form. Wearing *hijab* is also debated in women only rituals. The decision whether to wear *hijab* or not is often made by the ritual leaders. Some pious women assume that the souls of the Shi'a saints are present in the room and therefore, women must wear *hijab* as a sign of respect.

Ritual attendees in women's gatherings must only be women and their children. Until they are about five or six, small boys are also allowed to participate in these female-only rituals as they normally stay with their mothers. Not every *mollāyeh* agrees with the participation of children of any sex in some rituals. Some disagree with the presence of boys in female gatherings. While many *umlāli* believe that children need to become familiar with the religious values from early their childhood, other *umlāli* find the presence of children in such a serious context inappropriate. I observed some *umlāli* who called the small children forward so that they could sit in their circle. They had a special appreciation for the children's participation and wanted to reward them with their attention. After all, children need to know the regional culture to shape the future. On the other hand, some *umlāli* threatened the ritual organizers, saying that as long as the children were present, they would not perform.

Umlāli decide which prayers, Quran chapters, religious songs, and how many of them have to be recited for each event. Therefore, they are the decision makers who determine

9 Studies that focused on female leadership in Iranian Shi'a context include: Aghaie 2005; Kalinock 2004, 2003; Khosronejad 2015; Torab 1996.

the styles of performances and shape the format of each event. They decide who should recite which songs if there are several *umlāli* in one ritual, like in rituals with many participants. In such events, *umlāli* sing in turns and it is rare for one *mollāyeh* to perform two songs in a row. As a group, they decide who takes which songs, shortly before the ceremony begins. Based on the experience, ritual hosts can know approximately how many people would participate. Therefore, they evaluate how many *umlāli* are needed for each ritual. Ritual organizers, as the hosts, are responsible for inviting the *umlāli* and their payment.

Habitually the oldest *mollāyeh* in a ceremony, who is usually a more famous preacher among her colleagues, opens the ceremony. She begins with salutations and greeting words to the Prophet Mohammad and his family. Then, she welcomes the guests with short prayers and shows her gratitude for their participation. She speaks loud and clear to get the attendee's attention. Nowadays, *umlāli* use microphones in all rituals. As soon as a *mollāyeh* starts a ritual, participants must follow her instructions, which, regarding the musical aspects concern mainly the volume, that everyone should sing along, and at some points either produce shouts or ululate, depending on each ritual. In these ceremonies, no political or religious speeches by the *umlāli* take place. This is different from what happens in many religious rituals and women's gatherings in Iran, where political, religious and social discussions in the context of a lecture and subsequent question and answer sessions are very common.

To be able to lead the audience professionally, *umlāli* must have good musical and also rhetorical knowledge. Many songs and prayers sung at these Shi'a rituals are based on the musical form of call and response. Depending on each song, the responding phrase can be either the same phrase sung by the *mollāyeh*, or another phrase, sung and introduced by her at the beginning of the song. *Umlāli* repeat the melodic phrases until they are sure that the audience can sing them without difficulties. According to my observations, almost all participants already know the songs and prayers and do not need extra preparations.

In addition to their professional leadership at rituals, many *umlāli* teach the art of recitation to younger women and children who want to learn to perform. Students like to accompany their teachers and to have a chance to sing with them in ceremonies, serving as a group of assistants. This allows them to perform and be recognized by the women of the city and ritual arrangers gradually. It is common for *umlāli* teachers to take their students to their own performances, support them and allow them to sing a chant or two. Private classes usually take place in a group of six participants. The participants are called in Arabic *sāne'*. Each *sāne'* has her own goals and reasons for attending these lessons. According to *mollāyeh* Um Hamid (interview 20 July 2015), "every *sāne'* wants to sing as powerfully and clearly as her *mollāyeh* teacher. When I was a *sāne'*, many colleagues wanted to develop the same roughness in their vocal timbre as that employed by the *mollāyeh*". This exceptionally rough voice timbre of the *umlāli* is highly desired by both Arab and Persian audiences. Amnon Shiloah (1995: 15) writes about the voice quality in Arab culture, stating that "Arab authors considered the voice a reflection of the human soul's mysteries and feelings. For the mystics, it symbolizes divine life and puts man in vibrating resonance with the celestial and universal".

Classes usually take place in the house of the *mollāyeh*. During teaching, no men are allowed to be in the near of the classroom because they may hear the female voice. Due to the Islamic morality, it is indeed inappropriate for men to hear the voices of women who are not their grandmothers, mothers, sisters, daughters, granddaughters, or nieces. Therefore, practice sessions as well as any kind of female rituals, must always take place in private spaces. This is also the reason why such rituals remain in their local context and are not publicly known to the whole country.

The learning process is based on imitation. Students use no musical notes or other symbols in a class. Students have to memorize many songs and practice several modes. The modes are known with the Arabic word *lahn* (literally "melody"; plural *alhān*). Each *lahn* is a series of tones or specific intervals that move around a tonal centre with melodies that usually begin and end on that tone. These intervals can be halftone and whole-tone steps as well as the microtones that occur in Persian art music or the regional music of Khorramshahr. There is no fixed rule as to how many tones should be in a series to have a *lahn*. Nobody knows how many *alhān* exist and how many of them are used in the religious songs of female rituals. Moreover, in comparison with Arabic musical modes (*maghāmat*) or Persian classical music (*radif*) there are no specific names or labels for each *lahn*. My research participants describe the aesthetic properties of the *alhān* with adjectives such as beautiful, energetic, sad, pathetic, etc. Students learn the *alhān* by heart without referring to them using specific names. Instead of using labels, one sings only a phrase and the others know which mode or *lahn* is meant.

Thanks to cell phones and the Internet, *sāne'* can now engage in extra practice at home. Many *umlāli* record their voices during the teaching sessions and send their recordings to their *sāne'* in order for them to practice at home. Many religious people buy records of famous male preachers. Younger *umlāli* learn and prepare these songs for their repertoire, too. For this reason, they send the original recordings of these songs to their *sāne'*s. From male singers, Khorramshahri *umlāli* and *sāne'*s learn different things, such as new melodies, lyrics, vocal techniques and ornaments. This also shows how teaching methods can adapt to the times.

The leadership role of *umlāli* is evident in the variety of important tasks that they take on in Shi'a rituals in Khorramshahr. They are the vocal performers of the rituals who get paid for their performance. They guide the whole ceremony and its structure and give the participants instructions on how to behave and what they expect from them during the ceremony. Since they are role models for many younger women and children, with the influences they have on them, religious leaders contribute to enhancing the participant numbers in such communal activities and help with religious network building in their society. *Umlāli* are furthermore teachers and within this task as well as using the technology from the 21st century, they sustain and develop their practices and pass them to the next generations.

Working with Umlali in the Field[10]

From the very beginning of my research, I was curious to know why and how women choose to become *umlāli*. Speaking with these women about their profession and their role as ritual leaders in their community, as they view it, was sometimes combined with their doubtful reactions. The first reaction of nearly all of them was an excited childish smile and saying: "couldn't you find a better, more important topic for your research?! Another common self-diminishment that I frequently heard from them was that "we only perform for the sake of God and saints and nothing else". It might seem that the *umlāli* as religious leaders do not value their profession. Their self-diminishment might also be a *ta'ārof*, which is an exaggerated form of politeness in the Persian culture. The linguist Ahmad Izadi defines the *ta'ārof* as over-politeness and writes that "it reflects the moral order of considering others to the point of putting their feelings, needs and desires prior to one's own" (Izadi 2015: 84).

Umlāli are cautious to talk about their profession. As I observed in the field, they are the stars in the scene. Most of them even have their own fans, participants who come to religious sessions especially to hear the sound of their particular voice, following their telling of the story as they move from one event to the next. Besides being humble and making *ta'ārof*, one reason for this cautiousness could be that they want to protect the position of their husbands and their own as wives. This is because in this Shi'a community, according to traditional gender roles, women have to be at home and do their daily duties. There should not be rumours about them, they are the focus of someone's research. Another possible reason is that no one has ever asked them about their job as *mollāyeh* in an academic context. I started by getting to know them personally before I could successfully pursue my questions. Only after talking in unofficial interviews about the topics most of the *umlāli* were interested, like health and the current social and political issues, did they tell me about their life stories.

Based on my observations, most women who are either *umlāli* or ritual organizers stem from families of middle or lower-middle classes who have always organized rituals in the city or had famous *umlāli* or male preachers among their relatives. Most of the *umlāli* with whom I made interviews are from the elder generation. They are very well-known personalities in Khorramshahr. Interestingly, these *umlāli* from the same generation have similar life stories. They all started to learn the art of being *umlāli* during childhood. Some of them learned the songs from their parents, who were also *mollā* or *mollāyeh*. Some others have been supported and sent by their parents or wealthy family members to study with famous *umlāli*.

Mollāyeh Um Saleh, the oldest and the most famous *mollāyeh* of the city has, since her childhood, a very beautiful and unique voice (Arabic: *sawt*). Shiloah (1995: 15) describes the aesthetics of the *sawt*:

> Another important aspect was the growing awareness of the potential expressiveness of the human voice and its multiple nuances. The term *sawt* may designate sound,

10 All interview material in this section comes from several formal and informal interviews with three *umlāli* from September 2019.

> voice, or occasionally, song. In the living traditions of the Persian Gulf, *sawt* indicates a musical genre. […] Now, however, the knowledge of voice became a major concern for both sacred and secular music.

According to my interviews, younger *umlāli* who are still learning the religious songs dream about having a roughly textured vocal timber similar to that of Um Saleh. Her mother was a renowned *mollāyeh* in Khorramshahr and had many students, among them her daughter. During the lessons, the young and playful Um Saleh learned from her mother that practicing Islamic traditions is a serious task and not every person can fulfil this task. Therefore, she tried her best to become the best student of her mother. I heard similar stories from other *umlāli* from the same generation of Um Saleh. Usually, these *umlāli* perform together. If such experienced *umlāli* find out that a younger *mollāyeh* with less experience is also performing in the same ritual, they may decline their own invitation. The solitary exception in which these older women will tolerate a young *mollāyeh* is if she is or if she was once their own student. In this case, they even choose complicated and famous songs for their students to perform and become known by the audience. It reveals that *umlāli* have a special network of their colleagues with whom they would like to perform.

Another famous *mollāyeh*, Um Javad, was supported by her generous uncle to learn the Quran from a *mollāyeh*. Her official profession began during the years of war between Iran and Iraq (1980–1988). While Khorramshahr was occupied by the Iraqi army, many people had to leave the city and became war refugees. Like many people from Khorramshahr, Um Javad and her family moved to Kashan, central Iran. Khorramshahri women in the new city thought about practicing their rituals. They already knew that Um Javad had experience and asked her to lead the ceremonies. Gradually, the rituals became famous and were best-attended by Persian women in Kashan. Organizing such tradition in the new city played an important role in enhancing the sense of identity of the Khorramshahri women. Musicologist Even Ruud writes about the same aspect in a musical context that, in my opinion, can also be applied to my context:

> "A strong sense of identity derived from music can contribute specifically to the following four aspects of health: a sense of vitality (of being alive, of being empowered, of having internalized supporting self- objects), a sense of agency (of self- efficacy, of empowerment, of ownership of the "locus of control"), a sense of belonging (of participation, of a network, of social capital, of being recognized) and, not least, a sense of coherence and meaning (of strong emotional musical experiences, flow, transcendence)" (Ruud 2017: 589–590).

Talking about the war years is very common in almost every ritual, as one can still feel and see the unhealed wounds of those days in Khorramshahr. Women of the city say: "If you want to hear the most impressive elegies, you should visit the mourning rituals by Um Saber[11]". Um Saber opens her rituals with salutation to martyrs who sacrificed their

11 While writing this chapter in the summer 2022, I tried to contact Um Saber. Unfortunately, I found out that she has passed away after catching Covid-19. Her voice and elegies will remain undoubtedly in the memories of many women of Khorramshahr.

lives for the war. She is considered the best interpreter of elegies and she knew that she could sing the saddest songs better than any other *mollāyeh*. Sometimes she even has to stop and cry during her own performances. Apart from the fact that Um Saber was not allowed to perform for a certain period in her life, she always wanted to be a *mollāyeh*, no matter whether singing in mourning or joyful rituals. Many *umlāli* had a period in their life during which they were not allowed to perform in religious rituals, at least for some years due to their marriage or raising children.

Now as an elderly woman, Um Saber acts more independently. She told me stories of her life with a great sense of humour and making fun of men and jealousy while other women, including younger ones, sat and listened. Her confidence and humour made her a role model for many women. She talked about her suspicious husband that he did not allow her many things in life and spoke about her dream in an empty *hosseiniyeh*, with a poem book of *rowzeh*. In her dream, a tall woman in green clothes[12] suddenly appeared and commanded her to mourn and sing for her son. Um Saber cried and claimed that she saw Fatimah – Zahra. Then she explained everything to her pious husband, who found her dream a great sign and a big duty for her. With this narrative she was able to persuade her husband to allow her to sing again in rituals.

My conversation with Um Saber was one of the many cases in which a *mollāyeh* spoke about miracles to me. Miracles or miracle makings play an inevitable role on the pathway to becoming a well-known personality in this religious scene. The more miracles happen in a house, the higher would be the position of the hosts and *umlāli* and the more women will participate in the rituals in that house.

Conclusion

Iran is the cradle of several religions and ethnicities. With the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the situation for the practice of religious rituals has improved remarkably. Today, in nearly all Iranian cities, including Khorramshahr, women form religious networks and preserve their sacred rituals in women-only gatherings. These gatherings are public to all women from their cities. Female ritual leaders contribute to the formation of such networks by their charismatic characters and artistic performances. They lead other women and small children to their religious events, where they entertain and educate them by taking the role of preachers, solo singers and conductors. In such rituals, they lead the entire ceremony artistically and morally. In an Islamic society where women's singing and also leading are highly debated topics, women's cultural activities as well as their leading roles seem to be invisible. However, female ritual leaders of Khorramshahr enjoy a great respect and popularity in their community because they dedicated their work to Shi'a saints and therefore everyone knows about their position in the religious network.

These women spent their whole lives learning the Shi'a history, Quran, rhetoric, expanding their vocal techniques and song repertoire to be able to lead and perform. They teach and help the younger generation to become professional performers as well. These

12 Green symbolizes Islam.

women practice and work beside their daily duties as wives and mothers while practicing outdoor activities in the community we deal with is quite difficult. However, their job is not only a great way to express their hidden musical knowledge, singing skill and their talent for guiding amateur singing groups, it is also a good method to earn money and support a family. The practice of Islamic rituals not only fulfils women's religious duties, it largely contributes to their well-being and provides the ritual leaders with opportunities to enhance their status among other women.

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