

## **Axiology of Pilgrimage: Malaysian Shi'ites *Ziyarat* in Iran and Iraq<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract.** The religious rites of Shia remain a mystery to Malaysia's Sunnite majority. One such rite is the *ziyarat* (visits to sacred sites). This essay highlights the rituals conducted and performed by Malaysian Shi'ites during their seasonal pilgrimage to Iran and Iraq. Their rituals and behaviors during these pilgrimages to holy shrines in Iran and Iraq were documented from the standpoint of a cultural anthropologist. Rites from two sites, Mashad and Karbala, are presented in this study. Applying Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism as a conceptual framework, and Charles Brooks's methodology through social interaction and participant-observation, this essay aims to analyze and understand their rites, and the values and significance of these rites. By doing so, the axiological aspects of the rites were observed and clarified, thus enabling non Shi'ite Muslims to perceive greyest area of Shia rites, as performed by Shi'ites from Malaysia in their pilgrimage to Iran and Iraq.

**Keywords:** Shi'ism, Karbala, Axiology, Sufism, religious ritual, symbolic interactionism

### INTRODUCTION

In Islam, Shi'ism<sup>2</sup> is very distinct from Sunnism, especially in the aspect of Imamology. This study is not intended to disseminate theological issues between Sunni and Shia, rather, it is grounded in cultural-anthropology, in order to understand axiological aspects of Shi'ism during pilgrimage. What, then, is the importance of the Imamate, or socio-religious leadership, to the Shi'ites? Karl Heinrich Gobel (1989: 4) answered this question in brief:

According to Shi'ite doctrines, Muhammad had selected, through designation (*nas*), Ali as his successor, and Caliph (Imam); Ali had in turn appointed the next Caliph, and so forth. The particular attributes (*sifat*) of the Imams and, most of all, those of Ali are the criteria to which all rulers will have to adhere. The conditions (*shurut*) that a legitimate ruler must meet are *nass* (written statement), *hikmah* (wisdom), and *afdaliyyah* (seniority).

From the explanation above, it is clear that the Imamate is very central to Shia Islam. Imams are “responsible to the *ummah* from the perspective of Islamic government, of Islamic sciences and injunctions, and of leadership and innovative guidance in the spiritual life” (Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba’i, 2007: 191). There are misperceptions that Shi’ites believed and placed their Imam above the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). The fact is Shi’ites believe that the role of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is to receive Divine injunctions, while the Imams are the guardians of Divine religion. Therefore, after the event of the Prophet’s demise, Shi’ites saw the need for the role of the Imam. They believe Imams to be responsible for safeguarding the religion and guiding the *ummah*. To the Shi’ites, Imams are the real *al Khulafa al Rashidun*, the twelve Imams of the Pure Prophet’s Progeny (Muhamad al Tijani Samawi, 2000: 142). In addition, Shi’ites also believe that the “functions of Prophecy and Imamate may be joined in one person. As appointed to prophet Abraham and Prophet Muhammad saw” (Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba’i, 2007: 206–7).

In sum, the Imam is “the person on whose shoulders lies the responsibility for the guidance of a community through Divine Command” and that he is “the most virtuous and perfect of men” (Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba’i, 2007: 211). The quotation below explains those persons that are regarded as Imams among the Shi’ites:

Numerous prophetic *hadiths* have been transmitted in Shi’ism concerning the description of the Imams, their number, the fact that they are all of the *Quraysh* and of the Household of the Prophet, and the fact that the promised *Mahdi* is among them and the last of them. Also, there are definitive words of the Prophet concerning the Imamate of Ali and his being the first Imam and also definitive utterances of the Prophet and Ali concerning the imamate of the second Imam the same way the Imams before have left definitive statements concerning the Imamate of these who were to come after them. According to these utterances contained in Twelve-Imam Shi’ite sources, the Imams are twelve in number and their holy names are as follows: Ali ibn Abi Talib, Hassan ibn Ali, Husayn ibn Ali, Ali ibn Husayn, Muhammad ibn Ali, Ja’far ibn Muhammad, Musa ibn Jaafar, Ali ibn Musa, Muhammad ibn Ali, Ali ibn Muhammad, Hassan ibn Ali and the Mahdi. (Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba’i, 2007: 212)

Today, four of the Imams’ tombs are in Medina, Saudi Arabia. One of them is in Mashad, Iran and six of them are in Iraq. Shi’ites believe that the twelfth Imam, the promised *Mahdi* went into occultation (*ghaibah*) and will appear again to fill the world with justice and confront all kinds of corruption.

## THE ZIYARAT

As emphasized before, in Shia Islam, the Imams are essential and central to religious practice. Thus, their struggles and tragic lives are of huge importance to Shi'ites. Considering that, Shi'ites' *ziyarat* (pilgrimage) or visit to pay respect to these Imams warrants study. According to Sayyid Hossein Nasr (2007: 255) the religious rites performed or practised by the Shi'ites and Sunnis "are essentially the same including the hajj (in Mecca and medina) but it is the pilgrimage to other holy places that is emphasised more in Shi'ism than in Sunnism." He added:

The visit to the tombs of Imams and saints plays an integral role in the religious life of Shi'ites, one which in fact is compensated for in a way in the Sunni world by visits to the tombs of saints or what in North Africa are called tombs of marabouts. Of course, these forms of pilgrimage are not obligatory rites such as the prayers, fasting and hajj, but they play such an important religious role that they can hardly be overlooked. (Sayyid Hossein Nasr, 2007: 256)

The cultural activities performed during their pilgrimage, such as *rawdab khani* (a combination of sermons, recitation of poems, Quranic verses and street plays meant to depict the lives of the tragic Imams - particularly Imam Husein, who was martyred in Karbala), are keys to understanding more about them (Sayyid Hossein Nasr, 2007: 256).

Steven L. Gordon (1981) explains that culture provides ways to express social emotions. The act of mourning the loss of their leaders is expressed directly or non-directly during these *ziyarats*. Other than *rawdab khani*, there are also presentations of *ta'ziyeh* (passion play) and 'street processions during which people chant, cry and sometimes beat themselves' (Sayyid Hossein Nasr, 2007: 257). The social emotions expressed during the pilgrimage are interpreted, evaluated and modified according to their feeling rules. From a sociological point of view, feeling rules are "appropriate ways to express the internal sensations" (Joan Ferrante, 2011). These cultural behaviours are also presented symbolically.

In this case, Shi'ism is a transnational-supraethnic belief crossing many kinds of boundaries. For instance, one could conduct a study on how Pakistani Shi'ites or Turkish Shi'ites or Malay Shi'ites express their grief commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Husein on 'Ashura day. There are many interesting differences and similarities.

Moreover, *Ithna 'ashariyya* Shia is divided into two major categories; Usuli and Ahbari. There are many technicalities that distinguish these two groups, for example, the Usuli believe that “during the absence of the Twelfth Imam, the qualified Muslim scholars (*mujtahid*) are allowed to engage in independent reasoning to solve their daily problems,” while the Ahbari believe that during the occultation of Imam Mahdi “it is not permissible for religious scholars to engage in the use of reason to enact a certain judgement, to apply the principles of the law to a specific problem or situation” (Kallim Siddiqui, 1996: 112–3). The Usuli Shi'ites must follow guidance of their own elected *marja'i taqlid* (any senior *mujtahid* selected to provide guidance as to *fiqh*) while Ahbari Shi'ites do not follow any *marja'i taqlid* or *mujtahid*. In sum, the Usuli and Ahbari manifest a scholastic dispute over jurisprudential methodology.

These two perspectives offer different ways of thinking and acting. During the *ziyarat*, or pilgrimage, the Usuli and Ahbari Shi'ites have their own ways of expressing their social emotions. For instance, the act of *qama zani* (flagellations on the day of *ashura* in Karbala) is only performed by the Ahbari Shi'ites, while the Usuli Shi'ites avoid this controversial act since there are religious rulings (fatwas) issued by their *mujtahid* or *marja'* forbidding *qama zani*. Thus, Usuli Shi'ites choose to donate their blood to hospitals rather than shedding it. Most Malay Shi'ites are Usuli and therefore avoid *qama zani* in accordance with their *marjas'* rulings (Ibnu Azmi al Haidari, 2010)<sup>3</sup>.

The practice of *qama zani*, or bloody flagellation, was introduced into Shi'ism by “extremist Shi'ite groups, probably by the Qizilbash.” It has also been claimed that flagellation was introduced by newly converted Shi'ites in the regions of Caucasus and Azerbaijan. Flagellation therefore may reflect the “influence of Christian practices,” as the newly converted Shi'ites were Christian before embracing Shia Islam. Yitzhak Nakash (2008: 217-234) also pointed out that flagellation was practised in South Eastern Caucasus at the beginning of the twentieth century by the “poorest segments of the population.”

In fact, an academic investigation by Werner Ende (2008: 33-49) shows that bloody flagellation as “an expression of deep allegiance” is practised by the “uneducated” Shi'ites and “people who are not well versed in the rules of Sharia.” According to Ende, flagellation became popular at the end of the 19th century in Iraq. Nonetheless, the ritual was endorsed some Shi'ite scholars who feared they would lose control

over the Shi'ite masses, most of whom were uneducated. In his article, Ende analyzed Sayyid Muhsin al-Amin al-Amili (d.1952) stance regarding this matter. Al-Amili, a Lebanese Shi'ite scholar, rejected flagellations as a great *fitna* (scandal) and *bid'a* (unlawful innovation) in his work *al Tan-zih li-A'mal al Shabih*, published in 1928. Al-Amili suggested that the occasion of *ashura* should be celebrated in a “way that it can be transformed into an instrument of Shi'ite missionary work, not by spoiling the image of Shia by quoting false traditions, spreading superstitious legends and endorsing flagellations.” However at that point in time, Al Amili's appeal to reject bloody flagellation “received only small support.”

Today, bloody flagellation, or *qama zani*, is rejected by the majority of Shi'ite scholars (List of Shi'ites Marja or Mujtahid That Forbid Qama Zani, 2010). Sayyid Muhsin al-Amin al-Amili's view was again published in 1973, at which time it gained the support of the Shia public. While Usuli Shi'ites are more dominant than Ahbari Shi'ites, Shi'ites nowadays have mostly abandoned the controversial ritual following edicts issued by their *marja's*. For instance, Grand Ayatullah Ali Khamenei's (2009) issued an edict forbidding *qama zani*. Flagellation is somehow still defended by its “uneducated” fans and “people who are not well versed in the rules of Sharia” living in a few parts of Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan (Werner Ende, 2008: 49).

Taking into account all these complexities, Shi'itic culture provides us with rich ingredients and broad areas of study. This point leads us to an interesting question in this essay: what are the contents and values of Malay Shi'ites' pilgrimages to Iran and Iraq, and how are they carried out?

As stressed from the beginning, this essay is not intended to dwell on controversial subjects of sectarian debate. I have to point out that my interest is firstly, to understand why Malay Shi'ites make a pilgrimage to Iran and Iraq; secondly, to observe the rituals practised during their *ziyarat*s (visits) to these sacred places; thirdly, to perceive the meanings of symbolic objects and acts during their *ziyarat*; and, finally, to comprise Malay Shi'ite culture. In order to achieve this, I am adapting Herbert Blumer's (1969) symbolic interactionism as the conceptual framework.

## SYMBOLS AND VALUES IN RELIGIOUS RITES

Symbolic interactionism suggests that “objects for the human being are really social objects” and these objects are “defined and redefined in in-

teraction” (Joel M. Charon, 1979: 38–9). Basically an object changes because the use for it changes. Joel M. Charon (1979: 39) gave an example of how the meaning of the term communism is different to “a Soviet patriot than it is to a Wall Street broker.” Based on this theory, the term *ahlul bayt* (the Prophet’s household and his descendants) has different meanings, definitions, representations and importance for a Sunnite than for a Shi’ite.

From Shia perspective, *ahlul bayt* indicates Prophet Muhammad’s (pbuh) household and the twelve Imams (al Kulayni, 2010: 11). Symbols as a form of communication can be interpreted and can be found through i) words; as words represent ideas, feelings, values and have social meanings, ii) acts; as acts can be intentional and meant for something or someone, and iii) objects; as objects when given a meaning represent something valuable such as cross or a piece of cloth named flag (Joel M. Charon, 1979: 42). For Malay Shi’ites, the rites of pilgrimage and activities such as prayers are therefore symbols and acts of communication between people, and between themselves and their Imams – and these symbols are meaningful and arbitrary. By studying these symbols, Malay Shi’ites social world can be acknowledged and what lies beneath can be put on the table. By understanding these symbols the axiology of a pilgrimage can be understood.

Erving Goffman (1983: 12–3) explained that political and religious gatherings or carnivals gave “enough collectivities” to understand the “celebrants behaviour,” that anything “macroscopically significant resulted from the ceremonies” can be examined and considered researchable. Goffman also stressed that “the number of people responding in unison to the same platform event apparently had lasting influence on some participants” and it is interesting to see how the rituals reflected on the participants and “how the occasion contributed to the political hegemony of its impresarios.” There is no doubt that the best opportunity to understand Malaysian Shi’ites is to join their rites during their pilgrimage or *ziyarat* to Iran and Iraq. It is through the perspective of symbolic interactionism that any presence of “micro-ecological metaphors” and “iconic symbols” during the *ziyarat* can be well documented and analysed. At the end the values, the axiology, the logical and illogical behaviours can be understood.

Charles R. Brook (1989) conducted a successful study in cultural anthropology using symbolic interactionism. Brook, who had experience

researching the Hindu religious culture in India and joined Hare Krishna ceremonies, suggested that anthropologists: (i) identify themselves with the particular faction by wearing the same clothing or accessories, (ii) participate and observe using unstructured, open ended interviews in order not to distract informants (Malay Shi'ites), this is also recommended because the goal of these interviews is to explore the chosen topic in depth, (iii) use random verbal surveys, this method is beneficial especially in the case where informants are concerned about confidentiality, and (iv) document as much as possible the physical aspects of the subject or object studied by taking photographs. He stated that in order to access the subject matter (in this context Malay Shi'ites behaviour during their pilgrimage in Iran and Iraq) it is important "to find a role through," which to interact with "others." Hence, taking Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism as conceptual framework and Charles Brook's methodology, this essay will stress social interaction and participant-observation in collecting data during the religious rituals. By doing so, it will enable readers to understand the Malay Shi'ites and their behaviour while doing their pilgrimage to Iran and Iraq.

Only two out of eight sacred sites are highlighted here. Sites chosen are Mashad (Iran), and Karbala (Iraq). Sites that were omitted are Qom and Tehran (Iran), Najaf, Kufah, Samarra and Kadzimain (Iraq). It is important to note here that those sites not included in this essay are as important as those included. However, the two sacred sites, Mashad-Karbala, are considered sufficient to reach the objective of the study as most of the rituals are repetitive and they were visited only for a brief period. This paper should be considered as a preliminary study, and the two chosen sites are adequate to constitute a case study.

#### MASHAD REPUBLIC ISLAM OF IRAN

The tomb of Imam Reza (765–818 AD), the eighth Imam of Shi'ite Muslims, is without doubt the main focal point of Mashad. Imam Reza was born in Medina; he was subsequently politically cheated and forced to move to Khorasan. He was martyred by Abbasid Caliph, al Ma'mun on the last Friday of the month of Safar in 203 CE (Sayyid Saeed Arjmand, 2008: 84). He was buried in Mashad. The word *mashad* is an Arabic word for 'the place of meeting'. It is located 24 kilometers from Toos, the capital city of Khorasan, 924 km from Tehran. Shi'ites refer to

Imam Reza's tomb as 'Holy Shrine' or just 'Haram Imam Reza' and this essay will adopt the same manner in explaining the site. Today, Haram Imam Reza is a huge complex consisting of a library, a museum, religious seminaries, a dining hall, a university campus and prayer halls. Nevertheless, the central attraction of Haram Imam Reza is the *zarih*, or the holy burial chamber. According to the guide prepared by the office of Haram Imam Reza (Public Relations Office of Astan Quds Razavi, 2009: 22), the *zarih* is where 'the sacred body of Imam Reza has been buried'.

It should be mentioned here, the office of Haram Imam Reza also published a guide book in the Malay language entitled *Mahligai Cahaya Mengenal Imam Ali bin Musa Ridha A.S* (undated). Another Malay language book entitled *Adab-adab Ziarah Ahlul Bayt Rasulullah Sallallahu 'Alaihi Wa Aalih* (Hasan Askari, 2010) was also provided to every participant of the pilgrimage to Iran and Iraq. This signified that the number of Malay Shi'ites who make this pilgrimage is significant and growing with time.

The rituals observed around the *zarih* include: i) prayer recitation by groups or individuals, ii) *tawassul* or recourse (petitions) by the visitors, iii) kissing the doors of the Haram. It must be understood that Shi'ites believe that their Imams are 'still alive' as revealed in the Holy Quran (3: 169): "And reckon not those who are killed in Allah's way as dead; nay, they are alive and provided sustenance from their Lord." Furthermore, "the sacred souls of the Immaculate Imams were martyred in the way of God and Truth," thus "are alive and aware" of their pilgrimages, supplications (*dua* readings), and their petitions (*tawassul*) (Legenhausen and Azim Sarvedalir, 2004: 13).

The main rite during *ziyarat* is to recite the Holy Quran and prayers "from the prophetic hadith and from the sayings of Imams" as contained in '*ahjul Balaghah, al Sahifah al Sajjadiyyah, Mafatih Jinan* and *Usul al Kafi*'. These recitations take many hours as the texts, such as *Jawshan Kabir* and *Kumayl* (Syed Hossein Nasr, 2007: 257) are very long. The recitations are done by groups or individuals. Observation and examination of the text of *ziyarat*s, prayers and litanies show a manifestation of Sufism (from Sunni point of view) or in the Shia term; *irfan*. Luis Alberto Vittor (2010: 240–1), also confirmed this observation, as quoted below:

The hadith literature in Shi'ism and the anthologies of the hadiths handed down from the Imams are the veritable mines of Islamic gnosis. The *Usul al Kafi* of Kulayni and the other compendia of Shi'i hadith are real treasures of *irfan*. Moreover, the Shi'i prayers and litanies found in *al Sahifah al Sajadiyyah* of the fourth Imam is



the best exposition and representation of Islamic gnosis. Some Shi'i prayers, like *Dua Shabaniyyah*, *Dua Arafah* and *Dua Kumayl* highlight the highest themes of Islamic gnosis. Shi'i prayer books are replete with ritual formulae for acts of supererogation also much emphasised in Sufism and sometimes with identical formulations. The ritual invocation of the Beautiful Divine names and is recited by pious Shi'i on many occasions and at least once a week. Some identical formulae based directly and indirectly on the verses of the Quran are reiterated in both. The Shi'i canonical books of hadith are filled with themes which can be made the object of meditation and contemplation and which can find their true explanation in real irfan.

Syed Hossein Nasr (2007: 258) concurs with this point raised by Vittor; Nasr stated that “these devotional prayers and litanies come from the works of the saints, who in the Shi'ite world are identified with the Imams and the Household of the Prophet and in the Sunni world with Sufism in general.”

In this context, prayers and litanies are the language of social communication and interaction between the Shi'ites and their Imams. From the angle of symbolic interactionism, these prayers and litanies signify something. According to Legenhausen and Azim Sarvedalir (2004: 14) Shi'ites pilgrimages to their Imams symbolise “a presence with yearning and spiritual visit to Imam,” and this act eventually “setting up a relation” with those “proofs of God.” Pilgrimages or *ziyarat*s are their way of “keeping alive the memory of the Imams” and let them “express love for and allegiance with the Imam.” Politically, pilgrimages are their way to “announce that despite the martyrdom of the leaders, their names and goals will never be forgotten.” All the prayers recited during the pilgrimage are in the form of “declaration to support the leadership of the immaculate Imams and abhorrence toward the tyrannical idol powers and its way.” Therefore, needless to say, the Shi'ite pilgrimage to their Imam has not only a spiritual basis, but also a social, cultural and political one.

Along with prayer recitation, *tawassul* or recourse (petitions) by the visitors can also be observed easily. *Tawassul* is without question a symbolic ritual through “instruments and intermediary means.” By definition it is “resorting to the special friends of God, the *awliya* in requesting the fulfillment of one's needs from God the Almighty” (Legenhausen and Azim Sarvedalir, 2004: 17). The words recited in *tawassul* nearby the *zarih* are:

O Abul Hasan, O Ali son of Musa, O devoted one. O descendant of the Messenger of Allah. O decisive argument of Allah over mankind. O our chief, O our master. We turn towards thee, seek thy intercession and advocacy before Allah. We put be-

fore you our open need. O intimate of Allah, stand by us when Allah sits in judgement over us. (Abbas bin Muhammad Reza al Qummi, 2007: 985)

Another interesting rite that can be observed, and might be thought strange by Sunnis, is the kissing of the doors of Haram Imam Reza. The symbolic act is performed to “respect the proof of God, the Immaculate Imam.” Legenhausen and Azim Sarvedalir explained in the guide prepared for Haram Imam Reza that the rite is a way for Shi’ites to honour their leader:

The only reason we kiss the doors of the haram or the holy burial chamber or we believe they are sacred is to respect the proof of God, the Immaculate Imam. Their sanctity is due to the Imam’s holiness and blessings. It is just like kissing the cover of a Quran. Due to the holiness of the Quran the paper on which the words of the Quran have been written or the leather that has been used as the cover of a Quran obtain holiness. If the same leather had been used as a shoe or clothes, it would never have gained such sanctity. (2004: 22)

Kissing the doors carries symbolic meaning as it is not an individual act, rather it is a social one done intentionally. This rite falls under the scope of what Blumer (1969: 68) wrote, that “each object changes for the human, not because it changes, but because people change their definition.” Observation around the Holy Shrine of Imam Reza shows that almost all visitors fulfil this same right with full respect. Kissing the doors does not only imply respect and honour, it can also lead to “an active relationship to the environment” (Joel M. Charon, 1979: 92) as one of the Malay Shi’ites pointed out in an interview after the pilgrimage, “kissing the doors of Haram is something really pure and I am conscious about it.” He added that “it is not just paying a respect to Imam but a symbolic act of asking help, and I ask my Imam to look after me and my community. It is the simplest and humblest way of asking help from someone we love.”<sup>4</sup>

## KARBALA

The tomb of Imam Husein (626–680AD), the third Imam of Shi’ite Muslims, is the main focal point of Karbala. Imam Husein was born in Medina. He was the son of Imam Ali and Fatimah Zahra, and a grandson of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), who was brutally massacred togeth-

er with his followers and family in Karbala by mercenaries of Yazid bin Muawiyah,<sup>5</sup> the second Umayyad Caliph, on Friday, tenth of *Muharam* (or referred to as *Ashura*) in 61 CE (A.K Ahmed, 2007). According to Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i (2007: 542), *Ashura* marked the martyrdom of Imam Husein and "has become the most solemn day of the Shi'ite calendar, marked by processions and universal mourning." *Ashura* and Karbala indeed represent the whole meaning of Shi'ism, and the observation of *Ashura* "symbolises the whole ethos of Shi'ism." Karbala is 100km from Baghdad, the capital city of Iraq. Shi'ites refer to Imam Husein's tomb as 'Holy Shrine' or just 'Haram Imam Husein' (Imam Husayn Holy Shrine Foundation, 1432 CE). This essay refers to the site in the same manner.

The rituals that can be observed around the *zarih* of Imam Husein include i) crying and weeping while listening to *maddah* (elegies) and ii) reciting *ziyarat* dedicated to Imam Husein.

Observation of the reference group – Malay Shi'ites in pilgrimage – uncovered a very interesting rite. The group brought along two people tasked with *maddah* (elegies) recitation. Both of these people were responsible for reminding the participants of the pilgrimage about details of historical events relating to all the Imams visited during the spiritual trip in Iran and Iraq. The aim of the elegy reading is merely to heighten the emotional impact of the journey and encourage the pilgrims to cry or weep, as all the historical facts are already familiar to them. *Maddah* reading is usually very long. It is in Malay and intended to get the listeners to commit to two simple but meaningful points, i) allegiance to Imam Husein and that they will follow his path and ii) to protest and revolt against injustices and oppression carried out in the name of Islam. Therefore, the elegies recited along the way contain historical information, and have a political agenda and a mourning purpose. When listening to the *maddah* it is difficult to refrain from crying, and weeping often became a group activity. Malay Shi'ites seem to be satisfied expressing their grief by listening to *maddah* and beating their chests slowly.

As mentioned previously, crying and weeping in Karbala has an important political philosophy behind it. The axiological explanation can be extracted from the founder of Islamic Republic of Iran, Imam Khomeini's statement; "lamentation of the martyrs means preservation and perpetuation of the Movement". Text quoted below from Imam Khomei-

ni's work explains the meaning behind the symbolic rite of weeping in front of *zarib* Imam Husein:

Don't think that we weep and arrange these mourning meetings to please the Master of Martyrs. No, he has no need for our tears, and our tears, per se, cannot do anything. But these lamentation gatherings and meetings unite the people and give them direction. 30 to 35 million people during the month of Muharam, especially the Ashura days, all have a united aspect and move in one direction. Some of the Infallible Imams (a.s) have wanted that elegies be recited for them from the pulpits, others have stressed that rewards will accrue to those who cry, make others cry or appear to be sad and crying. The issue is not shedding of tears at all, it is political, for our Imams (a.s) with their divine vision wanted to unite and mobilise the nations, bring them together by various ways so that they won't be vulnerable. (2000: 60–7)

The lamentation for the Master of the Martyrs is a means by which his ideology (Islam) can be preserved. Those who want us not to observe the martyrdom of Imam Hosein (a.s) by mourning and lamentation do not understand the ideology of Master of Martyrs; they don't know that these mourning sessions have preserved this ideology. It is now 1400 years that these lamentations, elegies and passion plays have kept us alive, have maintained Islam up to now. To these youths who want us to speak the language of the day we say the words of Imam Hosein (a.s) are the words of the day, it has always been the language of the day. In fact it is the Master of Martyrs who has brought forth the final word for today and left it with us. These lamentations have preserved the Master of Martyrs; his ideology has been preserved by the cries of mourning and by tears shed, by these passion plays, elegies and breast-beatings. If instead of these actions, some saints would stay at home, confined to a room in which they would do nothing but recite Ashura prayers and use rosary beads, nothing would have survived. It requires clamour, every school of thought or ideology demands clamour. No ideology can be saved and maintained unless tears are shed for it and breasts are beaten.

The two paragraphs quoted above show how respect for the Karbala tragedy turned into a major political issue, and was translated into a push to fight oppression regardless of where you are or who the antagonists are. Hamid Ansari (1994) pointed out that "Ashura and Karbala" are the real source of the energy behind the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran.

The tragedy of Karbala, as noted earlier, is at the core of Shi'ism. Another interesting feature of the *azadari* (mourning) during pilgrimage is

that all the visitors to Haram Imam Husein wear black or green clothes. Black signifies mourning while green is the color of Imam Hussein. Stalls to donate foods and drinks, flags with slogans of Karbala and street stage plays are also common. Sayyid Imdad Imam explained

mourning is a precept as well as a practice, an example of practice is to wear black or green clothes, to construct sarcophagus like Imam Husain's tomb, to construct Husainiyyahs, to install banners, hold meetings to commemorate Imam Husain's martyrdom, feed mourners, distribute food among poor people, serve the poor and rich with eatables and drinks. (2009: 335)

Without doubt, Shi'ite rituals during pilgrimage are full of symbols. By applying symbolic interactionism, we can enable others to understand their rites.

It is common in Karbala for Shi'ites to visit and touch *zarib* Imam Husein while reciting *ziyarat*. There are many recitations during visits to Haram Imam Husein, including *ziyarat warith*, *ziyarat* Imam Husein and *ziyarat ashura*. After each visit to Imam Husein, Shi'ites will perform two prostrations at the Imam's head and recite verses from the holy Quran (Yasin T. Al Jibouri, 2007: 154–8). Below is an excerpt of *ziyarat ashura*:

Peace be on you, who was martyred while fighting heroically in the cause of Allah, the son of Allah's fearless warrior, you were isolated and had been attacked with a vengeance! Peace be on you and on those souls who had gathered in your camp, and strode along with you, in your journey. I pray and invoke Allah to keep all of you tranquil and restful, for ever; so far I am alive, this is my prayer, and till nights and days follow each other. O Abu Abdullah! Unbearable is the sorrow, nerve-racking is the agony, you put up with, for us and for all the (true) Muslims, crimes committed against you also shocked and unnerved the dwellers of the heavens, one and all. May Allah condemn and damn the people who laid the basis and set up the groundwork, to wander astray and turn aside from not only you and your family but to take liberties and bear hard upon you. May Allah condemn and damn the people who tried to obscure and deny your office and status, wilfully neglected your rank and class Allah had made known in clear terms. May Allah condemn and damn the people who killed you. May Allah condemn and damn the abettors who instigated and had a part in your murder. I turn to you and Allah, away from them, their henchmen, their followers and their friends, O Abu Abdullah, I pray and invoke Allah to send blessings on you. I make peace with those who make their peace with you, I make war on those who go to war against you, till the Day of Judgment us. (Abbas bin Muhammad Reza al Qummi, 2007: 985)

Again, as shown in text above, the *ziyarat* recitation is a political one. Reading the full text of the *ziyarat* within its' philosophical context makes *ziyarat ashura* "a framework for implicit dissent or explicit protest" for the Shi'ites "in reference to Husayn's famous quote on the day of Ashura, every day is Ashura, every land is Karbala."<sup>6</sup> From a historical point of view, *Ziyarat ashura* is a kind of framework transformed into the domain of ideology. As one Malay Shi'ite in the group of pilgrims stressed at the beginning of a *ziyarat ashura* recitation session,

this is our only weapon as we are marginalised and oppressed, so let's dedicate our recitation to our brothers discriminated against by religious enforcers back home, and dedicate it also to our brothers massacred in Bahrain by the tyrannical regime of Hamad al Khalifa, and do not forget our Palestinian brothers; even though they are Sunnites as they are also oppressed.<sup>7</sup>

Other than Haram Imam Husein, Shi'ites also visit *zarib* of Abu Fadhl Abbas (Imam Husein's brother from different mother) nearby.

#### NOTES OF OBSERVATION AND CONCLUSION

Two notes of observation from the pilgrimage from the point of view of symbolic interactionism follow. First, Shi'ite (in this context Malay Shi'ite) practices during pilgrimage to Iran and Iraq are full of sufistic rites (Sunni term) or irfanic rites (Shi'a term). These sufistic or irfanic tendencies are reflected in their prayers, litanies and recitation of eulogies. Sufistic tendencies should not be a problem for the majority Sunnite population of Malaysia, as these tendencies are also reflected among Sunnites (through *tarekats*, or sufi groups). Still, Shi'ite's 'irfanic' approach to rites is considered deviant, as Sunnites in Malaysia adopt a literal approach in understanding and interpreting Islam. Greg Barton (2005: 91–2) viewed Islam in Malaysia as "narrow and scripturalist," and suspicious of the influence of foreign thought (in this context, Shia in Malaysia is viewed as a foreign threat or 'Iranian thing'). Abdul Rahman Embong (2003: 73–4) blamed this uncomfortable climate on the Kaum Muda-Kaum Tua (traditionalist-reformist) schism, which took place a hundred years ago and led to a narrow interpretation and intolerance in religious practice.

Harsh actions directed at Shi'ites have been detected lately. An interviewee, Malaysian Shi'ite figure Mr Kamil Zuhairi (2011) blamed a Saudi

Arabian type of salafism or wahabism that “has been spread by those who have received their religious training in Medina” (Ibrahim Abu Bakar, 2007: 56). A symbolic sect such as Shia can often be easily misunderstood. By adopting a framework of symbolic interactionism for understanding the reference group – the Malay Shi’ites – one hopes that the huge gap between the majority Sunni Muslims and the minority Shi’ite Muslims can be bridged. Over all, the definition of minority should be able to comply to the minority in the sectarian context also.

Second, it is often claimed that Shi’ites reverence for their Imams supercedes that for Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) himself. But observation during the pilgrimages proved this to be wrong. According to Hasan ul-Amine (1997: 82–3), “Shi’ites affirmed that there is no God but Allah in every sense and that Muhammad (pbuh) is His prophet”. The huge difference between Sunnism and Shi’ism is that the Shi’ites recognise Ali and the other eleven Imams from Prophet’s progeny who succeeded him as the leader of the Muslims. Hasan ul-Amine added that, any Shi’ite who “exaggerates *ahlul bayt*, deifying them or affirming them the rank of a prophet or share in Prophethood or having any of the Attributes of God does not remain a Muslim.”

Finally, to conclude, Hamka, a notable Sunnite Muslim scholar, religious writer and teacher from Indonesia (who also enjoys celebrity status in Malaysia), visited Karbala twice – in 1950 and 1968. Hamka (1988: xi–xii) wrote in a preface of a translated book entitled, *Al Husain bin Ali R. A Pahlawan Besar dan Kehidupan Islam Pada Zamannya*: “I am not Shia, but I love Husain. From all the pilgrimages I have done my love for the Prophet’s grandsons, Hasan and Husain, gets stronger, as well as my confidence in the Sunni sect. Love is one thing and religious stance is another.”<sup>8</sup>

It is hoped that this particular essay will enhance our knowledge, broaden our perspective and help to bridge civilisations through dialogue. There are many good intentions targeted by symbolic interactionism. One of the most important is to establish communication and dialogue between people, which will hopefully lead to problem solving, and minimising conflicts between groups. In this context, a cultural anthropological outlook via symbolic interactionism will hopefully put the Shi’ite minority in the Malay world at a just space and at a correct page.

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<sup>2</sup> There are many kinds of spellings related to Islamic terms. In the text I have standardised it to one but I tolerate other kinds of spelling when it happened to be quotations from other sources. In this essay, the term "Shi'ism" indicates the sect that is in contrast with "Sunnism"; while "Shi'ite" refers to a follower or devotee in singular form and its plural is "Shi'ites." The same applies to "Sunnite" (singular) and "Sunnites" (plural). The term "Shi'itic" is used for adjective and Shia for noun. Shia in this text referred to Ithna 'ashariyya Shia (Twelver Shia) or also known as Imamiyyah Shia, or Ja'fari. Most of the Shia-related terms are referred to Sayyid Khadim Husayn Naqavi, *Dictionary of Islamic Terms*. Qom: Ansariyan Publications, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Refer <http://www.shia-explained.com/my/archives/1312>, accessed 10th August 2011 at 6:18 am. The blog is maintained by a Malay Shi'ite.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with a Malay Shi'ite from Trengganu, who joined the pilgrimage caravan to Iran and Iraq on July 8, 2011 in Mashad. He wanted to remain anonymous.

<sup>5</sup> To understand more on the political events that led to the tragedy in Karbala, refer to Taha Husain, *Fitnah Terbesar Dalam Sejarah Islam*. Trans. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1990. Or also see Abu Ala al Maududi. *Khilafah dan Kerajaan*. Trans. Muhammad al Baqir. Shah Alam: Dewan Pustaka Fajar, 1986.

<sup>6</sup> Refer [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Day\\_of\\_Ashura](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Day_of_Ashura).

<sup>7</sup> Words of a Malay Shi'ite from Penang, who joined the pilgrimage caravan to Iran and Iraq on July 12, 2011 in Karbala. He wanted to remain anonymous.

<sup>8</sup> My translation. See Hamka. In *Husain bin Ali R.A. Pahlawan Besar dan Kehidupan Islam Pada Zamannya*. Ed. Al Hamid al Husaini. Trans. Kelang Book Centre. Kelang: Klang Book Centre, 1998: xi–xii. The original quotation: "Saya tidak bermazhab Syiah tetapi saya mencintai Husain. Dari semua ziarah itu bertambahlah teguh rasa cinta saya kepada kedua cucu Rasulullah saw, Hasan dan Husain, di samping bertambah teguh keyakinan saya dalam mazhab Sunni. Sebab cinta lain dan pendirian agama lain pula."