

## **Al-Mukhtār and the Aesthetics of Persuasion**

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### **Introduction**

The first Shi‘ite leader with true political power – although it was limited in space and time – after the death of ‘Ali b. Abī Ṭālib was al-Mukhtār b. Abī ‘Ubayd (d. 67/687). In this paper, I will argue that one reason why he succeeded in his political ambitions was that he legitimized his endeavor by deferring to ‘Ali. In doing this he set a precedent for all future Shi‘ite leadership. Al-Mukhtār gained authority by convincing his followers that he possessed certain instruments of mediation between the people and the deceased ‘Ali, who was still supposed to be alive and active in one way or another by many Shi‘is.

### **The notion of “religious aesthetics”**

Al-Mukhtār’s success can be understood, at least partly, through the concept of *religious aesthetics* as it has been developed by the German anthropologist Birgit Meyer and others. At least since the enlightenment, Meyer writes, Western society has divided mind from the rest of the body. Religion also has become mainly a mind-business. But, she writes, “In order to be present in the world... religion requires tangible, sensational forms.” The transcendent has to manifest itself to humans through their senses. Thus it is helpful to regard religion as a “practice of mediation” that bridges the gap between the temporal and the perceived divine;<sup>1</sup> a mediation that is performed by appealing to *all human senses* through various media. In this, she applies the Aristotelian concept of *aisthesis*, by which Aristotle meant “our perception of the world through our five senses as an undivided whole...”<sup>2</sup> So, for example, we experience an apple with a texture, a taste, a smell, a sound, and a visible shape and color, all at the same

time. In a similar way, she claims, it is helpful to understand religious sensations created through different media.

When we understand religion as “a practice of mediation” that offers a particular kind of aesthetics, what we may call “religious sensations”, the media used will not appear as something foreign to religion, but as an integral and necessary part of it<sup>3</sup>. In everyday religious life, such sensations are constantly recreated through the religious media, often by religious functionaries.

The person in control of these media has the power to distribute and withhold religious sensations generated in the devotees through the media. Meyer uses the expression “aesthetics of persuasion” to describe such a practice of power<sup>4</sup>. As I interpret Meyer here, in order to function, a religious medium has to fulfil two conditions: 1) it has to meet the expectations of the people for these sensations; and 2) it has to be relevant to their needs. The person in control of the media has a unique opportunity to interpret and employ the media so that these two criteria are fulfilled.

### **Al-Mukhtār’s instruments of mediation**

In this paper, I will investigate three instruments of mediation used by al-Mukhtār in order to legitimize his authority to the Shi‘ites of Kūfa: 1) a living human being: his claim to act on behalf of ‘Ali’s son Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya, whom he called *al-mahdī* “the rightly guided”; 2) a religio-political action: his call to revenge for ‘Ali’s son al-Ḥusayn; and 3) an artefact: his claim that he was in possession of an ‘Alid relic, a chair that had belonged to ‘Ali.

Here, it is impossible to delve deeply into the question of authenticity. I would argue, however, that the accounts of these three instruments probably reflect an historical reality. Each of them is related in several mutually independent sources, and one of them – the chair of ‘Alī – also fulfills what is sometimes called the criterion of embarrassment. By this a mean

a phenomenon that is so embarrassing for later generations that it is hardly conceivable that they could have invented it.

### **1. Mukhtar's acting on behalf of Muhammad b. al-Hanafiyya**

‘Ali was regarded as the legatee (*wasī*) of the Prophet Muhammad, and of course Shi‘ites in general believed that this legacy was handed down from generation to generation within the family of the Prophet. As the most prominent son of ‘Ali still alive, Ibn al-Hanafiyya was now regarded by many as the rightful successor. He was the son of the legatee, *ibn al-wasī*.<sup>5</sup> By associating himself with Ibn al-Hanafiyya, Mukhtar used Ibn al-Hanafiyya's position as a way to defer to ‘Ali, and in this way he promoted his own authority. Ibn al-Hanafiyya thus became an instrument of mediation between ‘Alī and the devout Shi‘ites. Mukhtar referred to himself as the *wazīr* (‘helper’) of Ibn al-Hanafiyya.<sup>6</sup> This term is used twice in the Qur’an to describe the relationship between Moses and Aaron in which God makes Aaron the *wazīr*, the helper or assistant, of Moses (Qur. 20:29–34 and 25:35).<sup>7</sup> It is possible that in using this term Mukhtar may have intended to establish a relationship between Ibn al-Hanafiyya and himself comparable to that between Moses and Aaron<sup>8</sup>.

Al-Mukhtar furthermore spoke of Ibn al-Hanafiyya as *al-mahdī*. Words created from the same root, here connoting divine guidance, occur frequently in the Qur’an. Although the passive participle *mahdī*, ‘[divinely] guided,’ does not occur in the Qur’an, it was used very early among the Believers. Most scholars are of the opinion that the term did not have messianic implications at the outset of Islam; it simply meant that the person described by the epithet was divinely guided. Many hold that it was only when Mukhtar referred to Ibn al-Hanafiyya as *al-mahdī* that the term first came to mean a kind of messiah, an eschatological redeemer.<sup>9</sup> In my opinion, though, there is very little in the sources that indicate that Ibn al-Hanafiyya was regarded as a messianic redeemer. So despite views to the contrary expressed by many scholars,<sup>10</sup> I do not think that the connection between *mahdī* and Messiah can be established

with al-Mukhtār himself, although this idea is evident soon after his death. I do not have time to develop that argument now, but I am willing to discuss it afterwards if anyone is interested.

Be that as it may. That Ibn al-Hanafiyya was rightly guided (*mahdī*) was, in the mind of Mukhtar and the Shi‘ites in Kufa, of course a consequence of his being the legatee of ‘Ali, who in his turn was the legatee of the Prophet Muhammad. By making himself the *wazīr* of the ‘son of the legatee,’ al-Mukhtār deferred to ‘Ali, and thus created a very robust platform for his own authority.

## **2. Mukhtar’s revenge for the death of Husayn**

Many independent sources relate that Mukhtar gained influence by summoning the people to seek revenge for the killing of Husayn at Karbala, and that he actually did kill most of the leadership of the campaign against Husayn.

The story of the movement of the Penitents (*Tawwābūn*) shows that seeking revenge for the killing of Husayn was a crucial matter for the Shi‘ites in Kufa. Although the main elements of this story as presented by Tabari (through Abu Mikhnaf) cannot be established before the beginning of the eighth century CE,<sup>11</sup> the movement would be difficult to explain without taking account of a real feeling of guilt among its members, a guilt that was prevalent among many of the Kufan Shi‘ites. To be sure, the numbers of the Penitents are probably exaggerated in the story. Still, the movement must have had a considerable impact on the Shi‘ites of the town and reflected the feelings of many of them. Thus it is not surprising that Mukhtar succeeded in raising support for himself as leader with a mission from Husayn’s half-brother to wreak the vengeance that the Penitents had failed to exact for Husayn’s death.

## **3. Mukhtar and ‘Ali’s chair**

Several sources relate that, before embarking on a large campaign against the Syrians, Mukhtar displayed a chair (*kursī*) which he claimed had belonged to ‘Ali.<sup>12</sup> This chair aroused great enthusiasm among some of his followers.<sup>13</sup> The sources relate that it immediately

became a kind of cultic object to some of them, who regarded it as being on a par with the Israelite Ark of the Covenant. We are told that it was covered with silk and brocade, and the people raised their hands, circled around it,<sup>14</sup> and shouted. Attendants were appointed to it, and it was placed on a grey mule and brought out in the successful battle at Nasibin against the Umayyad army as a kind of talisman.

As Sean Anthony has demonstrated in his excellent analysis of this incident, the chair of ‘Alī, as it was associated with the Ark of the Covenant, had numerous Qur’ānic and apocalyptic overtones: Although the Ark had disappeared during the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem in 587 BCE, it was believed that it was to return at the end of times. In several ways it connoted the presence of God. It also seems that the chair was regarded as some kind of channel for divine revelation in that it inspired prophecy (*wahy*).

All this led many of Mukhtar’s followers to be filled with enthusiasm over the ‘discovery’ of the chair. At the same time, there were those who warned against the danger of falling into disbelief and committing polytheism. As far as we can tell, the chair was rather short-lived, and after the battle of Nasibin we hear no more about it.

The chair of ‘Alī thus was an important mediatory instrument between the more enthusiastic Shi‘ites and ‘Alī. Whether Mukhtar himself believed in its provenance we cannot know. What we can see from the sources is that he skilfully used it to support his claims to authority.

### **Mukhtar and the aesthetics of persuasion**

Let us now apply this to Meyer’s concept of religious aesthetics. As I mentioned above, a religious medium in Meyer’s terms has to fulfil two conditions in order to create religious sensations: 1) it has to meet the *expectations* of the people for these sensations; and 2) it has to be *relevant* to their needs. As many scholars have shown, messianic expectations were widespread in seventh-century Kufa, and were often directed towards ‘Alī. A general idea

among the proto-Shi‘ites was that ‘Ali’s claim to authority as religious and political leader had been transmitted to his descendants. Furthermore, the experiences of deprivation and oppression of some groups in the Kufan society, notably the *mawālī* who made up a great part of Mukhtar’s followers, seem to have facilitated their identification with the sufferings of ‘Ali and his family. Mukhtar was thus able to provide media that gave rise to religious sensations in his followers in that they met the expectations and was relevant to the experiences of the people. The three instruments thus acted as mediators between Mukhtar and ‘Ali, and Mukhtar was able to handle them so as to further his own authority.

To conclude, what we see in the accounts of Mukhtar is the early phase of a religious movement, the aesthetics of which has not yet crystallised into established forms. Some parts of those aesthetics would never do so. Of the three instruments used by Mukhtar to gain and sustain authority, one, the chair of ‘Ali, subsequently completely disappears. Another, the revenge for the blood of Husayn, is later translated both into an important element in Shi‘ite ideology – the martyrdom ideal<sup>15</sup> – and into a set of rituals, of which the most famous is perhaps the Ashura celebrations.<sup>16</sup> In this case we see how the early religious aesthetic promoted by Mukhtar develops over the centuries into established forms. Of course it is impossible to know how this aspect of Shi‘ism would have developed without the intervention of Mukhtar. The death of Husayn was already immensely important before Mukhtar’s activities; what he did was to channel the feelings it created into action, something which the Penitents had already tried to do. Personally, I think it probable that the whole complex of ideas and rituals around the Karbala tragedy would have developed anyway. The third instrument, however – the designation of an ‘Alid Mahdi who is the true leader in religious and political matters – is perhaps the invention of al-Mukhtar that has had the most significant repercussions in the following centuries. Although it cannot be demonstrated that it was with him that this concept acquired its messianic connotations, I do agree with many

scholars who believe that Mukhtar was instrumental in making the concept of the Mahdi popular. In the movement that developed after him, the Kaysaniyya, the association between Mahdi and messiah was definitely an important feature.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, as far as we know, no one before Mukhtar had claimed to be acting on behalf of 'Ali or any of his sons, something which later became the rule.

So, Mukhtar was able to channel the needs and aspirations of many of the Kufans by providing them with aesthetic forms, some of which developed subsequently into more formalised sensational forms. In so doing, he was also able to establish new forms of authority that subsequently developed and became prevalent within the different strands of Shi'ism that we know today.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Meyer (2006:435–437); Meyer and Verrips (2008:25)

<sup>2</sup> Meyer and Verrips (2008:21. Italics in original.)

<sup>3</sup> Meyer (2006:435).

<sup>4</sup> Meyer (2010:754–758).

<sup>5</sup> This idea is expressed in these or similar words by Abu Mikhnaf (Ṭabarī, 1879–1901:II, 534, 611) and by the poet ʿAbdallah b. Hammam (Ṭabarī, 1879–1901:II, 637).

<sup>6</sup> Abu Mikhnaf in several places (e.g. Ṭabarī, 1879–1901:II, 534, 608, 611), and Ibn Hammam in a poem quoted by Abu Mikhnaf (Ṭabarī, 1879–1901:II, 638).

<sup>7</sup> Sunni as well as Shiʿite tradition equal this relationship to that between the Prophet Muhammad and ʿAli. I have not been able to verify any occurrences of this tradition earlier than in Ibn Saʿd’s *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt*, referring back to Waqidi (Ibn Saʿd, 1904–1908:vol. III, pt. 1, 14 ff). However, there are many traditions about this in both Sunni and Shiʿite Hadīth collections and other sources (for references to Sunni hadīth collections, see Wensinck (1927:15); for some Shiʿite sources, see Bar-Asher (1999:156, n. 122), so most probably it is much

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earlier, perhaps even going back to the lifetime of the Prophet and ‘Ali. On this theme, see also Crone and Cook (1977:26–28); Rubin (1979:51–52).

<sup>8</sup> Goitein (1961); Crone (2004:77–78); Anthony (2012:267–268).

<sup>9</sup> Arjomand (1998:250); Donner (2000; 2010:184–185); Anthony (2013). For the view that the term *al-mahdī* had messianic connotations from the beginning, see Crone and Cook (1977:3–6), and in less affirmative terms, (Crone, 2004:75). Crone and Hinds, however, state that Mukhtar probably was the first to use the term, referring to Ibn al-Hanafiyya, ‘in the sense of a specific and long-awaited redeemer figure’ (1986:103).

<sup>10</sup> E. g. Madelung (1986); Donner (2010:183–184); Anthony (2013).

<sup>11</sup> Hylén (2017 [Forthcoming]).

<sup>12</sup> In the following section, I am deeply indebted to the comprehensive analysis that Sean Anthony has made of the different accounts of the chair and its significance (Anthony, 2012:261–290).

<sup>13</sup> Two narratives by Abu Mikhnaf and ‘Abdallah b. al-Mubarak and two hostile poems by A‘sha Hamdan and al-Mutawakkil al-Laythi are related by Ṭabarī (1879–1901:II, 701–706), and in the following I will mainly rely on his account. However, Anthony (Anthony, 2012:278–279) relates a longer rendering of A‘sha’s poem, taken from al-Jahiz’ *Kitāb al-Hayawān*, which I have also made use of.

<sup>14</sup> The word *tāfa*, used to denote the circling around Ka‘ba, is used only in the disapproving poem by A‘sha Hamdan (see e.g. Balādhurī (1936:vol. V, 242) and in al-Jahiz’ rendering of this poem in Anthony (2012:278–279, esp. v. 6)). Tabari has not included this verse in his version of A‘sha’s poem (1879–1901:II, 704–705). Abu Mikhnaf instead uses the word ‘*akafū*’ (Ṭabarī, 1879–1901:II, 702), and al-Mutawakkil derogatively says that they go ‘leaping around its boards’ (Ṭabarī, 1879–1901:II, 705).

<sup>15</sup> Aghaie (2004)

<sup>16</sup> Much has been written about both of these. See e.g. Schubel (1993); Halm (1997); Aghaie (2004).

<sup>17</sup> Anthony (2013)