

# The Shia in Lebanon: Rituals, Society, and Culture

From Creativity to Adherence  
under Imposed Guides





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under Imposed Guides

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# A Cross Section of a History The Shia Community in Lebanon

## تواریخُ مُتْقَاطِعَة حِصَّة الشیعة منها فی لبنان

UMAM Documentation and Research (UMAM D&R) is undertaking a history project in Lebanon entitled A Cross Section of a History. This project will create a space to explore and deepen understanding of the socio-political histories of specific communities within Lebanon - including the Shia, among others - to trace and explore their historical dynamics until today. Micro-level histories of individuals, families, and towns in Lebanon will be addressed, out of the belief that examination of these various histories will show the mosaic of personal and collective experiences of communities in Lebanon over history.

The title of the project "a cross section of a history" embodies this mission: by focusing on specific elements of Lebanon's collective, cacophonous history, we aim to illuminate unique and collective dynamics, identities, and transformations that help to explain the Lebanon we are seeing today. This project aims to directly engage with community members around Lebanon and in the diaspora, as well as academics and experts. The outputs of the project will be a research report and collections of archival material.



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## Introduction

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The subject of sociology is based on the study of human society in its complex collective phenomena, its interconnected structure, and the relationships that exist within it in order to understand the function that these phenomena perform. The scope of this science is broad and includes many topics, including religious rituals and ceremonies, cultural movements, customs, traditions, and external appearance. This is what this research addresses in regard to the social life of the Shia community in Lebanon.

The religious rituals and ceremonies of the Shia community in Lebanon represent the essence of their religion and ensure the connection of their individuals and groups with the sacred. These religious rituals and ceremonies also reflect the identity of their community and preserve it through the collective repetition of behavior that ensures the continuity of their past. As for the cultural movement, it is in various literary, poetic, and other aspects, and leads to specialized knowledge that leaves its mark on their communities and beyond, and distinguishes them culturally and socially from others. As for the customs and traditions, they are a reflection of social behavior that becomes entrenched over time and reflects a certain pattern. A part of these customs and traditions has become an official aspect that expresses belonging and social and religious

identity. As for clothing, while being a basic need shared by all human groups, the self-differentiations in various fields are reflected in its types, shapes, and boundaries, and can sometimes define and express the sectarian identity of the Shia across diverse societies.

This research was therefore conducted to collect and analyze elements of these topics within the Lebanese Shia community by presenting their origins and historical development in different chronological periods. The spatial scope of this research covers the Lebanese geography where Shia are present, with occasional excursions to other geographies in the region. As for its temporal scope, it covers the period from the 10th century AD, the golden age of Shiism, to the present day.

This research faced reference difficulties related to the lack of knowledge sources: there are topics on which not much information could be found before the Ottoman rule at the beginning of the 16th century. Meanwhile, the situation of some of the other topics deteriorated over time, leading to their disappearance or the scarcity of information towards the end of the 19th century.

This research is divided into an introduction, three chapters, and a conclusion. The first chapter deals with the reality of the Shia of Lebanon in their rituals and ceremonies, with a focus on Ashura and its rituals as a model. The second chapter presents the cultural and literary movement of the Shia in different stages, while the third chapter touches on their clothing, customs, and traditions. The methodology primarily followed historical and descriptive methods, while interpretive methods were used when necessary. For historical methodology, the research followed the sequence of the studied phenomena and how they followed and developed over time. The descriptive method relied on describing the phenomena in each chronological period in specific geographical locations. As for the interpretive method, it was needed to interpret the meanings of some texts and discourses.

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## Conclusion

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This research explored the reality of the Shia in Lebanon through their rituals, culture, and traditions by presenting their origins and development over the successive chronological stages. The first chapter covered the various Shiite rituals and ceremonies, with a focus on Ashura as a paradigm due to its significant impact on Shiite identity. It presented a historical overview of its observances, tracing them back to the golden era of Shiism in the tenth century AD and continuing through to the present day. The chapter also scrutinized and characterized the reality of these observances during each epoch. Additionally, it delved into the political implications of these rituals throughout different periods, culminating in the current era's political party dominance over them.

The second chapter presented the cultural and literary movement of the Shia through their works in poetry, prose, language, art, and more, leading up to the present time when these pursuits have increasingly been directed towards serving explicit partisan, political, and religious interests. Consequently, they have become integrated into a comprehensive political and religious project. The third chapter encompassed various Shiite traditions and customs, shedding light on attire and addressing the alterations it underwent due to political

reasons. It also examined the circumstances surrounding joyous and mournful occasions. This research has aspired, based on the adopted methodology, to the best of its ability to shed light on the Shiite reality across the mentioned topics, and serves as a basis for further works exploring these dynamics.