Akif Tahiiev

The Cinematic Face of the Sacred in Contemporary Shiʿi Visual Culture on Instagram

Abstract

This article explores the circulation of cinematic and televisual images of sacred Shiʿi figures on Instagram, examining how digital media shape devotional practice, memory, and collective identity. Using the example of Mukhtār al-Thaqafī's portrayal in the TV series Mokhtarnameh and that of other figures such as ʿAbbās b. ʿAlī and Imām ʿAlī, it traces the movement of cinematic faces from screen to social media, highlighting their function as mnemonic placeholders and affective anchors. Drawing on theories of collective memory, remediation, and premediation, the study argues that Instagram edits, video montages, and fan-generated content constitute "rememory" practices, reactivating sacred history through multimodal engagement. The article also examines tensions between clerical authority and popular devotional creativity, generational differences in visual religiosity, and the emergence of digital piety as an everyday practice. Ultimately, it demonstrates how contemporary Shiʿi audiences negotiate, circulate, and experience sacred history in a networked digital environment in which screens are transformed into sites of devotion, memory, and communal belonging.

Keywords

Digital Islam, Digital Historiography, Memory, Digital Piety, Shiʿism, Social Media, Fan Edits, Instagram

Biography

Akif Tahiiev is Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Institute for the Study of Islamic Culture and Religion at Goethe University Frankfurt. Previously he was Research and Teaching Assistant at the Department of Human Rights and Legal Methodology, Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, Kharkiv, Ukraine, and Research Fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity (Göttingen), the University of Vienna, and the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM Vienna). His research interests include Shia Islam, digital religion, Islam in Europe (especially Eastern Europe), minorities, and Islamic law.

DOI 10.25364/05.12:2026.2.4



Fig. 1: Poster announcing the *majlis* "Mukhtar Nama" by Syed Akbar Mehdi Jaffery in Hyderabad, India. Photo taken on 27 August 2025 by the author.

Introduction

On 27 August 2025, near one of the numerous *imāmbārgāhs*[1] in Hyderabad, India, I noticed a poster (fig. 1) announcing an upcoming *majlis*[2] entitled *Mukhtar Nama* (The Story/Chronicle of Mukhtār). The event, scheduled for the 1st and 5th of Rabīʿ al-Awwal, was to be addressed by Maulana Syed Akbar Mehdi Jaffery, a preacher well-known for his interest in the figure of Mukhtār al-Thaqafī, a revolutionary and the man remembered in Shiʿi historical imagination as the avenger of Imām Ḥusayn's killing.[3]

1 *Imāmbārgāhs* (also written *imambargahs*) are congregation halls or religious buildings used primarily by Shiʿa Muslims for gatherings, especially during the commemoration of Muḥarram and other events related to the remembrance of Imām Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī and the martyrs of Karbalāʾ. These spaces function as centers for *majālis*, recitations, sermons, and community activities.

2 In the context of Shiʿi Islam, *majlis* (plural: *majālis*) refers to a religious gathering convened to commemorate and reflect upon the martyrdom of Imām Ḥusayn and the events of Karbalāʾ, by extension, the term is also used to denote the sermon or oration (often delivered by a khaṭīb or ẓākir) that forms the centerpiece of such a gathering. These assemblies, which may include sermons, elegies *(marṣīyā)*, recitations, and acts of mourning, serve as central spaces for expressing communal grief, transmitting religious knowledge, and reinforcing Shiʿi identity and collective memory.

3 In Islamic studies, the figure of Mukhtār al-Thaqafī is considerably more complex and contested. His legacy is marked by significant theological and historical controversy,

At first glance, the poster seemed unremarkable. Its presence within Hyderabad's public devotional spaces is consistent with broader dynamics of Shiʿi performative and visual culture in urban India (as documented by Epsita Halder[4]). Also, the month of Rabīʿ al-Awwal marks the final days of the mourning season in Hyderabad, a city known for its extended mourning period – two months and eight days of *majālis* beginning on the first of Muḥarram. Yet one detail on the poster stood out. Alongside the preacher's portrait appeared a second image: a bearded man in battle attire, identified as Mukhtār himself. Mukhtār lived in the first century AH / seventh century CE, and no historical likenesses exist. The image was, in fact, a promotional still of the Iranian actor Fariborz Arabniya, who played Mukhtār in the celebrated television series Mokhtarnameh (The Book of Mokhtar, IRIB, IR 2010–2011).

This juxtaposition was immediately familiar. As part of my ongoing research project entitled "Images of Early Shi'a History in the Digital Spaces", I conduct digital ethnography and observe a range of Instagram accounts related to Shiʿi devotional content and its historical (re)interpretations. In the course of this fieldwork,[5] I have encountered numerous similar visualizations depicting historical figures, such as ʿAbbās b. ʿAlī[6] from Ḥusayn, Who Said No (Rastākhīz: Rooze Rastākhīz, Ahmad Reza Darvish, IR 2014) and Imām ʿAlī[7] from The Lady of Heaven (Eli King, UK 2021). As examples for this article, I have selected two Instagram posts featuring ʿAbbās[8] and two featuring ʿAlī.[9] These posts are not a representative sample in a strict

encompassing questions about his religious authority, his claims to Imāmate, and the legitimacy of his methods. See, for further discussion, Inloes 2009.

4 Halder 2019, 59.

5 Published as Tahiiev 2026a.

6 Abū al-Faḍl ʿAbbās ibn ʿAlī was the half-brother of Imām Ḥusayn, son of ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib. He is revered as the standard-bearer of Ḥusayn's army and a symbol of loyalty, courage, and self-sacrifice during the Battle of Karbalāʾ (680 CE). His refusal to drink water from the Euphrates while his companions were thirsty and his defence of Ḥusayn's camp play important roles in Shiʿi narratives of devotion and martyrdom.

7 Imām ʿAlī was the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muḥammad and father of Imāms Hasan and Ḥusayn. He is regarded by Shiʿi Muslims as the first Imām and rightful successor to the Prophet. He is venerated for his wisdom, justice, and spiritual authority, embodying the ideal of divine leadership.

8 For ʿAbbās: Instagram posts by abas_oficial, https://www.instagram.com/p/DNYarFZI-2Oz/ and halaleditor, https://www.instagram.com/p/DMxWlr7sQ2e/ [both accessed 13 September 2026].

9 For ʿAlī: Instagram posts by s.vsn_, https://www.instagram.com/p/Db-VsbQt7lS/ and

methodological sense, but they are illustrative of a devotional form observable across numerous accounts: short videos or image edits accompanied by lamentation, verses, or sometimes even secular music and accumulating hundreds of comments filled with invocations like *Salām yā Abā al-Faḍl* (Peace be upon you, O Abā al-Faḍl), *Yā ʿAbbās"*(O ʿAbbās), *Labbayka yā ʿAlī* (Here I am, O ʿAlī / At your service, O ʿAlī).[10]

Such imagery encapsulates a wider transformation unfolding within contemporary Shiʿi visual culture: the increasing circulation of cinematic faces – actors from religious films and television series – as icons of sacred history. While figural depictions of the Prophet's family and other revered personalities have long existed within Shiʿism, what is new is the media genealogy of these images. Sacred figures are no longer rendered through idealized or anonymous devotional art, but are now embodied through recognizable actors, whose performances and visages become repositories of memory and devotion across social-media platforms, especially Instagram. What emerges here is not simply fan culture, but rather a devotional re-inscription of media imagery with religious memory and pious affect.

In this article I examine this emerging trend, situating it at the intersection of cinema, social media, and Shiʿi devotional practice. I argue that these Instagram-mediated representations operate as *digital sites of memory*, where historical and sacred figures are continuously reimagined, circulated, and affectively engaged with by contemporary audiences. By tracing the movement of cinematic faces from screen to social media and by analysing the devotional practices they inspire, this study explores how digital media shape collective memory. In doing so, it highlights the ways in which modern technologies both transform and sustain the commemoration of sacred history.

aza.e.lucknow, https://www.instagram.com/p/DI-qQxFSH7b/ [both accessed 13 September 2026].

10 These expressions are devotional invocations commonly used by Shiʿi Muslims to call upon revered figures from early Islam, especially members of the Prophet Muḥammad's family (Ahl al-Bayt). Such phrases express both reverence and an emotional connection to their virtues. Overall, these invocations function as performative acts of remembrance, love, and solidarity with the named personalities central to Shiʿi piety and identity.

Mediating the Sacred: Theoretical Context

In his *La mémoire collective*, Maurice Halbwachs famously illustrated the social dimensions of memory with the example of a person's first visit to London. The experience of the city, he argued, and hence the memory of it, is shaped not in isolation but through the descriptions, images, and narratives of London that the visitor has previously encountered, whether in conversation, literature, or art.[11] Memory, in this sense, is always mediated: it is constructed through frameworks provided by others, through what a society or group makes available as its collective imagery of the world. Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney observe that this social conditioning of memory is inseparable from media. In their words, "Media of all sorts –spoken language, letters, books, photos, films – provide frameworks for shaping both experience and memory."[12] They propose that media perform this work in two interconnected ways: (1) as *instruments for sense-making*, they mediate between the individual and the world and (2) as *agents of networking*, they mediate between individuals and groups.[13] Memory, then, does not merely reside within individuals or even collectives – it circulates through material and symbolic forms of mediation that link past and present, self and community.

This theoretical lineage is particularly productive for understanding contemporary Shiʿi visual culture, where cinema and digital platforms have become key sites for shaping how believers see sacred history. Just as Halbwachs's visitor to London experiences the city through premediated representations, the Shiʿi devotee today often encounters figures like Mukhtār al-Thaqafī, ʿAbbās b. ʿAlī, or Imām ʿAlī through visual schema provided by film and audiovisual media. These representations become in turn templates that structure imagination of the sacred. For many, spending more time on social media than in traditional ritual spaces means that the cinematic or digitally edited image becomes the most immediate reminder of these revered personalities.

David Morgan's study of Christian visual culture offers a compelling parallel.[14] Morgan demonstrates how the circulation of Warner Sallman's

11 Halbwachs 1980, 23.
12 Erll/Rigney 2009, 1.
13 Erll/Rigney 2009, 1.
14 Morgan 1999. For the discussion in this paragraph, see pp. 12–21, 34–58.

Head of Christ (1940), an image reproduced millions of times across homes, churches, and devotional materials, actively shaped the lived experience of belief. The image's ubiquity, Morgan argues, endowed it with the power to configure experience, both ordinary and extraordinary, by embedding sacred imagery into the routines of everyday life. Such images, he continues, "serve as a material means of conducting the rituals that define the public, domestic, and private spheres in which believers discern their identity and the characteristic horizons of reality that link them to one another".[15]

The digital remediations of Shiʿi sacred figures (cinematic faces circulating on Instagram, AI-generated portraits, and fan edits layered with mourning chants) perform a similar function. They constitute new sites of visual familiarity and affective engagement that anchor the believer's sense of belonging and devotion. The faces of Fariborz Arabniya as Mukhtār and Bahador Zamani as ʿAbbās or the portrayal of Imām ʿAlī in The Lady of Heaven are not believed to *be* these figures, Islamic scholars explain,[16] just as Sallman's Christ is not Jesus himself; rather, they operate as "useful conventions", to borrow Morgan's phrase,[17] as placeholders that enable believers to visualize, recall, and feel close to the sacred.

What distinguishes the present moment is the digital intensification of visual mediation. The circulation of these images across platforms like Instagram multiplies their reach, allows for participatory reinterpretation (through remixing, captioning, or adding devotional soundtracks), and embeds them within the rhythms of online sociality. This marks what Andrew Hoskins calls the "connective turn" in memory: a move from static, institutionalized forms of remembrance toward networked, continuously updating memory ecologies.[18] Within such ecologies, memory is not stored but performed, remixed, and re-experienced through posts, shares, and visual edits. For devout Shiʿi users, cinematic faces of Imāms and martyrs act as mnemonic interfaces, mediating between sacred history and everyday digital practice.

In this sense, cinematic and digital images of Shiʿi sacred figures make memory, offering believers new ways of seeing, remembering, and relating

15 Morgan 1999, 17–18.

16 See Al-Islam.org, Ask a Question, Are the pictures of Imam Ali (as) that we see in some Shia communities the actual images of him?, https://t1p.de/h5v2m [accessed 28 April 2026].

17 Morgan 1999, 32.

18 Hoskins 2011, 20.

to their past.[19] The collective frameworks of remembrance today have expanded to include not only the sermon and the shrine but also the streaming platform and the Instagram feed.

From Cinema to Instagram: Digital Remediation of Sacred Figures

On Instagram, the circulation of cinematic and televisual images of sacred Shiʿi figures manifests in a distinctive pattern of social-media edits. These posts often combine multiple fragments of film or series scenes, alongside screenshots taken from various cinematic sources, creating short video compilations or image montages. Original audio is frequently preserved, including film dialogue or music, but many posts incorporate additional religious or devotional soundtracks. Examples include lamentation recitations such as *Hamah Kāreh-ye Ḥaydar* (Ḥaydar Handles Everything / Ḥaydar Does It All) by Sajjād Muḥammadī,[20] *ʿUrs bi-Arḍ al-Ṭufūf* (A Wedding in the Land of al-Ṭufūf) by Sayyid Salām al-Ḥusaynī,[21] and *Abolfazle Bā Vafā* (Abā al-Faḍl the Faithful/Loyal) by Maḥmūd Karīmī,[22] as well as excerpts from sermons[23] layered over video edits. These audio-visual combinations create a multimodal devotional experience, where visual and sonic cues work together to evoke memory, recognition, and pious affect.

The actors' faces in these cinematic fragments function as mnemonic placeholders, allowing viewers to connect with historical figures. In general, depictions of sacred personalities are a long-established presence in Shiʿi communal spaces and are broadly understood within Shiʿi religious culture as visual conventions rather than literal likenesses. Scholarly fatwas generally permit their circulation while cautioning that they should not be mistaken for authentic portraits.[24] Thus, they are not considered to be images of the historical person, but rather serve as visual anchors for devotional memory and imagination.

19 Tahiiev forthcoming.

20 Instagram post by halaleditor, see footnote 8, second mention.

21 Instagram posts by s.vsn_ and aza.e.lucknow, see footnote 9.

22 Instagram post abas_oficial, see footnote 8, first mention.

23 Instagram post by s.vsn_, footnote 9, first mention.

24 See Al-Islam.org, Ask a Question, Are the pictures of Imam Ali (as) that we see in some Shia communities the actual images of him?, https://t1p.de/h5v2m [accessed 28 April 2026].



Fig. 2: Bahador Zamani in the role of ʿAbbās, an image used in two of the Instagram posts discussed in this article. Retrieved from the film's official Facebook account on 29 October 2025, https://www.husseinmovie.com/.

Cinematic depictions and their media circulation often occur against a backdrop of clerical regulation and religious sensitivity. For example, the depiction of ʿAbbās in Mokhtarnameh faced strong objections from senior Iranian religious authorities, including Āyatullāh Nasser Makarem Shirazi and Āyatullāh Wahid Khorasani, who argued that showing his face could provoke unrest or offend devotees.[25] Similarly, Ḥusayn, Who Said No underwent extensive cuts owing to clerical concerns about the portrayal of ʿAbbās (fig. 2), Imām Ḥusayn's sons, and other sacred figures, leading to its delayed and restricted release.[26] An interesting approach can be observed in The Lady of Heaven. This film depicted the Prophet Muḥammad and Imām ʿAlī (figs. 3a, b) through computer-generated imagery (CGI) rather than live actors. A disclaimer at the beginning and end of the film clarifies that "the performances of Holy Personalities were achieved through a unique synthesis of actors, in-camera effects, lighting, and visual effects." No single actor is credited with portraying these holy figures, whose faces are often rendered as dazzling sunbursts or abstract visual motifs.[27] Despite this technical creativity, I have not seen Instagram posts featuring such portrayals of the Prophet Muḥammad, suggesting that digital devotees remain cautious.

Despite scholarly objections[28], online audiences, particularly Instagram users, demonstrate enthusiastic engagement, repurposing fragments for

25 Martyrdom of Hazrat Abbas – Deleted scene from Mokhtarnameh, *YouTube*, posted 29 November 2012 by guiders14, https://t1p.de/xx3ct [accessed 28 October 2025]. The YouTube video description recounts the circumstances behind the scene's removal, including the objections raised by mentioned scholars.

26 Sabet 2019.

27 Tahiiev 2025b, 31.

28 See footnotes 16 and 24.





Figs. 3a and b: The CGI-generated portrayal of Imām ʿAlī in The Lady of Heaven (Eli King, UK 2021). This depiction is used in two of the Instagram posts discussed in this article. Retrieved from the film's official Facebook account on 29 October 2025, https://www.facebook.com/theladyofheaven/photos/.

personal or communal devotion, commenting with invocations such as *yā ʿAbbās* (O ʿAbbās) or *Labbaik yā ʿAlī* (Here I am, O ʿAlī / At your service, O ʿAlī), and sharing widely across networks. Beyond their role as visual content, the posts are also a moral and mnemonic interface, training attention, affect, and piety. The affective engagement in these posts often mirrors Charles Hirschkind's concept of "ethical listening",[29] which I extend to "ethical viewing".[30] From multimodal combinations of image, text, and sound, users gain pious affect and moral awareness. Viewers actively cultivate devotional sensitivity through attentive observation, comment interaction, and sharing, reinforcing a sense of collective belonging while simultaneously performing individual memory practices. Here the visual encounter with cinematic depictions accompanied by listening to lamentation and reading poetic captions constitutes an embodied, moralized engagement with the past.

Together, these cases illustrate the tension between clerical authority and popular digital practice. While scholars enforce boundaries on visual representation, online users creatively negotiate these constraints, producing remediated visual narratives that preserve devotional engagement while

29 Hirschkind 2001.
30 Tahiiev 2025a, 12.

adhering to religious norms. Instagram thus functions as both a space of communal memory and a laboratory of mediated devotional practice where cinematic and digital images of sacred figures circulate, are recognized, and are affectively engaged with in new ways.

Remediation, Rememory, and the Ethics of Seeing

The circulation of the cinematic faces of sacred figures on digital platforms exemplifies what Astrid Erll calls the "remediation" of cultural memory: the continual migration of narratives and icons across new media environments.[31] In the case of Shiʿi devotional culture, the filmic and televisual representations of Mukhtār, ʿAbbās, and Imām ʿAlī are re-embedded in social-media ecologies, where they acquire new meanings through editing, captioning, and sharing. This process is not merely reproductive but also transformative, for very repost, remix, or fan edit constitutes a new act of remembering through media.

The concept of premediation[32] – the anticipation of future remembering by the shaping how events and figures are likely to be recalled – is also useful here. Cinematic works like Mokhtarnameh or Rastākhīz were created with an expectation of devotional remembrance. The filmmakers' careful visual stylizations, such as the shining halo, the dramatic framing of ʿAbbās's loyalty, and the poetic language of martyrdom, predetermine the emotional and mnemonic vocabulary available to audiences. When these images migrate into Instagram edits, the process of premediation intensifies: users engage with fragments already designed for remembrance, amplifying them with affective soundtracks and devotional captions.

This interplay between remediation and premediation produces "rememory", as described by Caroline Rody[33] and later expanded to Shiʿi contexts by Zahra Aleeha Ali[34] – the reactivation and reconfiguration of memory through repeated representation. Each digital reproduction of Mukhtār's defiance or ʿAbbās's heroism becomes a site of rememory, an instance where viewers recall not only the historical episode but also their previous

31 Erll 2009, 111.
32 Erll/Rigney 2009, 10.
33 Rody 1995.
34 Ali 2022, 130.

mediated encounters with it. In this sense, these Instagram posts function as mnemonic nodes linking multiple temporalities: the Karbalāʾ narrative itself, the cinematic retelling, and the present moment of online devotion.

Within Shiʿi thought, the visual encounter with sacred figures carries a tension between the prohibition of direct representation and the desire for proximity. The cinematic and digital remediation of the sacred thus involves an ongoing negotiation between reverence and risk. In Instagram edits, this negotiation is palpable. The layering of lamentations and sermons places the cinematic image in a devotional register, transforming entertainment footage into an act of remembrance. At the same time, the digital circulation of these images exposes them to algorithmic logics of visibility and virality, where sacred imagery coexists with secular content, advertisements, and comment-thread humour. This dynamic points to what I call processes of desacralization[35] and resacralization: once removed from the controlled space of the mosque or shrine, the image loses its ritual framing, but through users' affective engagement – for example, comments like *Salām yā Abā al-Faḍl* (Peace be upon you, O Abā al-Faḍl) or *Labbaik yā ʿAlī* (Here I am, O ʿAlī / At your service, O ʿAlī) – it is resacralized in the digital sphere.

In this regard, the Shiʿi Instagram aesthetic operates as a form of everyday digital piety. It transforms cinematic faces into mnemonic icons, integrating them into the daily affective rhythms of scrolling, liking, and sharing. The believer's screen becomes both archive and altar – a site where memory is continuously enacted, negotiated, and felt.

Mediating Memory: Generational Shifts and Digital Devotion

Erll and Rigney note, "[M]edia are more than merely passive and transparent conveyors of information. They play an active role in shaping our understanding of the past, in 'mediating' between us (as readers, viewers, listeners) and past experiences, and hence in setting the agenda for future acts of remembrance within society."[36] The cinematic and digital representations of Shiʿi sacred figures exemplify precisely this mediating function. Through film, television, and now social media, memory is not simply transmitted but

35 Tahiiev 2026b, 137.
36 Erll/Rigney 2009, 3.

continually reframed, thus reconstituting how the sacred past is imagined, felt, and collectively lived.

Foregrounding the mediating agency of images and platforms in this way does not, however, diminish the centrality of human actors in this process. The posts analysed here are simultaneously shaped by the affordances and logics of the media through which they circulate and actively authored by believers whose devotional intentions drive their production and sharing. The lay users who select, edit, and circulate these cinematic fragments are not passive conduits of algorithmic flows. They are agents of memory in their own right, and it is precisely their vernacular creativity and pious affect that give these fragments their *digital afterlife*: once released into the circulatory economies of social media, the cinematic faces of Mukhtār, ʿAbbās, or Imām ʿAlī become detached from their original filmic narratives, endlessly reanimated through user edits, reposts, and algorithmic recommendations. Media and human actors, in other words, are mutually constitutive rather than competing explanations.

This shift may produce notable generational differences in the experience and visualization of the sacred. Older generations whose memory of the Imāms or companions of Ḥusayn was shaped primarily by oral narratives, sermons, and shrine-based iconography are more likely to retain a more textually or ritually grounded relationship to the past. In contrast, younger publics, especially those socialized in digital media environments, encounter these figures through screen-based images, cinematic affect, and algorithmically circulated edits. Pierre Nora's claim that "memory is blind to all but the group it binds"[37] is substantiated here: digital memory binds a new kind of community, one defined not by physical proximity or lineage but by shared visual repertoires online.

As Tony Judt observed, "[I]n the absence of any common culture beyond a small elite, and not always even there, the particular information or ideas that people select or encounter are determined by a multiplicity of tastes, affinities, and interests. As the years pass, each one of us has less in common with the fast-multiplying worlds of our contemporaries, not to speak of the world of our forebears."[38] The digital sphere creates such a new elite of access: those able to navigate Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube may form their devotional imagination around cinematic imagery, while those outside

37 Nora 1989, 9.
38 Judt 2009, 5.

these digital networks retain different, often more traditional, mental images. Thus, Mokhtarnameh's Mukhtār, Rastākhīz's ʿAbbās, or the luminous CGI Imām ʿAlī from The Lady of Heaven become visual references immediately recognizable to younger Shiʿi audiences but largely unfamiliar to elders. As these cinematic icons become more dominant, the distance between digital and non-digital believers in the imagination of the sacred subtly widens.

Yet this does not mean that modern believers have abandoned collective or affective memory. On the contrary, as Jesseka Batteau argues, communal, non-reflexive memory persists within religious communities: believers "do live within memory, a memory which sustains their self-image as a group following in the footsteps of their forebears".[39] In this sense, Shiʿi digital devotees continue to inhabit a living memory-world – one in which the visual and auditory cues of cinema and social media have replaced, or supplemented, earlier mnemonic frameworks like shrine architecture or oral *majālis* recitation.

David Morgan's application of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's threefold model of how artifacts objectify the self offers another lens for interpreting this transformation.[40] First, religious images broadcast and stabilize cultural identity. The display of cinematic depictions of Mukhtār or ʿAbbās, whether as Instagram profile pictures, phone wallpaper, or physical posters at *majālis*, signals belonging to a global Shiʿi community. The same image, however, is differently interpreted by distinct publics: for instance, depictions of Imām ʿAlī in Omar (MBC 1, SA/QA 2012) or Al Hasan and Al Husein (Qatar TV, KW/SY/JO 2011), both Sunni-produced television series, are largely ignored by Shiʿi users, whereas the depictions discussed in this article have become internal markers of Shiʿi identity.[41] The selective adoption of particular visual codes thus reveals the community's ongoing negotiation of authenticity and authority.

Second, devotional images shape both personal and collective memory. Through repetition, circulation, and emotional engagement, they allow believers to narrate their lives in relation to the sacred. The cinematic Imām

39 Batteau 2009, 231.

40 Csikszentmihalyi/Rochberg-Halton 1981; Morgan 1998, 18.

41 During my fieldwork, occasional exceptions to this pattern were observed: some Sunni-run accounts posted edits featuring the depiction of ʿAbbās from the Shiʿi-produced Ḥusayn, Who Said No, suggesting that the affective charge of cinematic portrayals can, if infrequently, transcend sectarian boundaries.

or companion becomes part of the believer's autobiographical timeline – an image first encountered in a series, then remembered in a sermon, and finally re-experienced in an Instagram edit layered with lamentation or poetry.

And third, images symbolize and materialize relationships. Their circulation in domestic or communal spaces, whether as posters in *majālis* or as shared social-media posts, reaffirms belonging within a network of pious affect. This social power of images is evident in the adoption of the Mokhtarnameh portrayal of Mukhtār in official procession posters and banners (see fig. 1), where the cinematic face now functions as a collective devotional emblem. Taken together, these developments indicate that digital media have not displaced Shiʿi memory but remediated it, generating new mnemonic regimes that bind digital publics through shared affective imagery.

At the same time, these mediated images generate what I have termed *digital afterlives* of sacred figures. Once released into the circulatory economies of social media, the cinematic faces of Mukhtār, ʿAbbās, or Imām ʿAlī live on, detached from their original filmic narratives yet endlessly reanimated through user edits, reposts, and algorithmic recommendations. Their persistence online blurs the boundary between representation and presence: each repost is both an act of devotion and a renewal of existence in digital space. These figures thus acquire afterlives that unfold across the shifting temporalities of the platform, sustained by the rhythms of mourning, commemoration, and affective sharing.

What is striking, however, is the social asymmetry of production and circulation. Whereas the cinematic or televisual depictions of Shiʿi sacred history are produced within elite, professionally financed infrastructures of religious and/or national media, the afterlives of these images are predominantly grassroots phenomena. The Instagram edits and short video montages that populate Shiʿi digital space are usually made by lay believers with no institutional affiliation, technical training, or clerical authority. They operate within a participatory economy of memory, where devotion substitutes for expertise and affective resonance becomes a measure of legitimacy. In this sense, the sacred image is reactivated not by clerics or filmmakers, but by ordinary users who select, reframe, and circulate fragments that move them spiritually. This vernacular authorship blurs boundaries between consumption and production, transforming spectators into producers.

The comment sections accompanying such posts further perform devotional collectivity. Users respond with blessings, invocations, and emotive

expressions that transform otherwise secular affordances of social media into acts of remembrance. The accumulation of comments becomes a digital litany, a participatory extension of devotion in textual form. In this way, Instagram functions not merely as a site of visual consumption but also as a ritualized communicative space, where affective engagement, repetition, and collective witness sustain the vitality of Shiʿi memory.

In this hybrid devotional ecology, the sacred is no longer confined to the shrine, the pulpit, or the ritual gathering. It now also unfolds on the screen, within algorithmic flows and digital networks. The believer's engagement with these images – scrolling, listening, reposting, for example – is both an act of remembrance and a reconfiguration of what it means to see and feel the sacred in the twenty-first century.

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