

The Arba'een Pilgrimage Experience: A Sensory Anthropological Perspective

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Abstract

This article examines the Arbaeen pilgrimage through the lens of sensory anthropology, highlighting how sensory perception—particularly taste, touch, smell, sight, and hearing—plays a central role in shaping the embodied religious experience of pilgrims. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews with pilgrims and service volunteers (khādimīn) in Iraq, the study investigates how ritual food functions not only as nourishment but as a powerful medium of spiritual, social, and cultural significance. Through a multisensory approach, this research shows that the sacred is not only represented in religious texts and spaces but also felt, smelled, tasted, and heard in everyday ritual practices.

The article argues that the preparation, offering, and consumption of votive food is a central ritual act that mediates intersubjective connections among participants, rooted in deeply held beliefs about divine presence, intercession, and sacred reciprocity. Sensory modalities become symbolic carriers of memory, meaning, and identity, rendering the pilgrimage a site of both spiritual intensification and social cohesion. The analysis is grounded in theoretical contributions from David Howes, Constance Classen, Sarah Pink, and Éric Landowski, providing a robust interdisciplinary framework to understand how religious experiences are embodied, mediated, and communicated through the senses.

Keywords: Sensory Anthropology, The Arba’een Pilgrimage, Embodiment, Ritual Food, multisensory experience.

Introduction

As the philosophical principle states, “Whoever loses a sense, loses knowledge.”(1) “The primary origin of all acquired perceptions and apparent human sciences is the external senses, which are shared between humans and most animals. Indeed, if we assume a human being deprived of all senses, they would likewise be deprived of all sciences and knowledge. And if they lack certain senses, they would lack certain forms of knowledge, for, according to this principle, the channels through which sciences emerge and the gateways to acquiring knowledge are the human senses. Thus, with the loss of any of these channels or gateways, a portion of human knowledge ceases to exist.” (Ebrahimi Dinani, 1987, 2: 435-442).

Sensory experience in encountering the sacred:

Although pilgrimage (*ziyāra*) appears at first glance as a spiritual matter—a transcendental communion with a sacred, divine presence—and sensory perception may seem peripheral to its practice, the reality is that the interaction between the pilgrim’s body and the ritual’s material space plays an active role in shaping pilgrimage rites. Indeed, pilgrimage is inconceivable in cultural anthropology studies without the bodily engagement of the pilgrim with elements such as time, space, and the external senses.

The Arba‘in pilgrimage is an *embodied* practice; the meaning of embodiment in [pilgrimage] rituals lies in revealing how we experience our surroundings through our bodies (Csordas, 1994: 10). The pilgrim’s body—or more precisely, their external senses—constitutes an inseparable component of the spiritual perception of these rites.”

The external senses and sensory perception are not merely physical responses or personal experiences; rather, the senses constitute a domain of cultural expression through which a clearer understanding of rituals can be achieved. The Arba‘in pilgrimage, as a multisensory sacred experience, provides a context in which this approach yields deeper ritual comprehension. «Understanding culture through sensory experiences – hearing, smelling, tasting, seeing, and touching – constitutes a core methodological approach advanced by sensory anthropology.»(Howes, 2003).

Main Research Question/Problem Statement:

This research, focusing on the Arba’een pilgrimage from a sensory anthropological perspective, seeks to answer the question of how sensory perceptions (especially taste, touch, smell, sight, and hearing) play a pivotal role in shaping the embodied religious experience of pilgrims, and how ritual practices, elements, and symbols act as powerful mediators in spiritual, social, and cultural realms.

Significance of the Research:

This research holds significance from several perspectives:

1.Enriching the Literature on Sensory Anthropology:

By presenting an ethnographic and phenomenological analysis of the Arba’een sensory experience, this study contributes to the growing field of sensory anthropology, advancing our understanding of how religious meaning is lived, felt, and enacted within the context of a vast and embodied ritual. Contrary to traditional paradigms that prioritize verbal and visual data, this research emphasizes a multisensory and embodied approach.

2.Deepening the Understanding of the Arba’een Phenomenon:

Moving beyond purely textual or historical analyses, this study delves into deeper and less explored layers of the Arba’een experience. By focusing on its sensory dimensions, it offers new insights into the hidden facets of this immense global ritual and the profound connection of pilgrims with the sacred.

3.Elucidating the Role of Rituals in Mediating the Sacred:

This research demonstrates that the sacred does not merely exist in texts or abstract spaces, but is felt, smelled, tasted, seen, and heard through everyday ritual practices. This contributes to a better understanding of how the sacred is mediated through materiality and bodily action.

4.Highlighting the Role of Ritual Food:

By analyzing the central role of Nazri (votive) food in the Arba’een pilgrimage, this article underscores the significance of this cultural element beyond its nutritional function. It shows that the preparation, offering, and consumption of Nazri food is a focal ritual act that mediates intersubjective connections among participants, rooted in deeply held beliefs about divine presence, intercession, and sacred reciprocity.

5.Providing an Interdisciplinary Framework:

This analysis, by drawing upon the theoretical contributions of David Howes, Constance Classen, Sarah Pink, and Éric Landowski, offers a robust interdisciplinary framework for understanding how religious experiences are embodied, mediated, and communicated through the senses.

Literature Review

In 1990, David Howes—arguably the most influential figure in the anthropology of the senses—published a seminal article titled “Controlling Textuality: A Call for a Return to the Senses.” In this critical piece, he challenged the prevailing approaches of the textual turn, postmodernism, and interpretive anthropology. Howes argued that the most essential feature of the anthropologist lies in perception and experience within the field—an emphasis rooted in the legacy of Bronisław Malinowski, the founding figure of fieldwork-based anthropology and a pioneer of ethnographic revolution.

In 1996, Constance Classen and David Howes co-authored the article “Understanding Culture: Anthropology as a Sensual Experience,” in which they demonstrated the centrality of sensory experience in three Indigenous North American cultures. They effectively illustrated how reorienting anthropology as a form of sensual understanding could profoundly transform anthropologists’ comprehension of culture.

A year later, in 1997, Classen published a foundational article titled “Foundations for an Anthropology of the Senses,” in which she introduced theoretical ideas for a new sensory-oriented turn in anthropology. These efforts culminated in what is now referred to—not merely as a “sensory turn”—but rather as a Sensory Revolution, a term used by David Howes in a 2006 article. The sensory revolution brought about a paradigmatic shift in anthropology. It no longer regarded the anthropology of the senses as a mere subfield, but rather as a full-fledged methodological and epistemological approach. This shift gave rise to the emergent discipline of sensory anthropology.

Sensory anthropology views culture and individuals as inherently sensual beings and structures. It teaches anthropologists that human presence and action within society and culture are made possible—primarily and

fundamentally—through sensory perception. Sensory perception, in fact, is cultural perception. Humans not only understand the world through the senses, but also articulate both their world and their place within it through sensory experience. Accordingly, sensory relations are cultural relations: the nature of one’s sensory relationships and the experiences that emerge from them constitute human cultural experience.

This conceptualization underpins David Howes’s definition of culture in his book *Sensual Relations* (2003), where he defines culture as “ways of sensing the world.” We understand the world in the manner in which we sense it. As he eloquently states, “The sensory order is not something we merely hear or see; it is something lived. Just as meanings are shared, so too are sensory experiences. The senses must be understood as cultural systems” (Howes, 2005, p. 3). Moreover, Howes stresses the decisive role of culture in determining the social significance of sensory attributes (Howes, 2003, p. 49). He continues to advocate for the investigation of culturally specific sensory models and the cultural representations they entail.

An insightful contribution in this vein comes from Izadi Jiran, whose article “Tasting Rituals: A Sensory Ethnography of Nazri Food in Tehran” explores the visual, olfactory, and gustatory dimensions of the diverse range of ritual foods and beverages offered during Muharram. She introduces the concept of the “foodscape” (ghazavareh), which has been instrumental and illuminating for the present author’s inquiry.

Methodology

The theoretical foundation of this research is rooted in sensory ethnography as conceptualized by Sarah Pink (2015). Pink presents a critique of traditional ethnographic paradigms which prioritize verbal and visual data, advocating instead for a multisensory and embodied approach to cultural research. According to Pink, the senses are not biologically fixed channels of perception, but culturally mediated modes of knowing, which vary across societies and social contexts.

Drawing on phenomenology, material culture studies, and non-representational theory, Pink frames the sensory as both a methodological entry point and a conceptual lens for understanding how people inhabit, interpret, and co-create their environments. She emphasizes that knowledge is not merely constructed cognitively but is lived and enacted through sensory experience (Pink, 2015, 25). As such, the body is not a passive receiver.

The current research is qualitative in nature and employs a descriptive-analytical methodology. Data were collected through three main tools: open and conversational interviews, participatory and active observation, and field notes. Eighteen interviews were conducted using purposive sampling with random selection. Thematic analysis was employed to identify and articulate both primary and secondary themes based on the lived experiences of participants.

Findings

Pilgrimage, especially the immense Arba'een walk, transcends a merely spiritual or cognitive event; it is a profoundly embodied and multisensory experience. Sensory anthropology emphasizes that our cultural perception of the world is inextricably intertwined with our senses. Within the context of Arba'een, the five senses—sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch—are not merely passive receivers, but actively participate in shaping and enriching the pilgrims' religious experience. From the visual scenes of the Mawakeb (service stations) and holy shrines to the lamentations that fill the air, from the aroma of frankincense and the apple scent attributed to Imam Hussein's shrine to the healing taste of votive food, and from touching flags and the shrine itself to enduring the physical hardships of the walk, each of these sensory dimensions actively contributes to the production of meaning and the strengthening of connection with the sacred. These sensory interactions transform the pilgrimage into a holistic and profound act of embodied worship, where faith is lived through tangible and palpable experiences.

1. Arba'een Rituals and the Experience of Taste:

David Sutton, as the originator of the term “gustemology,” argues that:

“Given that a focus on food and the senses allows us to explore some of the most basic boundaries of inside and outside, private and public, individual and collective, this topic offers an excellent window onto that elusive notion of everyday life that anthropologists wish to understand theoretically and examine ethnographically.” (Sutton, 2010, 209).

This perspective assigns a central role to food and the senses in understanding social issues, suggesting that through taste and related experiences, one can comprehend cultural categories. As it can be said:

“Perhaps food items are among the very few things capable of embodying culture within the bodies of individuals in a society. By eating something, individuals not only consume culturally approved food (‘cultural foods’) but also experience the distinct taste of their culture (‘tasting culture’). Moreover, they consciously or unconsciously activate and internalize the meanings embedded in food” (Izadi-Jiran, 2013, 28).

In the rituals of the Arba’een pilgrimage, all participants engage with food in some form. Whether pilgrims or servers, they either consume ritual food or prepare it. Along the route from Najaf to Karbala, the mawkibs (service stations) and their guests—who dominate much of the ritual space—present a recurring image of food and drink: long, crowded queues for receiving votive meals at mawkibs, people distributing various beverages along the walking route, and throughout Najaf and Karbala. These include cold water (called “māy bārid” in the Iraqi dialect), coffee, tea, and, in recent years—given temperatures reaching 50°C—cool lemon sharbat and doogh (laban in Arabic). All of this unfolds within a richly ritualized context.

A notable example is the votive offering of water along the Mash’ay (walking route) and in various parts of Najaf, Karbala, and other pilgrimage paths—a ubiquitous sight during Arba’een. For those offering water, this act holds special sanctity, as it symbolically connects to the thirst endured by Imam Hussain (AS), his companions, and family during the sacred event of Ashura. By distributing cold water to pilgrims under Iraq’s scorching sun, they infuse this ritual act with profound spiritual meaning.

Izadi-Jiran in his article “Tasting Rituals: A Sensory Ethnography of Votive Food in Tehran,” introduces the concept of “foodscape” to analyze the appearances, aromas, and flavors of diverse votive foods and beverages in Muharram rituals. He argues:

“The foodscape constitutes a gustatory event within Muharram rituals that seeks to express and ritualize experience. It imparts a distinctive modality to rituals, rendering the acts of food-giving and food-eating inseparable from ritual practice. On another level, the foodscape possesses agency—specifically, the power to shape ritual experience. Eating, as the central act of this gustatory event or foodscape, operates as a practice that generates cognitive and affective states: from sociability to emotional attachment, from spatial presence to spatial domination, from memory recall to memory manipulation, and from externalization to internalization. Through eating, understanding emerges, and sensory connections produce knowledge. When food becomes attached to an object, place, or experience, it becomes part of that object, place, or experience. Gustatory connection ranks among the most powerful sensory linkages in both ritual and everyday contexts, as it transforms perceived food into bodily experience in its most profound and impactful form” (Izadi-Jiran, 2013, pp. 30-31).

“This experience connects with the perception of the sacred in its multiple and varied forms. From an anthropological perspective, even standing in line for food at a mawkib (ritual hospitality station) constitutes a ritual act—as pilgrims consider themselves guests of Imam Hussain (AS). As some pilgrims expressed during the author’s fieldwork interviews: ‘This is blessed sustenance (رزق متبرک) that Imam Hussain himself has prepared for his pilgrims; thus, the food contains divine light (نور), healing (شفا), and mercy (رحمت).’” (Author’s field notes).

This spiritual perspective holds even greater significance among the Iraqi people, to the extent that some consider even the leftover food of pilgrims to be sacred and blessed. Abu Ja’far, who runs a mudhif (traditional guesthouse) in Najaf, recounts that he and his family dry the leftover rice from the meals of the pilgrims of Imam Hussain (AS) and store it until the

following Arba'een. His wife then adds these dried rice grains to their daily meals so that they may “host Aba Abdillah (Imam Hussain) at their table every day” and partake of the blessed food. He and his family believe this food has healing properties and even administer it to the sick as a remedy.

The taste and flavor of this ritual food—consumed within a sacred and ritualized space—are incomparable to ordinary everyday meals. The lived experience of the devout testifies to the distinct taste of this blessed food, revealing even broader dimensions of its spiritual significance. One of the mawkib servants, who believed Imam Hussain’s food to be a source of healing, recounted:

“Two years ago, we hosted a Shi’a pilgrim from America. After returning home, he contacted us and shared his story: initially, due to concerns about hygiene in some mawkibs, he had hesitated to eat the votive meals. Yet, he did not deprive himself of this sacred ritual food and partook in meals at various mawkibs throughout his journey. Upon returning to his country and undergoing medical tests, he discovered that a rare illness that had plagued him for years had completely disappeared. He attributed his healing to the votive food, experiencing a profound connection with the sacred through this ritual nourishment.”

While standing in an overcrowded food queue at the Atabat Alawia (the sacred precinct of Imam Ali (AS)) in Najaf, I conversed with a young female engineering student from Tehran. When I inquired why she endured the long queue under the scorching sun, she responded - while counting prayers on her tasbih:

“This food contains divine light (nūr) - it is light itself! One must partake of this blessed food to illuminate their heart. You’ll never find this taste in any restaurant because we believe in its baraka (blessing). We

believe the Imam is our host, and this shrine food enlightens our hearts, purifying us before we visit Imam Hussain. I never queue anywhere - not even at the university cafeteria - but I'll stand here for hours because this is the food of Amir al-Mu'minin (Imam Ali). Insha' Allah this will become my rizq (sustenance), because if it doesn't, it can't truly nourish..."

At the "Yale Umm al-Banin" mawkib in Karbala, I observed women carefully preserving leftover bread as sacred souvenirs. They firmly believed these blessed remnants could heal the sick, demonstrating how votive food transcends material nutrition to embody spiritual value. As Izadi-Jiran observes:

"Foodscapes are so potent they don't just feed people - they transform entire spaces into gustatory experiences. Ritual systems employ foodscapes (or gustatory events) for their efficacy, sometimes becoming entirely gustatory phenomena themselves" (2013, 43).

Ritual Food as the Central Ritual Act among the People of Iraq

Food constitutes a fundamental element in the structure of both material and spiritual culture across all human societies. Due to its special status, many ritual practices and symbolic actions revolve around food. Ritual foods, beyond their earthly and material dimension, possess a sacred and transcendent quality. In various cultures, ritual food serves as a medium for connecting with the metaphysical realm. It is not confined to any single religion, sect, or geographic location. Numerous examples from around the world demonstrate that such foods function beyond the basic act of nourishment, carrying spiritual, religious, and social significance.

Moreover, food acts as a bearer of meaning within the realm of social relations and religious beliefs and practices. As a cultural phenomenon, food is not merely a biochemical substance; rather, it is a signifier of social bonds. In every society, the act of offering food or drink often symbolizes love,

affection, or friendship. Accepting such an offer signifies the recipient's acknowledgment and positive response to these sentiments. Conversely, withholding food—such as a mother disciplining her child—or refusing an offer of food in a culturally meaningful context can express anger or hostility. In this sense, rejecting food may symbolize a rejection of love or friendship, or an indication of animosity toward the offeror (Foster & Anderson, 1980).

During the Arbaeen pilgrimage, one witnesses an extraordinarily vast distribution of free food within a ritual context. One of the central cultural functions of this massive event is the deep social bonding it fosters between the nations of Iran and Iraq. These two countries, which endured the bitter experience of an eight-year war and the resulting political and social ruptures, now find themselves united in solidarity and empathy through such collective ritual acts.

Social semiotics holds that the world around us is structured as a network of meanings, and it is essential to uncover the values embedded within it. This field of knowledge examines meaningful human actions within specific cultural and social contexts and elucidates how meaning operates in practice. In essence, it highlights the social dimensions of meaning as it emerges in the interplay between individuals and society. Various communicative modalities—visual, auditory, sensory, perceptual, and more—serve as media through which individuals engage and connect within the social sphere (Aṭhari-Nik, 2022, 34).

According to the principles of socio-semantics as articulated by the Paris School, which emphasizes generative rather than merely descriptive semiotics and focuses on the processes of meaning production—three essential components must be considered in the semiotic analysis of food (Park, 2001, pp. 76–78): first, the production and presentation of food and the emergence of a particular taste or flavor; second, the pragmatic function of food in gen-

erating a sensory experience for the eater; and third, the social-cultural communicative capacity of food, which plays a pivotal role in shaping meaning.

The first and most basic aspect in the discussion of ritual food is the pleasure of eating and drinking, which relates to the gustatory experience already addressed. However, from an anthropological perspective, what holds greater significance is the role of belief as a modality in attributing cultural value to ritual food. For example, in a mawkib kitchen in the city of Karbala, it is explicitly stated that performing ablution (wuḍū') is a prerequisite for preparing votive food. According to the belief of the mawkib volunteers, "this kitchen belongs to Imam Husayn, and therefore, one must enter it in a state of ritual purity, as the Imam is present and watching over us."

Likewise, it is frequently observed that the prepared votive meals are decorated with inscriptions such as "Yā Ḥusayn" and "Yā Zaynab." Beyond their aesthetic appeal, these inscriptions reflect the operation of belief as a modal value, shaping the symbolic and spiritual dimensions of food. Additionally, for many of these practitioners, reciting Ziyārat 'Āshūrā' or listening to elegiac recitations (maddāhī) while cooking becomes a form of embodied spiritual experience, where devotional acts and culinary labor converge into a unified ritual performance.

According to Éric Landowski, the French social semiotician, meaning is not produced solely within linguistic systems but is instead constituted through social interactions and lived experiences. By emphasizing elements such as presence, situation, sensory perception, and interaction, Landowski argues that the understanding of meaning emerges as a felt dimension of existence. The subject becomes meaningful and present through engagement with the world, through social practices and lived experience (Landowski, 2004, 35).

From this perspective, ritual food functions not merely as a symbol, a social contract, or an object within mourning ceremonies, but as a meaningful medium in which religious value is implicitly embedded within its deeper layers. This kind of food affects not only the physical body but also influences the emotional and perceptual dimensions of the individual. Within the mourning or pilgrimage community, an intersubjective relationship is established between individual pleasures, such as the act of eating, and the collective emotional and cultural fabric of that society. In this discursive space, sensation is transformed into perception.

Ritual food, then, serves as a medium through which affective and intimate connections—a shared emotional resonance—are created among individuals. Its virtue, however, does not lie in the materiality of the food itself but rather in the network of meanings and relationships it engenders. In the domain of votive food (*nazri*), the sacralization of time and space becomes a key criterion of value. These temporal and spatial coordinates, imbued with religious significance, transform the food into a sacred object. Within this ritual context, the pragmatic subject is the agent who bestows meaning upon everything, rendering food not merely functional but inherently meaningful.

The question of why food assumes such a central and expansive role during the Arba‘een rituals is one often emphasized by critics of these practices. However, based on the author’s extensive and in-depth ethnographic conversations with Iraqi hosts, an understanding of their lived experience reveals a multiplicity of embedded meanings and intentions. These include: serving the mourners as a means of spiritual proximity or heartfelt connection to Imam Husayn; seeking intercession (*shafā‘a*); offering drinks in remembrance of the thirst suffered by the ritual figures of the Karbala event; feeding the pilgrims on behalf of the Ahl al-Bayt,

especially in symbolic reference to their return to Karbala in captivity on Arba'een; showing empathy with the Imam's family in a paradigmatic mythical tragedy; attaining a sense of spiritual tranquility through ritual participation; fulfilling vows (nadhr), and transferring the merit (thawāb) of the act to deceased loved ones as a form of posthumous benevolence.

In Iraqi maḍyafas—which are often humble rural homes with very limited resources—lavish meals are nonetheless prepared for pilgrims. The host endeavors, within the constraints of their means, to offer the best possible hospitality, precisely because the food is attributed to a sacred figure, namely Imam Husayn. Within the lifeworld (Lebenswelt) of the host, this act of hospitality is seen as a delegated gesture on behalf of a sacred and spiritual figure, forming the axis and logic of the offering. Accordingly, Iraqis hold the belief that “lā sarf fī al-ḍayf” —there is no extravagance in hospitality—emphasizing that such service is never considered excessive. In most cases, this generosity is made possible only through long-term family savings, accumulated over the course of the year for this very purpose.

2.Arba'een Rituals and the Haptics of the Sacred:

Beyond the sacred foodscape and gustatory experience in Arba'een rituals, the other senses of pilgrims and servants also play a vital role in this spiritual journey. The deliberate infliction of hardship and pain upon the body, through acts such as sineh-zani (chest-beating), latm-zani (self-flagellation on the head), zanjir-zani (chain self-flagellation), carrying, large and often heavy flags during the pilgrimage, weeping, the immense labor of setting up and maintaining mawkibs (service stations), preparing food, and enduring grueling 24-hour work shifts for over twenty days—constitutes a defining feature of Arba'een rituals.

Abbas Sarraf, a servant at the mawkib of Toronto’s pilgrims, recounts the paradox of exhaustion and transcendence: “There are 150 of us working in three shifts—50 per shift. Since morning, I’ve only prayed Zuhr and lay down for 10 minutes before returning to work.”

Interviewer: “You must be exhausted. Don’t you feel tired, Mr. Sarraf?”

Sarraf: “My body is exhausted from the workload, but I don’t feel tired... not at all. Today, I was extremely fatigued by afternoon [when the interview took place]. A colleague handed me a sandwich, and as I took the first bite, I realized I was nearly fainting from hunger—I’d eaten nothing all day, only drinking water and sharbat...”

Through ethnographic documentation, the author has recorded numerous instances where *mawkib* and *mudhif* servants subsist on mere minutes of sleep per day while maintaining continuous service to pilgrims. This extraordinary state of wakefulness is interpreted through a theological framework where:

A. Bodily Depletion as Spiritual Capital

- The physical toll of 20+ hour workdays is transfigured into quwwat rūḥiyya (spiritual strength).

B. The Alchemy of Suffering

- Hardship undergoes sacralization through what pilgrims term ināyat al-Imam (the Imam’s grace).
- Exhaustion becomes ṭāthir al-nafs (soul’s purification), paralleling Sufi concepts of riyāḍa (spiritual discipline).

C. The Haptic Liturgy of Service

- Calloused hands and aching feet become ritual instruments.
- The body transforms into a medium for experiencing sacred presence.

The haptic perception of pilgrims plays a significant role in various ways during the Arbaeen mourning rituals. A clear example of this is the heat exhaustion, foot pain, and blisters experienced during the long pilgrimage walk—a form of voluntary suffering intertwined with spiritual pleasure. Notably, some pilgrims walk barefoot as a sign of reverence for Imam Hussain (AS) and to empathize with the suffering of the captives of Karbala, enduring physical hardship in solidarity with their ordeal.

On the other hand, Iraqi volunteers (khādimīn) enthusiastically strive to serve these pilgrims, tending to their blistered feet, dusting off their clothes and bodies, and offering massages to alleviate their pain and fatigue.

Izadi-Jiran writes about the involvement of senses in the ritual space of Muharram:

“Even the visual space of Muharram, largely dominated by the black of clothing and flags, casts a melancholic mood over the collective psyche, ensuring that the weight of grief is felt by all. Yet, in contrast to this visual and tactile suffering, there lies the sensory pleasure of taste and smell. The sacred and ritual elements, when external to the individual or on the surface of the mourner’s body, are experienced as sorrowful and oppressive. However, when spiritual energies are meant to permeate the individual inwardly, they are experienced as pleasurable. Thus, the senses of taste and smell represent the pleasurable dimension of ritual, while sight and touch embody its painful aspect. Witnessing sorrowful scenes and the color black, the burning of tearful eyes, carrying heavy standards (‘alams or rayat), and long processions—all these sensory perceptions inflict pain and discomfort, compelling the individual to endure sensory suffering. This serves both to align them with the ritual’s gravity and, ultimately, to achieve a form of spiritual catharsis (2013: 39–40).”

Moreover, the tactile engagement with sacred icons—flags, symbolic objects like the cradle of Ali Asghar (AS), the panja (hand emblem), blessed green cloths, the shrine (zarīh), and the soil (turbah) of Imam Husain (AS), as well as the act of kissing them—all function as mediums for transmitting the perception and experience of the sacred to pilgrims.

3.The Rituals of Arbaeen and the Sense of Smell:

The sense of smell has always been one of the most important human senses in both material and spiritual perception. Beyond its functional role in environmental adaptation, smell gives meaning to human life. The human mind constantly seeks to analyze and categorize its surroundings, and through smell, it unconsciously distinguishes and classifies places and people. Scent can serve as a criterion for creating such distinctions. Moreover, since smell conveys deeper impressions than sight or sound, it forms powerful memories, such as the recollection of a past experience triggered by a specific fragrance.

Alongside the taste of ritual food, the aromatic richness of various dishes, the fragrance of frankincense and wild rue (esfand) that permeate the ritual space, and the sacred scent of the shrine must also be acknowledged. These olfactory elements deeply engage the pilgrims' senses, contributing to the multisensory experience of Arbaeen.

The sense of smell evokes pleasant or unpleasant emotional responses in humans. When encountering a new food or environment for the first time, the initial sensory engagement is often through smell, which imprints the new experience into memory. This olfactory trigger can instantly transport individuals back to cherished moments of the past—an effect experienced even more profoundly in sacred spaces.

Since ancient times, it has been customary to fragrance holy sites with spiritually uplifting scents such as perfume, rosewater, musk, ambergris, oud, esfand (wild rue), and frankincense. These aromas serve to purify and sanctify sacred spaces, as pleasant fragrances enhance the spiritual atmosphere of worship.

A deeply rooted Shi‘i belief holds that the shrine of Imam Husayn (AS) emits a uniquely cool and soothing fragrance reminiscent of apples. Devotees who visit the martyrdom site (qatl-gāh) or approach the sacred shrine (darīh) at dawn often report perceiving this distinct apple-like aroma. This belief is so pervasive that it has been poetically immortalized in Persian devotional literature, with multiple poets referencing the “scent of apples” emanating from Imam Husayn’s (AS) shrine.

This tradition originates from a ḥadīth narrative preserved in classical Shi‘i sources. The account relates that one day, Imams Hasan and Husayn (AS) visited the Prophet Muhammad (SAWS), where they encountered the archangel Gabriel (Jibrā’īl) in the earthly form of Dahīya al-Kalbī. Gabriel carried heavenly fruits—apples, pears, and pomegranates—which he presented to the two grandsons of the Prophet. Overjoyed, they ran to their grandfather, who smelled the fruits before instructing them to share the bounty with their parents. The family of Imam Ali (AS) abstained from consuming the fruits until the Prophet (SAWS) joined them for the blessed meal. Miraculously, the fruits replenished themselves as they were eaten, maintaining their quantity until the martyrdom of Lady Fāṭima al-Zahrā’ (AS), when the pomegranate disappeared. Following Imam Ali’s (AS) martyrdom, the pear too vanished, leaving only the apple until Imam Husayn’s (AS) final moments.

Imam Husayn (AS) testified: “This apple remained with me even during the siege when water was denied to us. Whenever thirst overcame me, I would smell it and my thirst would abate—until my suffering intensified and I became certain of my impending martyrdom, at which point I consumed it.” Imam Zayn al-‘Ābidīn (AS) later narrated: “My father uttered these words moments before his martyrdom. When he fell, the scent of apples permeated the battlefield. I searched for the fruit but found nothing, though its fragrance lingered. Later, when I visited his grave, the same apple scent emanated from it.” The ḥadīth concludes with this remarkable promise: “Any sincere Shi‘a who visits Husayn’s (AS) shrine at dawn should seek this apple fragrance—if they come with pure intention, they will indeed perceive it” (Majlisī, *Biḥār al-Anwār*, 1403 AH, 43:289).

This olfactory miracle serves multiple theological functions: it authenticates the sanctity of the shrine, confirms the spiritual connection between the Imams and their followers, and transforms the act of visitation (*ziyāra*) into a multisensory experience where the metaphysical becomes physically perceptible to the faithful. The recurring apple motif—from the celestial fruit to the battlefield aroma and finally the shrine’s perpetual fragrance—creates a tangible link between Imam Husayn’s (AS) earthly suffering and his eternal presence as an intercessor.

Nevertheless, it is evident that the sense of smell possesses such potency that it extends into abstract domains of pilgrimage and conceptualization within the realm of culture and beliefs. This is clearly manifested in how pilgrims and custodians speak of this “spiritual olfaction,” describing their experience as perceiving “the fragrance of Paradise” along the path of Husayn (Tariq al-Husayn). Some characterize this metaphysical atmosphere through expressions like “the scent of angels” or “the divine perfume.”

A noteworthy observation emerges from Sufi literature, which contains numerous references to the mystical states of Uways al-Qarani and his spiritual olfaction. Among these accounts circulates a famous hadith attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH): “I perceive the fragrance of Paradise coming from the direction of Yemen” (Furuzanfar, 2008, 73). Rumi, in his *Mathnawi*, has alluded to this very narrative.

4.Arbaeen Rituals and the Sense of Sight:

As previously discussed, the interaction between the pilgrim’s body and the material-ritual space plays a fundamental role in shaping pilgrimage practices. The Arbaeen pilgrimage, as an embodied ritual experience, is deeply intertwined with basic human senses, particularly sight. Throughout the walking journey (*mashāya*), the pilgrim visually engages with all components of mourning rituals. The black-clad mourning tents (*mawākib*), guesthouses (*maḍāyif*), sacred shrines, and the attire of mourners collectively evoke an overwhelming sense of grief. However, as participants themselves describe, this grief is not bitter or agonizing; rather, it differs fundamentally from worldly sorrow. It purifies their hearts, preparing them to connect with Imam Husayn (AS) and opening them to the spiritual joys of pilgrimage.

Moreover, the visual encounter with symbolic objects along the path—such as the cradle of Ali Asghar (AS), reenactments of Imam Husayn’s (AS) martyrdom (known as “*shabīh*”), and processions depicting the captivity of the Ahl al-Bayt (AS)—plays a crucial role in transmitting spiritual perceptions. Many *mawkib* organizers deliberately stage these visual elements, embedding them with ritual significance to materialize religious emotions. This visual dimension itself becomes a ritual act, reinforcing the sacred narrative through embodied observation.

5. Arbaeen Rituals and the Sense of Hearing:

Lamentations (nawha) and mourning melodies have always served as fundamental pillars of Shi'i mourning traditions, honoring the martyrs of Karbala. These historically rooted chants, with their profound emotional impact, facilitate the transmission of spirituality and enable participants to experience the sacred. In traditional mourning rituals (rawda khwani), musical instruments were generally absent except in mourning processions, and even then, only specific instruments like drums were permitted. However, with the expansion of mass media, the proliferation of audiovisual technologies, and the transformations of the modern era, the integration of music with religious eulogy (maddahi) has emerged as a new phenomenon. This development, while innovative, represents a departure from indigenous practices and creates dissonance with traditional structures.

During the Arbaeen season, mourning processions (hey'ats) maintain a continuous state of lamentation and spiritual connection with Imam Hussein (AS) from the moment they begin their journey toward Karbala. Nearly all mawkib (stations) are equipped with sound systems broadcasting various forms of lamentation poetry (nawha) in Arabic, Turkish, Persian, and other languages. The loudspeakers remain active almost 24/7, though their volume decreases significantly during late-night hours.

The auditory landscape—comprising recitations of Karbala's tragedies, the rhythmic chest-beating (latm) of mourning groups, and passionate Iraqi-style eulogies (maddahi) echoing from mawkib—creates an immersive environment. This enables participants to achieve a profound spiritual experience fundamentally rooted in sensory perception.

In recent years, there has been a noticeable rise in popularized mourning styles (pop-style maddahi) in both Iran and Iraq. Their appeal lies in

energetic performances, youth-oriented formats, and emotional intensity, attracting large audiences, particularly among younger generations. However, this trend has faced sharp criticism from religious authorities (marja'iyya) and political institutions. These non-traditional lamentations, often perceived as subversive in both form and content, have grown significantly. During Arbaeen 2024, The Imam Hussain Holy Shrine (العتبة الحسينية) precinct officially banned such “overly exuberant” mourning processions.

Notably, even mundane sounds contribute to the pilgrimage’s sensory tapestry. The nostalgic cries of Iraqi mawkib staff—“Māy bārid... Halawī-jakum yā zuwwār... Māy bārid” (“Cold water... Welcome pilgrims... Cold water”)—evoke cherished memories of the Arbaeen journey, becoming an integral part of its auditory identity.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the Arbaeen pilgrimage is far more than a spiritual journey—it is a deeply embodied and sensorial experience in which the senses are not passive receptors but active agents of meaning-making. Among these, ritual food emerges as the most central and pervasive sensory form, operating not only as nourishment but as a medium of emotional, spiritual, and social transmission. The multisensory interactions—tasting votive food, smelling sacred incense, touching symbolic objects, hearing lamentations, and witnessing ritual displays—create an immersive atmosphere of sacred presence.

The findings reveal that the materiality of religious practice—particularly food—serves as an interface between the sacred and the social, allowing pilgrims to internalize religious meanings through bodily acts. Ritual food, when consumed within sacred time and space, is perceived to possess healing

power (shifā'), divine blessing (baraka), and transformative efficacy. These embodied experiences are further shaped by cultural models of belief, such as the sacralization of generosity, ritual purity, and symbolic representation.

By centering the sensory lifeworld of pilgrims, this research contributes to the growing field of sensory anthropology and advances our understanding of how religious meaning is lived, felt, and practiced. The Arbaeen pilgrimage, in this light, is not simply a theological event but a sensorial rite of passage—a space where faith is tasted, heard, touched, smelled, and seen, transforming ritual participation into a holistic act of embodied devotion.

Suggestions for Future Research:

Based on the findings of this research concerning the sensory experience of the Arba'een pilgrimage, several avenues for future investigations are proposed that can expand our understanding of this profoundly embodied and multisensory ritual:

- Impact of Cultural and Technological Changes on Sensory Dimensions: Given the advent of new technologies and social transformations, the influence of these factors on pilgrims' sensory experiences (e.g., the use of smartphones for recording and sharing sensory experiences, or shifts in the types of votive foods offered) can be explored.
- Deeper Analysis of Individual Senses: While this article provided a comprehensive overview of all senses, future research could delve more deeply into one or two specific senses (e.g., olfaction and its impact on collective and individual memory, or touch and its role in fostering solidarity and healing).
- Investigation of Gender and Age Roles in Sensory Perception: Potential differences in how various gender groups or different age groups (e.g., children versus adults and the elderly) experience the rituals sensorially could be researched.

- Longitudinal Studies: Conducting longitudinal studies with pilgrims who have participated in the Arba'een walk multiple times could reveal changes in their sensory perceptions and meaning-making over time.
- Impact of Sensory Experiences on Pilgrims' Mental Health and Well-being: Research could be designed to investigate how sensory experiences (e.g., the consumption of votive food or enduring physical hardships) influence the mental health, resilience, and sense of well-being of pilgrims upon their return from the pilgrimage.

These suggestions can significantly enrich the existing literature in sensory anthropology, religious studies, and pilgrimage studies, deepening our understanding of the complexities inherent in the interaction between humans, the body, and the sacred.

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