The Private Performance of Salat Prayers: Repetition, Time, and Meaning

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ABSTRACT
This article is an ethnography of the private performance of the five daily prayers of Islam among a group of middle class, educated women in Tehran. It goes beyond the public and formal spheres to explore religious experience in everyday life. What happens in a ritual when performed alone, without a public? I argue against the prevalent notion that repetition renders the formulas of rituals meaningless. Instead, over time, there is a proliferation of meanings emerging as a result of the undermining of the formality of the text by repetition. The ways in which creativity is exercised are analyzed in answer to the question of what makes one prayer session more satisfying than another—what is an efficacious salat? I argue that the length of time the prayers have been performed, the age of the reciter, and the literate practices of reading and debate are crucial in understanding how this ritual is brought to life by its practitioners. [Keywords: Islam, ritual, prayer, women, language, Iran]

Between 2007 and 2009, during annual visits to Tehran, I talked to a group of Muslim women about their performance of the five daily prayers (salaat in Arabic, hereafter “salat;” and namaaz in Persian). The results of these conversations led me to revisit some of the debates about rituals—in particular, those that involve language. In 2010-2011, I went
back to Tehran and carried out an additional four months of fieldwork on the salat. Ethnographic studies of the salat remain few in number (Bowen 1989, Parkin 2000, Henkel 2005, Mahmood 2001), but those that concern themselves with its private rather than public performance are even more rare. The prevalence of images of the public performance of salat have made it appear as the unmarked form of prayer for Muslims. Yet, notwithstanding the weekly visibility of Friday and communal prayers in holy sites whose images are broadcast to most corners of the world, over a day and a lifetime, most prayers are performed at home with various degrees of privacy.

The public performance of the salat in small agricultural communities or large urban metropolises, in ethnically homogeneous or heterogeneous places, and in revolutionary or more quiet times can have a range of symbolic and political meanings as has been demonstrated by several scholars (Gilsenan 2000, Mottahedeh 1985, Fischer 2003, Bowen 1993, Lambek 2000, Starrett 1998, Mahmood 2005, Varzi 2006, Deeb 2006, Torab 2007, among others). But, performed in private, in the presence of God alone, the salat calls our attention to dimensions that are crucial to a better understanding of the ritual itself, to a deeper appreciation of sources of variation within Islam, and to the multiple roles that language plays in shaping this experience.

The focus on public performance has skewed the study of the salat towards men (Parkin 2000), since women pray in mosques far less often. Mosque attendance in all social classes is more of a male than a female practice, but especially so in the higher social classes. None of the women in my group pray on a regular basis at the mosque. Even their male relatives pray at home most of the time. The influence of class on mosque attendance is similar in Egypt, but in the context of social movements with religious aims (whether or not connected to oppositional politics), women attend mosques more often (Mahmood 2005). In Iran, after the revolution of 1979, urban lower class women’s mosque attendance increased (Torab 2007). For Turkey, Henkel reports that “women generally do not use mosques” to perform the salat (2005:494; see also Gilsenan 2000:167).

The aim of this article is to consider the implications of a ritual that is performed alone (see also Silverstein 2009, Du Bois 2009). I will offer an ethnography of private prayer—what I have been able to observe and what I am told about it by the women I interviewed. It is difficult to conceive of what a ritual would mean or be like beyond the public eye. But this
central ritual of Islam is both private and public. The salat falls under what are called “ibadaat” (sing. ibaada, in Persian ibaadat)—practices that are undertaken for the purpose of concentrating on being in the company and in the thought of God. These refer to the salat as well as other obligations (Graham 2010:94). Among Muslims, it is not controversial to undertake ibaadat at home (or outside) (Parkin 2000). Hence, the term “ritual” is not a fully adequate translation. This non-equivalence should hover over ethnographies and analyses of Muslim rituals. At the same time, ibaadat does have a significant partial overlap with ritual as is evident in the literature on the salat within and outside of anthropology. I will therefore carry out an analysis of the salat as a ritual, bearing in mind the problematic translation.

Returning to the question of private prayer, I ask what are individuals doing when they follow a ritual requirement of their religion without the presence of fellow reciters and a leader to emulate? In considering the “linguistic individual,” Barbara Johnstone (1996:3) argues that most work on language has relied on theorizations of the abstract social system, following Saussure, without adequate attention to the individual speaker. In this way, we have yet to answer the question of “when, how and why individual speakers are connected with discourse and language in particular historical, cultural, and generic context” (Johnstone 2000:406, 1996). One can pose the same question with respect to the performance of rituals: How does each reciter get connected to the ritual (language) at a given historical moment, in a given cultural context? It is this question that I try to address in the following.


Each salat is made up of suurahs (“chapters”) from the Qur’an. The suurahs are recited in a prescribed order—certain orders have become standard. However, the only suura that is required to be recited at the
beginning of each prayer is *al-Fatiha* (Iranians refer to it as *al-Hamdu*), the opening chapter of the Qur’an. In theory, any suura that the reciter chooses can follow al-Fatiha (see also Graham 1993:103). The opening chapter is described as a *keliid*, a “key” that lets the reciter into a hoped for sacred spacetime. There are five daily recitations: at dawn, noon, afternoon, evening, and night. Each one of these has a standard number of prayer cycles or “rak’ats”—the dawn prayer has two, evening three, and the others four. In addition to the recitation of the suurahs, the performance of each prayer involves four body postures: standing, bending forward with hands on knees (“*rukuu*”), prostrating (“*sujuud*”), and sitting. People who are incapable of these physical movements may perform the whole prayer in any one posture they find comfortable. Those who would like to add to the number of prayer cycles can do so, and those who are traveling are allowed to decrease that number.

Depending on the personal context of the reciter, there are a number of non-standard suurahs that are chosen by these women for the prayers: for seeking refuge in God in times of distress, *al-Falaq* (“The Dawn,” Suura 113) and *al-Naas* (“The People,” 114) are recited; when feeling light and in good relations with God, having been given what one asked for, *al-Nasr* (“The Victory,” 110); when one needs to be patient, *wal-Asr* (“The Time,” 103) and “for when you need to be reminded that after every period of hardship comes a period of ease and comfort,” some choose *al-Sharh* (“The Relief,” 94). These suurahs—all of which are between 3-6 ayas—are examples of non-standard suurahs that were mentioned more frequently. The choice can be any chapter of the Qur’an.

Within the structure of each prayer, in particular that of dawn, there is a non-obligatory act that is *mustahabb* (“favored”) and that is to recite a *qonuut*. The content of what one recites in the qonuut can vary greatly. The women in this group all like to include the qonuut. One might recite a few verses of a suura, talk to God in Persian, recite a du’a, or as a few told me, recite a few verses of poetry. Qonuut is often said to be an exclusively Shi’ite practice. However, Arab Iranian Sunnis from Qeshm (an island in the south of Iran) told me that they do include it in their salat. Bowen (1993:69) mentions that the question of its inclusion was debated in Indonesia among Sunnis. According to Ayatollah Taghi Modaressi, qonuut, meaning obedience, is a special du’a and must be performed in the following manner: hands must be raised and held in front of the face such that “the palms are facing the sky and the backs of the hand the earth.” Hence, the qonuut is
another occasion for creativity. Individual performance seems to be a major site of variation and innovation in part because one is not following a prayer leader, as is the case in congregational prayer.

I begin by contextualizing the women and their lives in present day Tehran and go on to offer an ethnography of prayers performed by them. Before going further, it should be noted that there are two main kinds of prayer for Muslims: the obligatory salat and the non-obligatory du’a—often glossed as “personal prayer, supplications.” There are different kinds of du’a: prayers written by various Shi’ite imams, spontaneous requests or talks with God, or recitation of a few verses of a Qur’anic chapter. In English, one uses the word “prayer” for several kinds of prayers that have distinct names among Muslims. In any case, while on some days a believer might not recite a du’a, she is required to do the salat daily.

The language of rituals is usually characterized as “formal”—meaning that it is different from the everyday language of the performer and that the latter has not “chosen” its words (see Irvine 2001). For many, formality seems to imply rigidity—at times they are used synonymously (see below). Repetition in ritual and its consequences for meaning continue to be debated (Asad 1993, Bowen 2000, Keane 2007a, Bloch 2005, Robbins 2001, Du Bois 2009). Building on this literature, I pose a number of questions that require further debate. For example, does the concept of repetition imply sameness of context at each performance? And, if not, can there be such a thing as pure repetition—an exact copy of what one has done previously? Are all repetitions comparable so that repeating a phrase “to a bewildering extent” (Bloch 2005:124) can be compared to repeating “Amen” in Christian rituals or to reciting the same chapter of the Qur’an at the beginning of each salat? In a review of studies of repetition in the social sciences and humanities, Johnstone (1987) found that “mainstream Americans and other Westerners” view repetition negatively, even though it is used all the time in everyday language, in talking to children, and in poetry and songs.

In pursuing a line of inquiry into the questions I posed above, it is crucial to take the temporality of the salat—in several senses—into account. The repetition of formal language over time lessens the formality—in fact, repetition undermines the stiffness and rigidity associated with formality. It potentially removes one of the hindrances to creativity. In addition, the age at which the salat is performed matters greatly. The salat of an 18-year-old is not the same as that of a 65-year-old. The worlds
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stretching in front of them are clearly distinct. What the salat has to offer as ibaadat, as meaning, resonances, and knowledge are not once and for all matters. And the length of time one has been praying is crucial to understanding how, over time, the salat changes. For the women among whom I did my fieldwork, the fact that they had been praying for more than three decades is central to their religious experiences. Over a lifetime, what the salat means in terms of providing a particular form of being in the thought of God, what its verses signify, and how the reciter finds spaces of creativity and presence in its performance, go through transformations. As the individual’s intellectual and emotional conditions change, as she makes and remakes a variety of relationships with friends and family, as she experiences births and deaths, her interactions with the salat also undergo changes, including the contribution of the salat to the cultivation of a certain interiority. With increases in religious knowledge, different chapters of the Qur’an other than the standard ones are chosen, depending on particular concerns and anxieties of any given moment. To do this also requires confidence and practice, all of which are implicated in the length of time the prayers have been performed.

The meanings of what is recited are in part dependent on whether the reciter is literate and aware of continuing theological debates and the layers of meanings of the repeated verses. Without knowing whether an individual is literate, and to what degree, whether she is part of a community in which literacy is a dominant mode of knowledge acquisition, whether relevant debates (about the ritual) are part of television and radio programming and so on, we cannot answer the question of the relation between repetition and meaning (or loss of meaning). The skepticism that a number of anthropologists have voiced over having a general category called “ritual” (Asad 1993, Bowen 1993, Robbins 2001) is highlighted when literacy is taken into account. In communities where the semantic and theological meanings of a frequently performed ritual like the salat are regularly debated, the verses of the prayers remain, year after year, perhaps too meaningful for those who are literate enough to participate in such discourse. What happens to meaning in any given ritual has to be analyzed over time and with respect to its specific users, uses, and histories. In his discussion of “private ritual encounters” and the “general category” of ritual communication, Silverstein asks whether the “‘communication’ authorized and licensed by the ritual [must] be denotation-centered” (2009:272). As I will suggest below, the answer to this question is negative in the experience
of the women that I studied. What emerges in the course of the private performance of the salat is that it’s stipulated poetics do not preclude possibilities for reflexivity.7

There is another sense in which the temporality of the salat needs further contemplation. When one stands to pray, I was told, one does not know where the session will end up. Will the reciter manage to communicate to God and feel close to him?8 Will she be able to muster the necessary concentration? Will she be able to be as honest as possible? I will return to this discussion later in this article. For now, it should be noted that my interlocutors described an efficacious prayer as one that ends with them feeling particularly close to God, having managed to be “honest” with him and having communicated what is on their minds. However, one does not know how any given prayer session will proceed. Some women told me that whenever they start to pray and realize shortly afterwards that their mind has wandered, they “break” their prayer and start over. If they still do not succeed, they will not pray for a few hours, or even a whole day, until they can marshal the necessary concentration.

The Women and Their Religious Activities
The women I spoke to in Tehran are middle class9 and well-educated. Almost half were born and raised in other parts of Iran but have ended up living in the capital. I interviewed about 25 women. Each interview lasted for approximately two hours and I was able to talk to some of the women more than once. I held a number of group discussions as well. I interviewed the women’s Qur’an teacher and attended lessons frequented by a different group of women. Over the years, however, I have been talking to and observing a larger group of Muslim men and women. Therefore, while I mostly rely on the views and statements of these 25 women, I also draw on a larger set of interlocutors and a longer time span. My interlocutors do not comprise a “representative sample” of Iranian Muslim women; however, their approach to following the requirements of their religion is fairly representative of professional, middle class women who have gone to university and pursued economic independence. Their insights are worth analyzing because they challenge our ideas about the possibilities of ritual when performed beyond the public eye and outside a congregational context. With few exceptions, most of these women are in their 60s. Among the older group are women who have known each other for a long time,
bound by kinship ties and longstanding friendships. They are retired now and receive pensions. After finishing high school, some went on to teacher training colleges (for two years) and/or to universities where they specialized in fields such as psychology, literature, and language. They held long-term jobs as high school teachers (mostly in public schools, but also a few in private ones), head mistresses, editors of dictionaries, and other similar posts requiring linguistic and cultural expertise. A few wear a headscarf both inside and outside the house, but most take their scarf off as soon as they enter a private home, whether or not they expect to see unrelated men. Outside the home, covering the hair is obligatory for women under the laws of the Islamic Republic. None wears a head-to-toe veil (chador) except when inside mosques, shrines, and for special gatherings. Most of the women engage in extensive and systematic charity work, which offers them a wide network of friends and acquaintances in several parts of Iran with whose lives they become intimately familiar.

They take a number of classes during the year, the most regular being Qur’an classes. The Qur’an classes are generally year round and one can join at any time. Many are offered inside people’s homes and require a personal introduction. The Qur’an classes that I went to were not publicly advertised and, because political discussions of daily events inevitably came up (though not routinely), the teacher and the students wanted to make sure that those who join will not report on such discussions. The classes are free and teachers rarely accept money. However, students bring sweets, free copies of the Qur’an and other publications, and at times make voluntary payments so that the classes can go on. They start from the first Chapter of the Qur’an and discuss each word and verse, then move on to the next chapter. In any given class, there are at least five or six different editions of the Qur’an with different Persian translations. The teacher reads a verse in Arabic, then its translation, and asks: “What do others have?” Those with different translations then read their versions and a discussion ensues over particular words or verses—are the translations adequate, clear, apt, weak, or misleading? In the long debates that ensue, problems of translation and interpretation merge so that the inadequacy of a word in Persian for a particular one in the original Arabic leads to further considerations that have to do with theological precedence, likelihood, and coherence. There are also weekly poetry classes that most of these women attend. These are classes on Mowlavi (Rumi), Hafiz, and other poets.\textsuperscript{10}
Some of the women in this group come from religious families among whom scholarly knowledge of Islam is highly valued. They learned how to pray and read the Qur’an and other religious texts from family members. It is important to note that, as in other Muslim countries, there are many low cost salat manuals, as well as manuals on other rituals. However, their mere availability does not mean that those who pray actually use them. If the believer is not literate, she cannot read the manuals. If the believer is literate, more often than not, she learns the prayers either at home or from a teacher. Until a few decades ago, instructions about how to pray were parts of books on various religious topics and not separate manuals. These books were sometimes given by (grand)parents or other relatives to children to read and later be tested on. This allowed the parents to “correct” or change what some of the books said. Ultimate authority lay with the parent or relative, not with the book. This is still the case and those who use manuals generally seek another person’s guidance as well. One woman commented that prayer manuals are for “foreigners who convert.” There are probably others, besides converts, who use the manuals, but their general use should not be assumed from their existence on the market (Henkel 2005:492).

How and from whom one learns to pray—whether from family members, at school, from religious figures, or from books and manuals—is important because it has implications for structures of authority and the practice of variability in the performance of salat and other rituals. Those who have learned about their religion from kinship networks see themselves as authorized to engage in variation. There is a great deal of awareness of the hierarchies of religious knowledge. The kind of pedagogical process (Mahmood 2001, 2005) that one experiences—family, friends’ families, teachers, classes, manuals, books, and combinations thereof—can make a fundamental difference both in the ways in which rituals come to be embodied and in the legitimacy of variation and sources of authority. To learn to pray from a kinship network is to learn variability because inevitably there are individual differences that are explicitly commented on and discussed.¹¹ Short manuals and pamphlets on doctrinal matters are produced for those with lower levels of literacy and religious knowledge, and they are designed as teaching tools, hence simplified. They rarely present the possibilities for variation in performing a ritual. The pedagogical process can result in distinct forms of embodiment depending on who (and what) mediates that process.
In addition to praying, the women in this group organize and participate in a variety of religious gatherings. These include *mowludis* (celebrations of the birthdays of the Prophet and other imams) where the exclusively female participants arrive dressed up. At these events, they read from the Qur’an, sing, clap, dance, and recite praise poetry (Torab 1996, 2007; for Pakistan, see Hegland 2003). A mix of classes and generations attend these gatherings. Younger women who become interested in expanding their religious knowledge make friends with the older women present at these ceremonies—facilitating future meetings that enable them to pose questions or read certain texts together. Another kind of gathering which takes place once a month in some homes (its time being decided based on the lunar calendar) is called a *rowzeh*. In a rowzeh, a professional reciter, *rowzeh khan*,12 comes to recite religious songs, verses of the Qur’an, and du’as appropriate to specific occasions. In the homes of some families, rowzehs can turn into literary evenings where, after the rowzeh khan is finished, individuals who are present read their own poetry or choose verses from the poetry and prose of others to move listeners to a debate. The poems or passages do not have to be religious and most often they are not. Literary and political discussions round out the evening. In some homes, rowzehs have separate male and female sections, while in others men and women sit in the same room (see Fischer 2003:100 for a description of a more strictly religious rowzeh).

At times, small groups of close friends (sometimes just two women) get together to recite special prayers specifically designated for Friday evenings—du’as on behalf of themselves or others, for the sick, deceased, and anyone in need. If there are women present who cannot read the verses, they still take part by sitting close and listening (Haeri 2003, Hirschkind 2006)—listening being itself a religious act. Often, the larger gatherings involve cooking and the distribution of special kinds of food and sweets.

Some women organize what is called a *khatmeh an’aam*. The An’aam suura has 165 aya (“verse”) and is said to be special because it is the only one that was revealed to the Prophet all in one moment, unlike other suuras whose “descent” (*nozuul*) occurred at different times. Khatmeh an’aam means finishing the reading of this suura in one *majlis*, or sitting. Ideally, 40 women should gather together and take turns in reading the ayas out loud. In practice, the number of reciters is often lower and each individual recites several verses and then the next person picks up where she left off. It is believed that reading and finishing this suura is appropriate when one...
has made a special request of God. So women who have a “nazr” (“vow”) may organize khatmeh an’aam. Other women believe that one should do the reading before one has any wishes.

For Persian speakers, one fundamental difference between the salat and the various du’a is linguistic. The salat is the word of God and hence always in Arabic, but a du’a can be in either Arabic or Persian. The Arabic du’as are published in prayer books such as Mafaatih al-Janan (“keys to paradise”). This prayer book seems to be the most popular and is available in many editions. It includes prayers written by Shi’ite imams. Note that a few verses of a suura can be used as a du’a. In addition, at the end of the salat, reciters often sit cross-legged and “talk to God in Persian”—this is also du’a. For example, if praying for someone to regain his health or wishing to thank someone for a generous deed they have done, a reciter might say “I did lots of du’a for his health” or simply “I did lots of du’a for her” (barash kheili du’a kardam), meaning “I thanked her in front of God for the great thing that she had done,” i.e., “I prayed for her.”

Having achieved decades of consistency in the discipline of performing the salat, fasting during Ramadan, going to the hajj (“pilgrimage”) when they could, doing charity work, and so on, the women characterize their struggle as learning to get closer to God. This involves learning to communicate with him in more candid and intimate ways—telling him what is in their del (“heart”) and increasing their understanding of various aspects of their religion. In terms of the salat, they talk about their struggle as in part consisting of reaching utmost tamarkoz (“concentration”). It is reasonable to suggest that the particular aims of one’s struggles in (religious) self-formation and the variety of experiences one has while praying, change as one grows older and enters different stages of life. The women I talked to witnessed changes in the political uses of the salat (especially after the revolution of 1979) and the ways in which it found a series of new symbolic meanings depending on the particular configurations of post-revolutionary regimes. In their long religious lives, they have attempted to be pious and, in a sense, one can say that attempts to become increasingly pious are lifelong, meaning that piety can encompass many different struggles. But at this point in time, their specific reasons for the performance of the salat and other rituals are not articulated in terms of piety. Explaining the contents of their struggles, several told me that “one has to learn to become intimate with God,” to which another added, “it is not always easy to be totally honest with God.”
Private Performance of the Salat

Unless there are guests in the house and rooms must be shared at prayer time, the women in this group perform their prayers alone in their rooms. The salat is recited while standing on a sajjadeh (“prayer rug”) which contains the janamaaz (small square or round cloth that includes the prayer stone, mohr) and the tasbiih (“prayer beads”). At times, rose petals or a few jasmine (yaas) flowers are thrown inside the janamaaz. The sajjadeh, janamaaz, and tasbiih are objects to which the women have an emotional attachment. While they may lend their sajjadeh to guests who have come without theirs, the sajjadeh is personal, like an item of clothing. The whole set is wrapped into a bundle and placed carefully on beds or chairs. People avoid sitting on them or throwing clothes on them. Parkin (2000:1) asks whether the spaces in which prayers are performed outside the mosque are considered sacred. I happened to ask some women this question. It seems that there is a ravaayat\(^\text{14}\) that on roozeh qiyamat (“day of judgment”), the particular spot where one has always prayed bears witness that the reciter has in fact been praying. As such, that place can be considered special and meaningful, if not sacred. With some interesting exceptions,\(^\text{15}\) I noticed that the exact place where the women pray never seems to change. Indeed, they often leave the sajjadeh open for the next prayer.

As I mentioned earlier, none of the women in my group pray on a regular basis at the mosque. Even their male relatives pray at home most of the time. In their bedroom at home, they lower the lights, partially draw the curtains, close their doors, and are left alone by others who know they are praying. They whisper their prayers, but the whispering is audible.\(^\text{16}\) People hold off on calling each other at prayer times. In one of several group discussions, I asked whether there are differences between praying at home and at a mosque. One woman said:

There is a big difference. I don’t like praying with a prayer leader (pish-namaaz) at all. It does not put me in the right state of mind. First of all, women can’t even see the prayer leader and so there is the mokabbir who is usually a young boy who says things out loud to help the women know what is going on like “qad qaamat il-salat” so you know that you have to stand up at that point. And then for the noon and afternoon prayer, they don’t even recite them out loud [as opposed to the prayer at dawn] so you don’t hear anything in addition to not seeing anything. They really don’t think about women...
The other women present expressed similar views. However, those who had grown up in cities such as Isfahan and Yazd said that when they were in elementary school, their mother or grandmother used to take them to their local mosques. They loved that experience. The mosques were beautiful and they saw their neighbors there—it was almost like going to a party. At times, as children, they were allowed to stand in front of the older women and lead the salat, but that kind of atmosphere does not exist in mosques any longer. In any case, to better understand the women’s reasons for not praying at mosques, we should remember that praying behind a prayer leader implies a hierarchy of knowledge and spiritual achievement that may dissuade them because the pish-namaaz is not necessarily more accomplished in those realms. One must consider him as at least an equal and “accept” his qualifications. At times, one may disagree with his politics and not pray behind him for that reason. They find praying in public generally less conducive to concentration (with some exceptions)—hence a series of factors make praying in public as a regular activity undesirable.

We should pause here on the possibility of degrees of publicness and privateness in the performance of the salat. At one end of the scale, there is the mass Friday prayer on the grounds of Tehran University that is led by a senior cleric and in which thousands of people participate. It is also broadcast on television inside and outside of Iran. The choice of the “imam jom’eh” (“Friday imam”) is often a political matter and the topics he discusses are rarely just matters of religion. The seating arrangement (before and after the prayer people sit on the ground) is decided on the basis of political rank, though religious rank is also important. Hence, the Friday prayer is at the extreme end of both publicness and politicization. Then there are group prayers in smaller mosques that are not televised. On Fridays, mosques usually have a prayer leader, but on other days they may not necessarily have one for every prayer time. In each city and in each neighborhood, there are more or less important mosques. There are individuals who pray at their local mosque by themselves—in a “favorite corner” in an attempt to create some measure of privacy while enjoying the purity or holiness of the mosque atmosphere. There are also group prayers at home on special occasions, for example, the prayer performed on Id al-Fitr, the end of the month of Ramadan. To celebrate this day, some families gather with friends and pray in the same room. Finally, there is the most private prayer performed in one’s room with no one else present except oneself and God.
The woman quoted above stated that she is not put in the right state of mind when praying behind a pish-namaaz. But she and others had experiences in the mosque where the pish-namaaz was a respected scholar (at times, an elder acquaintance) who had a beautiful voice, recited the verses with a melody, and guided them towards a connection with God. A crowd is not necessarily antithetical to the possibility of experiencing transcendence, as Sufi gatherings clearly demonstrate. The importance of the style of the delivery of verses along with the beauty of the voice are particularly commented on with respect to the azaan, the call to prayer. There are a few famous azaan reciters, such as the late Mu’azzin Zadeh Ardebili, whose voice continues to be heard everyday on radio and television as well as in some mosques. In fact, these calls to prayer may begin the process of mediating the relationship that the worshipper hopes to build to the divine during prayer. Hence, depending on one’s relationship to a pish-namaaz, the scale of the public space, and whether one is being watched by multiple publics while praying, the public/private dichotomy loses its starkness and becomes mediated by a variety of factors. If this argument is tenable, then one cannot characterize every prayer outside the home as “public” tout court. The reciter standing in a favorite corner in a mosque and praying by herself probably has a different experience from one who prays in the front row of televised Friday prayers. In order to understand this, we need more ethnographies of the experience of the salat under distinct conditions. Perhaps, what we can learn from Sufi gatherings is that privateness and concentration are related to each other or are similar states.

After the revolution of 1979, there emerged a reflexive turn in Iranian society—a still continuing interest in understanding “ourselves” better. The revolution brought about a great desire to understand Iranian identity, culture, history, and religion. This reflexive turn has contributed to debates on a variety of matters, chief among them religion (see also Adelkhah 2000). The large number and kinds of mostly informal classes on different aspects of religion and literature that are offered is a direct reflection of this change in Iranian society. Many, though not all, of the women I spoke to in the course of my fieldwork could manage to live abroad, but they do not want to leave Iran. What seems to be providing great meaning to their lives is precisely this kind of searching stance vis-à-vis their religion. Their regular gatherings, charitable activities, and the many classes that they attend cannot be characterized as belonging to a strictly private sphere.
These women consider themselves to be Muslims whose religion is at the center of their lives, private and public. It is a kind of religious devotion that seeks debates, and of course one of those debates revolves around the experience of living under a government that identifies itself as Islamic. They do not characterize their religious practices as political opposition. At the same time, they are critical about certain sanctioned approaches that they come across in the public square and the public sphere. There are religious scholars that have television and radio programs representing views and practices that are congruent with those of the women in this group. Hence, the public sphere is not uniformly discounted. The religiosity of the more political public figures is often displayed in the media, and this provides occasion for spontaneous commenting. The television broadcast of the Friday prayer elicits a variety of comments, always said with a shaking of the head along with surprise, that you can pray all your life without becoming a “true Muslim.” Some routinely assert that while praying is a necessary condition for becoming a true Muslim, it is not sufficient, as the examples on television demonstrate daily. Among other things, this highly visible religiosity gives greater currency to reams of poetry that express dismay against outward displays of piety. Those who suddenly “jump up” and pray in a gathering as soon as they hear the call to prayer are not automatically regarded as more pious than those who do not (Deeb 2006, Parkin 2000). In fact, they often elicit comments to the contrary, being judged as “insincere.” Another difference that the women see between themselves and the public figures shown praying on television is that they believe that “one prays for oneself, not for God.” That is to say that God wants people to pray so that they become better human beings, stay away from lies, learn to be more compassionate and less hypocritical, and so on. But he “does not need our prayers.” The implication is that if people prayed for themselves then prayer would not be merely a matter of doing “dolla raast” (mindless bending and standing up)—a reference to the bodily positions one assumes in the course of the salat. Dolla raast is the expression used to refer to the very opposite of mindful, sincere salat. Thus while it is true that the state has appropriated, and to a large degree co-opted, the public sphere to conform to only certain kinds of practices and interpretations of Islam, the large number of women—and men—who pray outside the mosque, take part in debates, and exchange readings, CDs, and cassettes in various “private” gatherings are also engaged in a certain kind of appropriation, albeit one less visible.
Al-Fatiha Does Not Always Mean the Same Thing

I return now to a more detailed discussion of formality, repetition, rigidity, and meaning. All these terms should be put in quotation marks to call attention to the fact that different scholars mean different things by them and see distinct implications. Does formality necessarily imply rigidity and absence of the possibility for creativity? Does repetition mean a gradual loss of (propositional) meaning? Among the group of women with whom I carried out my fieldwork, what appears to take place over time is that while the forms of the verses—the words that make them up—remain unchanged (they are God’s chosen words after all), their meanings proliferate. At different times, some meanings come to dominate, others recede and become less important, and still others may come to be rejected. There are the semantic meanings and theological interpretations of the verses. There are also meanings that emerge as a result of the personal matters conveyed to God while uttering any given suura. And in addition, some suuras and verses acquire resonances and associations over time with people, places, experiences, and events.

Years of reciting the same suuras—the practice of reciting them five times a day, everyday, for decades—enables these women to tell God what is on their mind while enunciating the words of the suuras. That is to say, that they use God’s chosen words to tell him what they want to share: requests, gratitude, questions, anxieties, or remembrance of a person who is ill or has passed away. To make sure that I was grasping what one interviewee was explaining to me, I asked her: “so you are saying that in reciting the same suura, you say different things to God?” She replied rather emphatically and in a louder voice: “you say a thousand things to God. Over the course of a day and throughout your life there is so much that comes up that you want to tell him.” This was explained to me repeatedly by my interlocutors—that “things happen,” “things come up,” and you need to talk to God about them.

Many of my conversations began with variations on the following questions: Do you feel that you are communicating with God when you pray? In what ways are you communicating if you are not choosing the words? The women in this group know the meanings of the words in the suuras and know what the suuras are about so that while they are reciting them, they understand what they are saying. This is not necessarily the case with less educated Persian and other non-Arabic speaking Muslims. Even among Arab Muslims, a certain level of effort, repetition, and education is required
for them, as the prayers are in *Classical* Arabic (Haeri 2003). I was told that the prayers are indeed acts of communication with God:

What else am I doing? Of course I am communicating with God but I tell him different things depending on what is happening in my life. I do not immediately begin to pray as soon as I stand on my sajjadeh. I pause and gather my thoughts. I do my *niyyat* and *takbir*. Then I try to concentrate on each word that I am saying and while doing that I am also telling God what I need, what I am afraid of, I ask for guidance. Al-Hamd [al-Fatiha] does not always have the same meaning.

I think her last assertion bears repetition: that the most repeated chapter of the Qu’ran “does not always have the same meaning.” It is in part the implications of this view that I try to elucidate. Another woman, echoing the point that this suura does not always mean the same thing, offered the following example: “today, the phrase ‘those who have gone astray’ for me means Mubarak [former President of Egypt], tomorrow it may be someone else.”

Analyses of the consequences of repetition and formulaic language are based on the assumption that linguistically, nothing else is happening: the reciter simply repeats the formal language each time the ritual is performed. This model of ritual is quite unlike the experiences of these women. If we conceive of the salat as a speech event that is multi-functional, then what opens up before us is the simultaneity of several functions that potentially make any given prayer efficacious to various degrees. There is, for example, a metapragmatic focus on the pronunciation of each word (Silverstein 1993, Caton 1993)—taking care to pronounce them carefully. The resonances of the ways others pronounce them are also present at times. One woman told me, “I cannot perform the morning [dawn] prayer without hearing my father’s voice.” Another said that she prays out loud because hearing her own voice helps her concentrate better and because that is how her father prayed. He was familiar with the modes of Classical Persian music and he almost *sang* the verses. In regards to what she shares with God, the reciter speaks of her anxieties, poses questions, or makes requests. Hence, there is not simply a repetition—a re-production of a copy of what has been recited before. These resonances, memories, and associations are part and parcel of what we call, almost always rather vaguely, “the meaning” of a ritual.
There is an equally compelling reason for conceptualizing the performance of the salat as a speech event: each recitation is, in the words of Du Bois, a meeting between the “ritual text” and the “voice of the individual who enacts it”—“the encounter of a seemingly timeless text with the unique personal voice of its present performer calls into question some of our most basic assumptions about the separation between the worlds of ritual and ordinary discourse” (2009:317). Du Bois’ analysis is of particular relevance to the concerns of this article because he examines an instance of a “ritual in solitude.” To these assumptions about ritual and ordinary discourse, we might add one that presumes a necessary forfeiture of agency and intentionality in any ritual performance. In her review of the ways in which the concept of formality has been employed by anthropologists, Irvine identifies four uses and highlights the implicit but prevalent assumption that formality is equated with rigidity and is timelessly resistant to change:

But formalization can be thought inimical to change only if one has a certain view of the social system to which formal occasions call attention—a view that the social system is monolithic, that the structure of a society prevents its members from conceiving of alternatives, and that all members of society have exactly identical conceptions of the social order. (Irvine 2001:202)

We assume that those who pray are a monolithic group who are “prevented from conceiving alternatives.” And we further assume that the individuals’ particular attributes and dispositions do not make any difference to the form and content of the ritual. Yet, even when a ritual entails the repetition of formulaic verses, it still makes a difference whether she is young or old, literate or illiterate, has knowledge of Arabic or not, is aware or unaware of theological debates, has achieved various degrees of devotion and intimacy with God or not, and what she is going through at any particular moment. The question is what happens to a set of conventions, and to their forms and contents, as enacted by different groups of people throughout their lifetimes and under different social and political conditions. Among this group of women, variation and creativity are precisely what have rendered the salat of continuous relevance to their daily lives. Although speaking of Christianity and the oral reading of the Bible, what Du Bois (2009) finds in terms of the “semiotic openness” of scripture
resonates with my observations of the salat as performed by these women as well as with their readings of the Qur'an.

There was a general surprise almost every time I asked the question about communicating with God: “Well I am not choosing the words of the suura but I concentrate on pronouncing them well, not hurrying through them, and I try to learn to tell God what I want to.” Specifically, one of the women gave the following example to explain what is happening in her prayers (at least at times) when she is reciting al-Hamd (al-Fatiha). She said:

In the first four ayas, you are praising God and God is in the third person—you feel that he is rather far from you.

1. In the Name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful
2. All Praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds
3. The Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful
4. Sovereign of the Day of Resurrection
But suddenly in the next verse you address God directly and you feel closer to him, you say:

5. It is You we Worship and You we Ask for Help
These you say very slowly and calmly because now you have reached a station (jaygaah)\textsuperscript{24} where you are talking to God directly, you are addressing him. Here you are saying that I seek your aid. Only yours. Now you say what it is you want, what is in your del (heart). You seek his aid on behalf of yourself, say if your child is sick, or on behalf of a friend who needs help...

Although I had heard previously that “you tell God what is on your mind” while enunciating the words of the suura, this was the first time someone offered such a meticulous and detailed description of how that can happen. Perhaps the simultaneity is possible precisely because these words are utterly familiar to the reciter. Having told God what the reciter has in mind, she went on:

Then, at this point, while you are still addressing God directly, you go on to say:

6. Guide us to the Straight Path
7. The Path of Those you have Blessed, not Those who Have Provoked Your Anger and Those who Have Gone Astray.
Now this is the path of God but you don’t know exactly what that means, does that just mean you pray and you fast? One constantly asks God and oneself this question: What path is that? What is it you have to do to be on that path?

In her experience, although for years she repeated the words of this suura over and over, they have neither “drifted out of meaning” nor become semantically impoverished or “fetid” (Bloch 1975; see also Bowen 1989 and Keane 1997a for a critique). On the contrary, they have served as vehicles for intimate conversation with God—telling him of concerns and worries and posing questions. My interlocutor continued:

There is a certain answer to that: it says the path of those that you have blessed. But who are the ones God has blessed? I think it is those that God never leaves alone, never forgets. We ask God not to leave us to ourselves even for a second because without that overseeing, we would be lost, be without protection. So even if we can’t or don’t know what it means to be “blessed,” we ask of God simply to not forget us.

It would not be reasonable to claim that everyone who prays achieves this kind of “intimacy” with God or arrives at this station, especially for those who have just started praying. But such descriptions of what sometimes happens during the prayer for some people challenge received notions of the linkage between authorship, agency, and formal language. I asked whether there could be a certain contradiction between concentrating on the words of the prayer on the one hand, and then also telling God other matters. No one saw this as a contradiction. The two are not separate communicative acts—they are intertwined. In fact, they pointed out that they find the higher their level of tamarkoz (“concentration”), the better they are able to tell God what they want.

I argue that, precisely because praying involves more than simple repetition, in time repetition actually overcomes the formality. Formality does not act to block a multiplicity of meanings from emerging. Through repetition, the form becomes, to various degrees and at different times, a vehicle for conveying many different meanings. This seems to be a move away from concentrating on the purely denotational meaning of the verses. In this way, the reciter creates a presence in the words of the prayer and the
prayer transforms into a space of co-presence. In using God’s words to tell him what the reciter wants, she comes to co-exist with the divine in the very words that belong to him. It is easier to see that the act of repetition allows the repeater a presence if we imagine the consequences of the repetition of, for example, playing a musical instrument. A cello concerto played over and over, everyday, for years does not become “rote.” The musical piece is not repeated, but practiced. I suggest that the salat is practiced everyday, not always simply repeated. Perhaps, the co-presence that can be achieved through practice is similar to Alter’s analysis that repetition in the Hebrew Bible expresses the “inescapable tension between human freedom and divine historical plan” (2011:141). One could argue that the intentionality of the reciter does not reside merely in the ability to choose the words of the prayer, but in the fact that she comes to breathe new meanings into the same words. As Culler points out, meaning is “context bound but context is boundless” (Culler 1983:123).

In my interpretation that these women at times reach a co-presence with God in the space of the prayer, I am inspired by Michel de Certeau’s discussion of voice as being a “presence in the signifier” (1988:137). I am not suggesting that the reciter, in fact, arrives at a voice co-existing with God’s but that she creates a co-presence. She is present in the very words that belong to God because through their utterance she tells God what she wants to. And it is this co-presence that makes her feel that a particular prayer session was so much deeper, better, and more efficacious than others. Speaking of Christian Europe, de Certeau states:

The sacred text is a voice, it teaches…it is the advent of a “meaning” (un “vouloir-dire”) on the part of a God who expects the reader (in reality, the listener) to have a “desire to hear and understand” (un “vouloir-entendre”) on which access to truth depends. (1988:137)

He goes on to argue that this voice “no longer reaches us” and explains his position by analyzing the dominance of writing in the last few centuries and the “gigantic effort of ‘modern’ societies to redefine themselves without that voice” (1988:137). In the case of Persian speaking Muslims who pray, that voice—still in its original Classical Arabic and not having undergone “corruptions” through repeated translations—seems to reach the reciters. Those who pray do have a vouloir-entendre—they have a desire to hear and understand, but at the same time
there is a vouloir-dire in which God is not the only one who speaks and creates meaning. This is a vouloir-dire that is shared between God and those who pray. I suggest that in repetition the actor achieves a certain presence in the very form of what she is repeating. Hence repetition as practice offers the possibility of creativity—the possibility of undermining the rigidity and formality that form imposes. Speaking of medieval monks, Asad states that the “proper performance of the liturgy is regarded not only as integral to the ascetic life but also as one of the ‘instruments’ of the monk’s ‘spiritual craft,’ which he must acquire by practice” (1993:62-63). It would not be an exaggeration to say that for these women the practice of the salat is in fact a “spiritual craft” at which they hope to become better in the course of their lives. It seems to me that we would conceptualize the salat differently if we thought of it as practice rather than as repetition. It is, of course, possible that for some the experience of repetition in prayer does render the ritual “mindless.” But those I spoke to saw the repetitive nature of the ritual as a challenge and an opportunity, through practice, to achieve a more perfect communication with God. In his critique of views of formalization, Asad states that “Increasing formalization [of speech and behavior in the monastic program] did not signify increasing subordination: on the contrary, those less adept in the performance of prescribed forms were placed under the authority of the more adept” (1993:135).

The semiotic ideologies underlying the ways in which different religious communities distinguish between spontaneous prayers and formulaic ones—that is, prayers “coming from the heart” as opposed to ones that are already formulated by others—have been discussed by a number of scholars (Keane 2007b, Bialecki 2011, Mahmood 2005, Engelke 2007, Targoff 2001). In the literature on the anthropology of Christianity (Cannell 2007), this discussion has proved highly productive and led to a number of interesting formulations. A full treatment of how the ethnographic material presented so far might contribute to this debate is outside the scope of the present article, particularly because the semiotic ideologies that are local to the Iranian context need a lengthy discussion. I would, however, like to relate my formulation of co-presence as discussed above to the ways in which sincerity is seen as predicated on assuming an interior state (Keane 2007b:316, Bialecki 2011:682).

Keane argues that the “concept of sincerity thus seems to assume a clear distinction between words and thought, as parallel discourses
(interior and exterior) such that they either could or could not match up” (2007b:316). Recall that in the case of the salat, the words are those of God’s. While one’s own words may or may not match one’s thoughts, in the case of God’s words, the challenge to utter them with sincerity and pure intentions is one that is explicitly articulated by these women as part of their struggle. What does it mean to utter God’s words with sincerity? If sincerity is an inner state but the words do not spring from it, what then is entailed for Muslims in performing the salat? It seems to me that a part of the ethical cultivation of these women is the interiorization of the word of God and its utterance, each time, with full concentration and pure intention. This struggle entails both arriving at a disciplined disposition in relation to the salat (Mahmood 2005) and simultaneously arriving at an interiority that succeeds in creating a co-presence in the words that belong to God.

**Practice, Iteration, and Agency**

As I have argued, practice may be a more suitable concept for the performance of the salat (at least for the women in this group) and perhaps for other rituals because it underlines the continuous honing of skills, sentiments, and goals such as intimacy. It highlights the possibility that at each turn, the performer may arrive at a new understanding, a different way of making connection with God, of concentrating, finding new things to say, using a chapter of the Qur’an that she had never recited before, and so on. I find a similarity here between the idea of practice and that of iteration as explored by Derrida (1985). They both look back but have implications for what is to come, so they also look forward. There is, in a repeated act, a trace, a memory, but at the same time, each iteration of the act is open. Arguing against Searle that a citation or use must be “serious” rather than in jest, Derrida claimed that on the one hand, the serious could be a special case of that which is acted rather than the opposite. And on the other, that each iteration is open to new meanings because each time, the citation is (re)contextualized. While Derrida does not deny that a convention must be recognized for it to be a convention (or a performative), he calls attention to the fact that the recognizability does not render the meanings of the convention as closed to further possibilities. The insight captured by the openness of iteration seems to me to be similar to the conceptualization of the salat as practice rather than repetition.
As applied to rituals, each iteration might accomplish the goal of the ritual differently. For example, the salat is supposed to be an act of “submission” to God but each submission might be a different experience. We do not know the contents of any given submission—what do people experience in the acts of submission? Butler states that “an account of iterability of the subject...shows how agency may well consist in opposing and transforming the social terms by which it is spawned” (1997:29 as quoted in Mahmood 2005:21). Mahmood points out that Butler’s conceptualization of agency “tends to focus on those operations of power that resignify and subvert norms” (2005:21). In other words, we read “agency primarily in terms of resistance” (2005:23). Mahmood goes on to argue that there is agency also in “ethical self-formation” (2005:32)—in acts that would be regarded as submission rather than resistance. This is a significant observation and Mahmood argues that the submission/resistance dichotomy needs to be re-thought. What I would add is that “submission” as a practice of ethical self-formation is iterable, and may be accomplished differently each time and over time. Submission in public or private, at age 18 or age 70, in sickness and in health, in revolutionary contexts or outside of them can span many different experiences. What I have described in terms of the experiences of the women in my group cannot be characterized as either submission or resistance. We need non-binary conceptualizations and a wider vocabulary for what individuals are doing when they follow the requirements of their religion. Perhaps taking into account sets of simultaneous norms—norms that are often contested by different groups—would lead us to that wider conceptualization.

Conclusion
The salat is both a public and a private ritual. In Islamic terms, it is an ibaadat that is meant to put the believer in the thought of God regardless of place and the number of people it is performed with. What individuals experience in performing it under a variety of circumstances, alone, together, in times of peace and quiet or otherwise, is in need of further ethnography. One salat session might be entirely different from another. The experiences of these women can hardly be captured in any binaries of doctrine or practice. The text of the salat, being comprised of suuras from the Qur’an, can be characterized as “formal” in several senses. However, the repetition of these forms brings about a familiarity that in time undermines their
formality. There is an emergence and a proliferation of meanings rather than a fading of it: denotational, theological, personal experiential (as memories of persons and events), and personal interpretive. Any given verse can have indexical significance that might correspond to the particularities of the life of the reciter in the moment of the performance. And as those particularities change, the indexical significance can change as well. The stipulated poetics of the salat do not prevent thematic choices of non-standard suuras or the communication of questions and anxieties to God. In fact, it is often these very possibilities that give moral and emotional force to the salat. The struggle to achieve efficacy is an on-going one. Reciters strive to arrive at a station where they are able to create a presence in the words of the prayer and achieve a certain companionship with the divine.

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Endnotes:
1For Persian speakers, the word is namaaz but the term salat is more familiar to anthropologists, hence my choice to use salat (its second vowel is long: salaat).
2In English, this term is often translated into “worship.” I avoid this term because I do not find it a good translation for ibaadat. My interlocutors rarely use this term. This might be because the translation of “worship” into Persian is a verb that brings to mind most readily idolatry—the verb is parastidan (infinitival form). The ta marbuuta of Arabic borrowings is pronounced in Persian, hence rak’at and ibaadat; the latter term has a pharyngeal ‘ain at the beginning but this turns into a glottal stop in Persian. I only indicate it when it occurs in the middle of a word.
3Parkin states that prayers outside the mosque are “fragmented” and “suspicious,” adding: “Mosque-based prayers denote a large measure of Islamic piety while those outside the mosque provoke questions: was there no choice but to pray away from a mosque...” (2000:1). While this might be the case in the community Parkin studies, it should not be generalized to views of “Islamic piety.” What is meant by “fragmented” and “suspicious” remains unexplained. One could get a general agreement among Muslim Iranians that performing Friday prayers at the mosque (for men) accrues more sawab (“reward”) in the eyes of God, but no one that I spoke to would say that praying outside the mosque is in any way “less pious.” Chapter 62, verse 9 of the Qur’an says to believers to leave their shops and go to the mosque to pray on Fridays when they hear the call to prayer to remember Allah. This is followed by the verse “That is better for you, if you only knew.” Two verses further (62:11) we read about what it is that is “better”: “But when they saw a diversion or transaction [O Muhammad], they rushed to it and left you standing. Say, ‘What is with Allah is better than diversion and than a transaction, and Allah is the best of Providers.’” So what is better is to pray when it is time to do so and “be with Allah.” The “better” is not referring to praying in the mosque, at least not exclusively (www.quran.com).
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4I hasten to add that we also do not know the answers to these questions for public prayer. In other words, we do not know about the experience of individuals while praying in public, beyond the symbolic and political meanings that public prayers might convey in some contexts.

5The subject of qonuut brought up mention of Sunni practices—a very rare topic in the many discussions that I have had. I was told by several that Sunnis do not include qonuut in their prayer. This was not a criticism but, as they saw it, a fact. As it turns out, some Sunnis do, but perhaps most do not. The fact that these women rarely discussed sectarian differences might be because Sunnis in Iran are a minority and practically any statement about them can feed into unforeseen but feared sectarian rifts. Some go out of their way to make positive statements. The Qur’an teacher told me that he prefers the body posture of Sunnis in prayer and so he stands to pray like them. Having said that, I do not want to imply that the experiences and views I describe here have nothing to do with the fact that these women are Shi’ites. When we have comparable studies of private prayer among Sunnis, we would be in a position to tease out differences that stem from Shi’ite/Sunni doctrinal differences.

6Accessed from http://www.almodarresi.com/Persian/lbook/42/pl0tx6xz.htm on September 25, 2010. There are many websites that discuss the qonuut.

7I am stealing “stipulated poetics” from Michael Silverstein.

8Persian does not have gender in third person singular—there is no “he” or “she.” Hence God is never referred to as “he.”

9However, they do not all live at the same level of comfort. Some are better off than others. Indeed, a few have deep financial worries. What they have more in common is the social class milieu in which they grew up and their levels of education.

10At times, weekly classes are offered in neighborhood farhang-sara (“Cultural Centers”) and if the teacher proves popular, they become events with full houses, Q and A, and tea and sweets served later. Somewhat more frequent are the classes that are organized inside people’s homes. The pattern is that someone finds out (or shares with others) that a friend/acquaintance is particularly knowledgeable about a poet. This person is then asked to offer classes. These are often at least two hours long and go on for months, rotating in being hosted in different members’ homes. Poetry and prayer have been longtime neighbors in Iran. An early exploration of the crossings between the two among Bedouins in Egypt is Abu-Lughod’s (1986) Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society.

11One hears many stories such as “my grandmother told me ‘I like to say sobhan allah three times when I go to sujuud but your grandfather preferred ya latif…”’ and so on.

12To organize a rowzeh once a month, a family must have some means at its disposal. At a minimum, the rowzeh khan must be paid various sums depending on how professional he is. The “khan” in this term comes from the Persian verb khandan, “to read, recite, sing.”

13Among Muslims whose mother tongues are not genealogically related to Arabic, the semiotic ideologies about Arabic and the local languages show some interesting and perhaps expected similarities (see Bowen 1993:82-87).

14When there are certain ideas—stories (ravaayaat, pl.)—that people are unwilling or unable to give the status of hadis (Classical Arabic hadith, the acts and words of the Prophet Mohammad) to (whether belonging to the Prophet or Shi’ite Imams), they use the rather non-committal term “ravaayat,” thereby also implying that perhaps this is just a superstition. From Arabic r-w-y, “to narrate,” and rawaaya, “a story.” Note that hadis can also mean a story.

15A few women told me that they do change the place of their prayers, depending on where there is natural light, a better breeze, bigger space, and so on.

16In Cairo, when I was present during the prayers of my women friends, I could not hear anything at all. I could see their lips moving, but did not hear any sound.

17The women in this group believe that women are equal to men in religious knowledge and capacities for leadership, similar to the groups of Muslim and Jewish women that Lahav (2009) spoke with on limitations to religious leadership.

18See Torab 2007:148 for a description of ambivalence towards the pish-namaaz as discussed among a group of women with lower levels of literacy than the group discussed in this article.

19There are a series of hadis in which the Prophet underlines full concentration as the most important aspect of the performance of salat. For example, in one hadis, the Prophet says: “two rak’ats that are accompanied by active thought and concentration are better than a whole night of praying when one’s heart is playful and uninvolved” (as cited in Khomeini 1943).
See also Deeb 2006:105 on group prayers among Shi’ites in al-Dahiyya, Lebanon.

But even those who do not know what the words of the suuras mean, learn, for example, that in al-Fatihah, one is praising God. Still the question of what it means to “understand” something like a suura has not received adequate attention.

Niyyat (Arabic niyya) means “intention.” It is necessary to do niyyat in the performance of the salat. One concentrates, discarding all other thoughts, on the prayer and says that she will perform, for example, two prayer cycles for the dawn prayer waa‘ijib qurbatan ilallah, “to be close to God, or as God has asked,” followed by “allaho akbar.”

An educated middle class man in his 50s told me that when he was in the last year of high school and had difficult exams, he would recite one of the salat prayers while walking to school. He said this alleviated his anxiety.

There is a great deal of writing on the idea of stations that one may reach in practicing the salat in the course of a lifetime. Many theologians have written about stations in their “asraar il-salat” (“secrets of the salat”), including Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. In his Adabu Salat, Ayatollah Khomeini discusses various subjects, including stations of the salat, covering topics that have to do with ritual purity, the clothes one must wear, and moving on to the spiritual stations, and the particular understandings that the one who prays should hope to arrive at. In the second chapter of Adabu Salat entitled “The Stages of the Stations of the People of Suluk,” he begins with this passage:

Know that there are for the people of suluk [journey], in this station (i.e., paying attention to the humility of servitude and the Glory of His Lordship) and other stations, countless stages and degrees, only to a few of which we can generally refer, since comprehensively knowing all their aspects and counting all the stages are beyond the capacity of this humble creature: “The ways to Allah are as numerous as the breaths of the creatures.” (Khomeini 1943:82)

The last statement, in bold in the original, is a reference to a hadis. I thank Sylvain Perdigon for calling my attention to the French translation of Ayatollah Khomeini’s original book.

In French, to practice an instrument is “répéter” and each practice is a “répétition.”

This is similar to Du Bois’ definition of voice as being present when the speaker invests a text with his “stance” (2009:324), but the two are not the same. To be present in the signifier, the reciter can give each signifier a “new” meaning, whereas to have a stance in uttering a signifier, it must be audible to be analyzed as a stance.

Tambiah makes a similar point about the influence of writing in his Culture, Thought and Social Action (1985:25-26).

Without further explanation he also speaks of “textual corruption and the avatars of history” (1988:137).

There are in fact tens of translations of the Qur’an into Persian. But these have not become the Qur’an itself. They are read and consulted, but in order to perform a religious duty one must read the Qur’an in its original language.

Some women discuss the fact that they go through periods where they are not satisfied with their praying.

I have argued elsewhere that in communities where the language of the divine book is considered God’s word and sacred, reciters are the “custodians” of that language and not its “owners.” This distinction has implications for viewing languages like Classical Arabic or Biblical Hebrew as exhibiting non-arbitrariness (Haeri 2003:13-21). I think addressing how “sincerity” figures into language use in such communities might offer interesting insights, in particular with respect to implicit separations of aesthetics and conventions from what comes to be considered as sincere linguistic practices. I addressed this question in a presentation at the American Anthropological Association’s meetings (November 14, 2012) in a paper entitled “The Words of Others: Sincerity, Prayer and Poetry.

References:


The Private Performance of Salat Prayers: Repetition, Time, and Meaning

[**Keywords:** Islam, ritual, prayer, women, language, Iran]

Islamic prayer rituals are performed by individuals in private settings, often in a repetitive manner. The time spent in prayer and the implicit meaning behind these performances are significant aspects of Islamic devotion. This study explores the role of repetition and time in the private performance of salat prayers, highlighting the cultural and religious significance of these practices in Iran. The research delves into the psychological and spiritual implications of these actions, providing insights into the profound impact of private rituals in Islamic practice.