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# The Malaysian Shi'a: A Preliminary Study of Their History, Oppression, and Denied Rights

MOHD FAIZAL MUSA

*Research Fellow, Institute of the Malay World and Civilization, National University of Malaysia, Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia*  
[mfaizalmusa@ukm.my](mailto:mfaizalmusa@ukm.my), [kajianakademikfi@gmail.com](mailto:kajianakademikfi@gmail.com)

**ABSTRACT:** Malaysia is one of the largest strongholds of Sunnism in the Islamic world, and, frequently, the existence of Shi'a in the Malay archipelago in the pre-modern era or the existence of any sizable number of indigenous Malay Shi'a is denied; this is done explicitly in the context of legislation outlawing Shi'ism. Nevertheless, Malay cultural practices show evidence of the influence of Shi'ism; this suggests a stronger historical presence of Shi'ism than is commonly acknowledged. Applying the oral historiography framework of Jan Vansina, this study unearths evidence of Shi'ism in Malaysia going back centuries through anonymous interviews. It also highlights the contemporary lack of religious freedom that the Shi'a minority in Malaysia faces, particularly after the 2010 raid on the Hauzah Ar Ridha Alaihissalam community centre near Kuala Lumpur. Ultimately, this study hopes to put the situation of the Shi'a in Malaysia today into a larger historical context and refute the argument that Shi'ism is a recent arrival to the Malay archipelago.

**KEYWORDS:** Shi'ism, Shi'a, Malaysia, human rights, Southeast Asia, Iran

## *Introduction*<sup>1</sup>

On 20 July 2013, Jamil Khir Baharom of the Prime Minister's Department (2013) declared that Shi'as in Malaysia have no rights, and that only

Sunnism is accepted and recognized in Malaysia. This statement followed a move by the Chief Minister of the northern Malaysian state of Kedah, Mukhriz Mahathir, to ban Shi'ism, as well as a decision by the state government 'to bring its followers back to Sunni teachings'. Former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad (2013) supported this move, declaring that Shi'a teachings were dangerous, deviant, and risky to 'others'. According to Mahathir, 'Shi'as will bring war, hostility, and killings.' Mahathir encouraged other states in Malaysia to follow Kedah's example. The anti-Shi'a campaign and stigmatization was also endorsed by a major Malaysian opposition party, PAS (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia), which called the move 'necessary' (Awang Chik 2013). Amid Shi'a-phobia in 2013, the Islamic Religious Department arrested two Shi'as in the state of Perak. Besides arresting the two people, the raiders confiscated books, CD recordings, and posters (Pragalath and Prasena 2013). The arrest was a repetition of same type of intimidation that occurred in 2010-2012 in the state of Selangor where Shi'a community centres were raided by the Selangor Islamic Religious Department.

The harsh treatment towards Shi'as in Malaysia originated from a fatwa. On 5 May 1996, the Fatwa Committee of the National Council for Islamic Affairs in Malaysia discussed the state of Shi'as in Malaysia. The committee decided to:

Agree with the decision of the Fatwa Committee Meeting held on 24 and 25 September 1984 [Paper No. 2/8/84, Item 4.2. 2/8/84, Item 4.2. (2)] on the Shia path as follows: 'After discussing this paper and deliberating it the Committee has decided that [the previous fatwa stating that] 'only the Zaydi and Ja'fari creeds of the Shi'a school are accepted to be practiced in Malaysia.' Repealed.

Determine that the Muslims in Malaysia should only follow the teachings of Islam which [is] based on the beliefs of Sunni Islam in Doctrine, Law and Islamic Morals.

Support and accept the proposal to amend the Federal Constitution and State Constitutions—to provide expressly that the religion of the Federation and the States shall only be the religion of Islam based on the beliefs of Sunni Islam in

Doctrine, Law and Islamic Morals.

Make provision for amendments to all State Law and Islamic Law to coordinate the Sharia definition of Islamic law to be as follows: 'Sharia Law or Islamic law means the Islamic laws based on the beliefs of Sunni Islam in Doctrine, Law and Islamic Morals.'

Recommend that Islamic teachings other than the beliefs of Sunni Islam are contrary to Sharia Law and Islamic Law hence the spread of any doctrine other than that of Sunni Islam is prohibited.

Stipulate that all Muslims in this country are subject to Islamic Law based on the beliefs of Sunni Islam only.

Determine that the publishing, broadcasting and distribution of any books, pamphlets, films, videos and others relating to the teachings of Islam which is [sic] opposed to the beliefs of Sunni Islam is prohibited. (Fatwa Committee of the National Council for Islamic Affairs in Malaysia 1996)

The fatwa violates the basic rights of Shi'as.

However, the issue of freedom and human rights as pertaining to Shi'as will be further elaborated on in the second part of the essay. In this first part, I will be presenting evidence of the historical presence of Shi'ism in Malaysia. While scholars rarely acknowledge the historical presence of Shi'ism in Malaysia, they have nonetheless been puzzled by traces of Shi'ism evident in Malay culture. While the question of when and how Shi'ism arrived in Malaysia may once have been solely of academic interest, it is now a question of immense contemporary relevance to the Shi'a in Malaysia, who are experiencing severe repression. The goal of this essay is to provide evidence of the historical presence of Shi'ism in Malaysia in hopes of shedding new light on the current situation of Shi'a in Malaysia. Both textual and oral history will be utilized to this end.<sup>2</sup>

While the Malay world is perhaps the most staunchly Sunni Muslim region in the world, elements of Shi'ism persist within Malay society and customs. For example, Wendy Mukherjee (2005: 137-152), a notable

scholar on Malay classical manuscripts, writes:

Today, Malaysia and Indonesia adhere universally to the Sunni laws of Shafi'i jurisprudence. It is generally understood by scholars that a long process of 'de-Shi'ization' over three centuries, through the sixteenth to the nineteenth, worked to expunge traces of Shi'ism from social and ritual practice in the archipelago. The orthodox zeal of Arab immigrants from the Hadhramaut in the nineteenth century and reformist, or *Kaum Muda* ideas from Egypt were most effective in completing the process.<sup>3</sup> What then are we to make of the continuing evidence of early Shi'i texts? Literature appears to have escaped censorship to a certain extent, because it is precisely during the last phase of manuscript production, namely the nineteenth century, that the Fatimah Admonitions have been collected. We are moved to ask how the Admonitions, indeed the Shi'i repertoire itself, have been preserved. Could it be by the sheer weight of the antiquity of the literature and the value traditionally given to texts as cultural artifacts?<sup>4</sup>

Similarly R. J. Wilkinson was struck by noticeable Shi'a elements in the Ninety-Nine Laws of Perak (the oldest laws on Islamic affairs in the state of Perak), which were imported from Persia. The Ninety-Nine Laws of Perak had been brought to Malaya by Sayyid Hasan Jamalullail during the era of Sultan Ahmad Taj al-Din Shah (1577-1584) and were enforced in Perak until 1900. Wilkinson (1908: 1-7), in examining the origin of the Ninety-Nine Laws of Perak, raises one question after another regarding this issue:

Another point next suggests itself. We can understand the Malay element and the purely Moslem element, but why is the Persian element so strongly marked in this code? Why does the author try to impress his hearers by referring to Nushirwan and Buzurjmihir instead of quoting Abu Hanifa and Shafei? Here again we have to go into the family history of these Saiyids [sic]. They claim descent from Muhammad through his great grandson Zainu'l-Abidin. The political effect of this story was that it made the Persians strong partisans of the family

of Ali as against the Umayyad Caliphs of Arabia and Syria. It helped to split the Moslem world into Sunnis and Shi'as and curiously enough this Saiyid family 'code' of Sunni Perak takes the Shi'a side in the controversy. I am not prepared to suggest that the Saiyids were of Shi'a origin, but, I feel sure that they got their family history from Shi'a sources.

Wilkinson and Mukherjee were not the only ones bewildered by these apparent Shi'a influences. In fact, the descendants of Sayyid Hasan Jamalullail, who introduced the Ninety-Nine Laws of Perak, were also perplexed by their tendency toward Ja'fari jurisprudence. In a blog maintained by the Jamallulail family in Perak, the author asks, 'The big question, is what is the relation between the Jamalullail of Perak with the 'Abbasid Empire, the Ja'fari school of thought, and Persia?' (Jamallulail 2010)<sup>5</sup>

A nuanced discussion of Shi'ism in Malaysia requires that we go beyond the straightforward definitions of Shi'ism or Sunnism often used today and discuss the uncertain boundaries between the two.<sup>6</sup> As will be seen, Shi'a in Malaysia frequently hid their beliefs, even from their own family members. Additionally, there is evidence of local syncretism: some people seem to have held Shi'a beliefs while also practising Sunni *fiqh*. This is similar to what Jalaluddin Rakhmat (2000: 149) notes in Indonesia, where he is convinced there were Shi'as long before the formation of the modern Indonesian state, but that Shi'ism was limited to religious scholars who were known in society as Sunnis. Rakhmat argues that, at least in Indonesia, 'Shi'a' should not only be used to refer to people who practically follow the Ja'fari school of law but also should refer to those who accepted Shi'a theological doctrines, especially concerning the Imamate, as well as philosophical ideas commonly espoused by Shi'a (Rakhmat 2000: 149-152); that is to say, it should also refer to people who were 'Shi'a at heart'. We will use this broader definition of Shi'ism here in our discussion of the influence of Shi'ism in Malaysia.

### *The immigrants from Hadramaut*

Though scholars have commented on traces of Shi'ism in the Malay world, especially in cultural practices (which will be described later in



this paper), there have been no detailed studies of this subject, especially among historians. As such, the study of Shi'ism in the Malay world has been neglected, and Shi'a in the region have become victims of academic generalization. For instance, Azyumardi Azra (2000: 9-30), a well-known scholar in the field of history in Indonesia, dismisses the idea that Shi'ism had been in the region since the arrival of Islam many centuries ago and declares it 'a myth'. He argues that traces of Persian influence should not be read as evidence of Shi'ism in the region and that, furthermore, Persia only became Shi'a during the Safavid era (1501-1736 AD). Azra agrees that there are Persian tendencies in the cultural products of the Malay world but rejects the idea that Malay Shi'as produced them. Azra also contends that Shi'ism only became a phenomenon in Nusantara (the Malay world) after the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979). He clearly holds that Islam was brought to the Malay world by Arabs. These Arabs were, he claims, Sunni Shafi'is. Finally, Azra suggests that the rise of the Ottoman Empire in modern Turkey helped to strengthen Sunnism in the Malay world, especially after the Acehnese took the Ottomans as their 'patrons' in their fight against Portuguese colonization. Similarly, Claude Guillot (2010: 13-52), a French scholar, claims that the rise of Ottoman influence in Asia (and therefore Sunnism) during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw the decline of Persian influence (and therefore Shi'ism) in the Malay world.

Just as it is inappropriate to conflate Persia with Shi'ism, it is also unwise to describe all Arabs as Sunnis, or to associate the Ottoman Empire exclusively with Sunnism. Early Muslim proselytizers in the Malay world often came from Hadramaut in present-day Yemen. These Hadramis were well accepted in the Malay world, especially in Mindanao and North Borneo (Saleeby 1968: 16-24). Jalaluddin Rakhmat (2000: 144) maintains that the Arabs from Hadramaut (also known as 'Alawiyyin) were in fact Shi'a. He argues that according to an old edition of *Munjid*, a well-known Arab dictionary, 'Hadramaut' is defined as a place where the residents are 'Shi'a Shafi'is', although a sufficiently old copy of *al-Munjid* was not found which verified this claim.<sup>7</sup> Of course, Rakhmat's finding could be biased since he himself is a Shi'a. Nevertheless, despite the problems with Rakhmat's argument, we can consider it from two angles.

The first possibility is that these Arabs from Hadramaut could be 'Alawi but not Shi'a. The Hadrami diaspora originated from Ahmad ibn 'Isa ibn Muhammad Naqib ibn 'Ali al-'Uraydi ibn Ja'far al-Sadiq (the

great-grandson of one of Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq's sons). Thus the Hadramis claim ancestry from six of the Shi'a Imams, from 'Ali ibn Abi Talib to Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq. Due to the oppressive and unhealthy political climate, Ali al-'Uraydi's grandson, Ahmad ibn 'Isa al-Muhajir, chose to move to Hadramaut in Yemen from Baghdad, together with his clan and followers. In Yemen, Ahmad ibn 'Isa al-Muhajir led a series of battles confronting the Kharijites, who practised Ibadi jurisprudence. Al-Muhajir was strongly backed by both the local Sunnis and the local Shi'a. He later adopted Shafi'i jurisprudence and started to teach religion, rapidly attracting more followers. Muhammad Diya' Shahab (1980: 58) wrote that the successful wars against the people of Bahran (the battlefield where the Ibadis and al-Muhajir's followers fought) were 'a joined participation of Sunnis and Shi'as in defeating the Kharijites'.

Al-Muhajir had four sons: 'Ali, al-Husayn, 'Ubayd Allah, and Muhammad. 'Ubayd Allah chose to stay in Hadramaut along with his father and had a son named 'Alwi. He became the leader of a powerful clan, later named al-'Alawiyyin or also known as Ba'alawi. This particular clan consisted of several other tribes – the al-Atas, al-Habashi, al-Hamid, al-Jufri, al-Kaf, and many others. These were allegedly the people who brought Islam to Southeast Asia, as al-Habib 'Alwi ibn Tahir al-Haddad (2001) mentions.

The anthropologist L.W.C. Van den Berg (1989: 55-56) notes that Hadramis are Shafi'is and that he found no Ja'faris or Wahhabis in Hadramaut. However, his research on contemporary Hadramaut does not rule out the historical presence of Shi'a in the region. While Hadramis are not Ja'faris – that is, Twelver Shi'as – in terms of *fiqh madhhab*, this does not mean they have no historical connection to Shi'ism. The term Shi'a itself means 'followers' or 'partisans' of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (Tabataba'i 2007: 56-57). The difference between these Hadramis with Imami Shi'as is that they regarded al-Muhajir as their spiritual leader after Imam al-Sadiq, while the Imami Shi'as took Imam Musa al-Kadim and the six remaining Imams as their leaders. Furthermore, there is no contradiction here since al-'Alawiyyin is also the founder of the Ba'alawi Sufi order.<sup>8</sup> From a Sufi point of view, as stressed by Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1999): 'Imam Ali is called Sayyid al-'Awliya (the chief of all *walis* and Sufis)', and Sufism in the Sunni school of thought is 'actually the meeting point of *tashayyu'* (Shi'ism) and *tasannun* (Sunnism)'. In fact according to Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1999: 115), Sayyid Haydar Amuli (1319-1385), a notable Shi'a scholar

living in Persia, 'believed that every true Shi'a is a Sufi and every true Sufi a Shi'a'. This point can also explain why most Malay classical texts in this region are filled with admiration towards and eulogies of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib and the *ahl al-bayt* (Abdullah 2004: 95-131). Thus, Rakhmat's view that the residents of Hadramaut are Shi'as who practise Shafi'i jurisprudence is correct. This is from a Sunni point of view.

The other possibility, however, is that the early Hadramis were actually Shi'a; this view is supported through Shi'a *hadith* and *rijal* (biographical) literature. Shi'a authors assert that al-Muhajir was definitely a Shi'a in his Basrah (Iraq) days before he migrated to Yemen. According to Sayyid Muhsin al-Amin (1960: 137) in *A'yan al-Shi'ah*, al-Muhajir was cited in two *hadith* in a prominent Shi'a collection, *al-Ghaybah* by al-Tusi. The narrations (numbers 1473 and 1474) indicate al-Muhajir's clear identity. It would have been unlikely for a non-Shi'a to narrate this type of material, or for al-Tusi to accept the view of a non-Shi'a on theological matters. Of course, as explained previously, Ahmad ibn 'Isa al-Muhajir was later known as a Shafi'i in Hadramaut. This evidence is strong enough to indicate that the Hadramis were genuinely Shi'a at heart. If this point of view is taken into consideration, Rakhmat's claims that the Hadramis were Shi'as who practise Shafi'i jurisprudence is also difficult to contest. The confusion probably occurred because they practised *taqiyyah*. In any case, in one form or another, the Hadrami Arabs who propagated Islam to the Malay world were Shi'a.

Of course, Ahmad ibn 'Isa al-Muhajir would later be known as a Sunni in Hadramaut. Mohd Shaiful Ramze Endut (2012: 205) concludes by quoting Zulkifli's thesis that upon arriving in the Malay region, al-Muhajir's descendants portrayed themselves as Sunnis:

There have been three prominent figures from Shi'a communities in Indonesia: Sayyid Muhammad bin Ahmad al Muhdar (1861-1926), Sayyid Ali bin Ahmad Shahab (1865-1944) and Sayyid Aqil bin Zainal Abidin (1870-1952). Shi'ism was propagated only to their families and clans, and thus did not spark any conflict within the wider Muslim society, although the communities were stigmatized by the majority Sunni.

As noted previously, this probably happened because he practiced *taqiyyah*. This particular tenet of Shi'a Islam can be 'traced back to the

generation of Muhammad al-Baqir and his son Ja'far al-Sadiq, the fifth and sixth Imams respectively'. In fact, 'the disappearance of the twelfth Imam in 260 AH/874 A.D is explained as an act of *taqiyya* designed to save him from harm until his return as Mahdi' (Kohlberg 1975: 396-397). According to Etan Kohlberg (2008: 235), *taqiyyah* means 'fear or caution', or 'self-protection through dissimulation' to safeguard secrets. Another term used for *taqiyyah* is *kitman*.

There are two manifestations of *taqiyyah*: concealment or *suppressio veri*, and dissimulation or *suggestio falsi*. The early Shi'a demonstrated the first type of *taqiyyah* – concealment – when they hid a number of the sacred texts originating from their Imams from the public:

In addition to the Qur'an, the Imams are said to have possessed a number of other sacred texts, some inherited from the Prophet and some from other members of the *Ahl al bayt*. The contents of these texts were normally known only to them, though they would on occasion reveal excerpts to trusted disciples. Those excerpts which are cited in the early literature often deal with doctrines which Sunnis find offensive; and so it is likely that at least one reason for concealing these texts was fear. (Kohlberg 2008: 244).

An example of dissimulation or *suggestio falsi* is to pray behind someone who overtly rejects the position of *ahl al-bayt* (not just a Sunni). Of course, *taqiyyah* in this form does not mean a Shi'a is free to do 'anything' in order to hide his faith; there are 'moral and religious considerations which limit the use of dissimulation' – for example, a Shi'a is not allowed to commit sinful behaviour in order to dissimulate (Kohlberg 2008: 247).

*Taqiyyah* is also a major factor among Shi'as living in Malaysia today. For this reason, when interviewing local Shi'a, I was obliged to promise strict anonymity to the participants as a pre-condition for their participation, since they were unwilling to expose themselves. Nevertheless, the information that I collected through these interviews proved invaluable in tracing the continued arrival of Shi'ism to Malaysia in the past few centuries; this concurs with the view of Jan Vansina (1985: 19-39) that the oral tradition can preserve information across a broad span of time. With respect to the population being studied, this type of

data has both social and cultural legitimacy. Hence, oral histories will be included in the next section, and will be considered along with historical documents and local historiographer sources.

### *Later immigration and conversion in the Malay Archipelago*

It is unwise to conclude that any and all connections with the Ottoman Empire are proof of Sunni influence. One must recall that during Bayezid's reign over the Ottoman Empire in 1501, 'some 30,000 Anatolian Shi'as were relocated to Morea in Europe' (Cole 2002: 16-30). Soon after, during Selim I's rule over the Ottoman Empire, as many as 40,000 Shi'as in Anatolia were massacred. Researchers on Shi'ism in Turkey quickly learn that the Anatolian Shi'as were not referred to as such by Ottoman authorities, but were described as 'Qizilbash' (wearers of red headgear that signifies the blood of Imam Husayn in Karbala). The use of the term 'Qizilbash' as an equivalent for 'Shi'a' is rarely known to scholars unfamiliar with Ottoman history. In fact, the Qizilbash were treated by the Ottoman Sultans as apostates (Cole 2002). According to Mohd Nor Ngah (1991: 155-156), the Ottoman policy of killing the Shi'as is indisputable, since 40,000 Shi'as were massacred in Halab, Syria in 1048-1049 CE due to a religious verdict by Nuh Affandi. As I conducted research in Kelantan, a state on the eastern coast of Malaysia, I encountered a Malaysian Shi'a family who claimed that one of their ancestors came from Turkey; that is, this ancestor was a Shi'a who fled from the oppressive taxation policy of the Ottoman Empire during the reign of Sultan Abdul Hamid II.<sup>9</sup> A cross-check with Ottoman historical accounts studied by Juan Cole (2002: 27) showed that 'in the 1890's the government of Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1876-1909) attempted to curb Shi'ism and to proselytize Twelvers, hoping to convert them to Sunnism.'

Further interviews revealed various other accounts of Shi'ism arriving in Malaysia through various means over the past couple centuries. For instance, another Shi'a family in Kelang (a city in the state of Selangor, Malaysia) relates that they became Shi'as though their great-grandfather who once worked in the northern and western parts of Australia. According to the interviewee, his great-grandfather was a diver hired by a Dutch company in Darwin.<sup>10</sup> There, his great-grandfather grew acquainted with a small number of Afghan Hazara Shi'as. In Australia they were known

as the Ghans, or the Cameleers, as they were hired to be camel drivers in Australia at the end of the nineteenth century (Jones and Kenny 2007).<sup>11</sup> The Ghans were responsible for building the first mosque in Australia in Adelaide, in the year 1888. Unlike the Ghans, who stayed in Australia, the Malay divers hired by the Dutch companies later returned to their homeland. The interviewee, who asked to remain anonymous, claimed that his great-grandfather remained a Shi'a and passed his faith on to one of his sons named Abu Talib. They hid their faith even from their extended families, and were only 'brave enough to practice Shi'ism after 1979' because they saw it 'as a sign of many signs of the reappearance of their twelfth Imam'.<sup>12</sup>

Another Shi'a family from the village of Naning, Melaka (a small state in southern Malaysia) relates that they 'became Shi'a through their great-grandmother who came into contact with Shi'as in the holy city of Medina during her pilgrimage in the early twentieth century'.<sup>13</sup> This claim conforms to a travelogue written by Mirza Mohammad Hosayn Farahani (1990: 257-258), which indicates that there was an abundance of local Shi'as in the holy city of Medina in 1885.<sup>14</sup> According to Farahani, in Mecca at the time, Shi'as did not practice *taqiyyah* and 'openly practice[d] Shi'ism' even holding 'mourning ceremonies during the days of Ashura'. One of the prime reasons why the Shi'as were not disturbed in 1885 was because Mecca was under the reign of Sharif 'Awn, who had a moderate attitude towards Shi'ism. Most of the Shi'as in Mecca were pilgrim guides (Farahani *et al.* 1990: 227-228). In sum, there were so many local Shi'as involved with the hajj season that it was impossible not to make contact with them. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Malay pilgrims often stayed in Mecca or Medina for extended periods, sometimes for up to two years. Historical research has indicated that, during the 1880 hajj season alone, there were about 12,000 Jawi pilgrims (those from present-day Indonesia and Malaysia), who outnumbered pilgrims from Iran, Egypt, North Africa, and the Ottoman Empire (Farahani *et al.* 1990: 186-187). Farahani's description is similar to the first documented travelogue by 'Abd al-Majid Zayn al-Din (Awang 1986: 178-181), a Malay pilgrim in 1925. In 1927, for example, 12,184 Malaysians went for pilgrimage (Awang 1986: 204-205).<sup>15</sup> The informant explained that 'after her great-grandmother returned from hajj, she seemed to practice Ja'fari laws, and this could be detected especially by her *zikrs* and *du'as*, and the most distinctive sign of her new faith was that she broke her

fast during the month of Ramadan a little bit late just like Ja'faris.'<sup>16</sup> The informant also revealed that her great-grandmother passed on Shi'a teachings to selected family members and that they only 'understood and dared to practice more of their ancestral faith during the 1980s and kept it a secret due to the repressive and intolerant religious climate in Malaysia'.

Shi'a also arrived in peninsular Malaysia from Burma. Significantly, there are a number of Shi'a families of Burmese origin in Kuala Lumpur.<sup>17</sup> Today, there are around 20,000 Shi'as living in Yangon, Mandalay, Amarapura, Pyay, Thandwe, and Mawlamyine (Thein 2011). This explains the presence of three Shi'as of Burmese origin during a raid carried out by the Selangor religious enforcer on 15 December 2010 at a Shi'a community centre in Gombak, a district near Kuala Lumpur (JAIS tahan 200 pengikut Syiah anggap mazhab lain halal dibunuh 2010). Additionally, there are also a number of Shi'as living in the state of Sabah in East Malaysia. Many of them are from the Southern Philippines.<sup>18</sup> It is also important not to neglect Shi'as of Indian and Pakistani origin in Malaysia, as they are also accepted as citizens in contemporary Malaysia. Their contributions to introducing and strengthening Shi'ism in Malay society will be discussed later.

It is important to reiterate that tracking Shi'ism in the Malay world is made difficult by the tendency of Shi'a minorities to engage in *taqiyyah*. Most Malay Shi'a seem to have been comfortable employing *taqiyyah*, even more so than Shi'a from other areas such as the Indian Subcontinent, to the degree that they drop enough hints for people to presume they are Sunni. Some of them even choose to marry Sunnis and keep their faith hidden, only later revealing it to their favourite child if they think it is necessary.<sup>19</sup> The difference in attitude is most probably related to the fact that Malay Muslims are greater in number when compared to Muslims from other ethnicities. Because of that, a Malay Shi'a can be more easily labelled as alien within his society compared to a Pakistani Shi'a. A Malaysian Shi'a of Pakistani origin can always escape the negative perception of being a Shi'a, as they can easily claim that they inherited Shi'ism from their ancestors, which is not the case with a Malay Muslim, given the general view that Malay Muslims are exclusive adherents to the Shafi'i school of thought.

More research should be done to clarify the question of to what extent the Malay Shi'as dissimulated and how this dissimulation evolved and



compounded, then syncretized with Sunnism and the culture, until distinctive aspects of Shi'ism were no longer apparent. A compounding difficulty is the place of metaphor in Malay culture. By the term 'metaphor' it is meant that Malay people often 'use a gestalt from one domain of experience to structure experience in another domain' (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 230). Malay metaphoric expressions appear in the literary and cultural products which inform cultural literacy among the Malays (Ahmad 2003: 40). For instance, a simple Malay *pantun* (traditional poem) can easily be a unidirectional metaphor, as shown below:<sup>20</sup>

*Ada berempat sababat Nabi,  
Ada seorang jadi khalifah,  
Abu Bakar, Omar, Osman, dan Ali,  
Saidina Ali suami Fatimah.*

There are four companions of the Prophet;  
there was one caliph.  
Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman, and 'Ali –  
Sayyidna 'Ali, Fatimah's husband. (*Kurik Kundi Merah  
Saga* 2005).<sup>21</sup>

A close reading of the *pantun* shows that among the four companions of Prophet Muhammad (S), the real *khalifah* or successor after his demise is 'Ali, the husband of Fatimah (the Prophet's daughter). Even though this *pantun* is open to interpretation, the clear meaning of the *pantun* is evident – that is, 'Ali is the only *khalifah*. This is important to understand, as the basic split between Shi'ism and Sunnism goes back to the political history of who should succeed Prophet Muhammad.

### *Malaysian Shi'a during the pre-modern era*

It is often argued by the Malaysian government that Shi'ism only appeared in Malaysia after the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. Nonetheless, the Malaysian Shi'a figure, Kamil Zuhairi Abdul Aziz, an Iranian-trained leader of the Hauzah Ar Ridha Alaihissalam, a Shi'a community centre near Kuala Lumpur, asserted in an AFP interview that Shi'ism is not new in this region:



Shi'ism came to the shores of Malaysia in the 14<sup>th</sup> century when Islam arrived here as many of the Arabic, Indian and Persian traders who brought the religion were also Shi'as. The authorities must recognize that we are not a recent phenomenon and that we should be respected just like any other faith in the country. (Bose 2011)

Kamil Zuhairi's statement above is not vacuous. In fact, academic findings do support the Shi'as' presence in the region as early as the seventh century (Musa 2006: 15-89). A Persian account by Abu Ishaq Makrani al-Fasi, 'Izhar al-Haqq fi Mamlikat al-Falah wa al-Fasi', notes the of a Shi'a religious teacher named Nakhuda Khalifah in the year 820 AD along with Persian, Arab, and Indian Shi'as. Kamis Ismail's (2003: 169) doctorate thesis also proposes that the Shi'a were the first Muslims to come to the Malay world, and they founded the kingdom of Perlak in 840 AD; he adds that five of its kings were Twelver Shi'as.<sup>22</sup>

It is also worth noting here that, in the latest research done to understand the mysterious word of *Santabi* or *Sahabi* on *Batu Bersurat Trengganu* (the 'Inscribed Stone of Terengganu', dated 1303 AD), Adi Yasran Abdul-Aziz and Nurhidayah Jumaat (2010: 3-17) conclude that *Santabi* or *Sahabi* does not mean 'the companions of Prophet Muhammad' (which would signify the influence of Sunnism) but correctly means 'the prophet Muhammad and his blood relations', an interpretation which signifies the influence of Shi'ism.<sup>23</sup> Both researchers come to this conclusion by referring *Santabi* or *Sahabi* to a loan word from Sanskrit, *Sanabhya*, that translates to English as 'blood-relation'. Another archaeological piece of evidence is the gravestone of Abu Kamil dated 1039 AD found in South Champa (Cambodia), whom S. Q. Fatimi (1963: 47) identifies as a Shi'a.

Sunnism only arrived in this region in the thirteenth century and has since been the dominant sect (Abdullah 1989: 105). According to Mahayuddin Haji Yahya (1994), with the arrival of Mawlana Shaykh Isma'il al-Siddiq, Sunnism became dominant in the Malay world, and Shi'ism has been neglected ever since. Nevertheless it is possible that the presence of the doctrine of *wahjat al-wujud* (the unity of Being) itself is due to the influence of Shi'as, for while this doctrine was codified by Ibn 'Arabi, it was heavily espoused by certain Shi'a philosophers (Nasr 1975; Nasr and Leaman 2008: 497-523); in the Malay world, it is particularly apparent in the writings of Hamzah Fansuri, a great Malay mystic and

poet. It is believed that Hamzah Fansuri adopted this particular doctrine while residing in Ayuthya, Siam (known in Persian as 'Shahr-i Naw') (Al-Attas 1970),<sup>24</sup> which was under the heavy influence of Shi'ism during the mid-sixteenth century, since Persian traders played a significant role in the Ayuthya court (Kongchana 1995: 253-269). This will be elaborated on later.

### *Shi'ism and Malay traditional performing arts*

Because of the pre-modern presence of Shi'ism, it is not surprising that Shi'a influences are apparent in Malay performing arts. For instance, the origin of *boria* (choral street performance) shows that Shi'ism is nothing new in Malaysia, especially in Penang (Kementerian Kebudayaan Kesenian dan Pelancongan Malaysia n.d.: 5-9).<sup>25</sup> Mozaffari-Falarti (2004: 1-18) has shown in his research that 'along with the British, came *sepoy* troops from India, many of them Shi'as from various denominations' and 'those Shi'a *sepoy* soldiers brought with them *boria*'. At the time, *boria* was celebrated and performed during first ten days of Muharram (the first month in the Islamic calendar) to commemorate the tragic killings of Imam Husayn and his followers in Karbala. *Boria* has many similarities to Iranian *ta'ziyeh* (passion plays) performed during Ashura commemorations. Upon arriving in Penang, *ta'ziyeh* later transformed into *boria* (Yusof 2010: 83-101). Today however, the original objectives and forms of *boria* no longer exist; this is similar to what happened with respect to the Hosay commemoration in the Caribbean, in that the Hosay (derived from 'Husayn') originated from Indian 'Ashura commemorations but, over time, evolved into a local custom and lost its distinctly Shi'a character.

In addition to *boria*, *dabus*, a traditional ceremonial dance performed in Perak and Selangor, has Shi'a origins (Syed-Ibrahim and Jahid 2009). In fact the performance of *dabus* or 'sharp-spike' has similarities with *qamah zani*, a ritual practiced among some Shi'a involving striking one's self with a blade in an expression of grief for Imam Husayn. The *qamah zani* practitioners lash themselves with chains with blades to feel the same pain experienced by Imam Husayn in the battle of Karbala, while the *dabus* dancers strike themselves with sharp metal to show their invincibility.<sup>26</sup> However, as above, these performances have lost their religious meanings.

### *Historical links with other Shi'as in the region*

Additionally, Malay Shi'as, along with ethnic Thais, Persians, and Pathans residing in Ayuthya, Thailand, have maintained links with Malaysian Shi'as for centuries.<sup>27</sup> As mentioned previously, Shi'as in Ayuthya enjoyed good positions in the palace of Siam during the Ayuthya period (1350-1767) (Marcinkowski 2006a). Shi'as were appointed as Chularajmontri (advisors to the Siamese King on Islamic affairs) especially during the Sukhothai dynasty (1569-1629) (Scupin 1980: 55-71). Historical documents say that King Songtham of Ayuthya (1610-1628) gave a greater role to Persian traders in his palace, thus allowing Shi'ism to be imported directly from Iran (Aphornsuvan 2003).

One of the famous Iranians of Ayuthya was Shaykh Ahmad Qummi, also known by his Thai name, Chao Phaya Boworn Rajnayok. Shaykh Ahmad was a Shi'a who came to trade in Siam with his brother Muhammad Sa'id in 1600 during the reign of King Ekathotsarot (1605-1610). He served as a civil servant in the court of King Songtham (1610-1628), the son of King Ekathotsarot (Chularatana 2008: 51-52). According to Oudaya Bhanuwongse (1995: 206-207), the tenth lineal descendant of Shaykh Qummi, his great-grandfather 'never forgot or gave up his nationality or his religion of the *Chao Sen* or Shi'a sect'. When Shaykh Qummi arrived in Ayuthya as a preacher and trader, Shi'a Muslims had already been given many administrative positions in the Siamese palace, including Pharaya Srihaj Dechochai, an army chief; Phraya Nakornsridharmaraj, a southern regional army chief; Phraya Rajbangson, a navy admiral; and PhrayaYamaraj, another regional army chief (Srisak 1995: 208-214).

As stated earlier, it is also believed that Hamzah Fansuri, the great Malay poet, travelled to Ayuthya, residing there and adopting *wahdat al-wujud* before returning to Aceh. Christopher M. Joll (2012: 29) even suggests that Hamzah Fansuri was actually Persian from Fansur, in North West Sumatra. According to M. Joll, who conducted a study for the Muslim Studies Centre of the Institute of Asian Studies in Bangkok, Hamzah Fansuri was known to be in contact with the sizeable Persian community in Ayuthya during that era. These points are enough to show how Shi'as in Ayuthya were capable of strengthening their position politically and culturally, thus influencing some of the local people. As a reminder, *ta'ziyeh* came to Thailand directly from Iran during the kingdom of Ayuthya. Christoph Marcinkowski (2005), in his research

on Shi'ism in Ayuthya, stresses that *ta'ziyeh* was performed in Ayuthya and that the Buddhist Siamese monarch provided the Shi'as a 'special building and other facilities for the purpose'. It is important to note that Persians also played an important role in the court of the Melaka Sultanate. It is stated in *Commentarios*, a document on the conquest of Melaka in 1511 by the Portuguese, that there were 'at least three thousands Khorasones or Persians' in Melaka when it fell (McRoberts 1984: 26-39). In the sixteenth century, Shi'ism was already widespread among Persians in Iran and thus the 'Khorasones' were most likely Shi'as. There is further evidence of this in Thai scholar Plubplung Kongchana's paper 'The Historical Development of the Persian Community in The Court of Ayuthya', which states that after the fall of Melaka to the Portuguese Christians, many Muslims from Melaka (including Malays and Persians) moved to the safety of Ayuthya. This was the reason why the Muslim population in Ayuthya dramatically rose after 1511 (Kongchana 1995: 253-269).

There is no reason to dismiss offhand the hypothesis that Shi'as in Ayuthya were also disseminating Shi'ism beyond the border of Siam. According to Julispong Chularatana (2008: 51-52), one of the main reason why Shi'as were given so much attention by the Siamese Kings was because the effectiveness of *taqiyyah*. He also added that, later, Ayuthya's Shi'as intermarried with Sunnis from Pattani, the southern part of Thailand (close to the modern-day Malaysian border).

### *Malaysian Shi'a in the modern era*

As have been mentioned earlier, there were many Malay Shi'as in Thailand from the Ayuthya period who kept their ties with other Shi'as from Indonesia and Malaysia as well. Most of the Shi'as in Ayuthya can be identified through their Thai surnames, namely Ahmadchula, Bunnak, Buranon, Chatikrat, Supmitr, Sripem, and Chularat (Karnjanomai 1995: 221-224). Shi'a Muslims remained in Ayuthya and then migrated to Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos; this would suggest that many also must have travelled to or settled down in northern and eastern Malaysia. Today, one of the famous Shi'a mosques in Ayuthya is Masjid Dar al-Sunnah, which was built in 1975 and is attended by Sunnis as well (Kongchana 1995: 269).

If these facts are not sufficient enough to demonstrate the historical presence of Shi'ism in Malaysia and its neighbouring countries, the Indonesian Shi'a icon and founder of Yayasan Pesantren Islam or YAPI in Bangil (an institution heavily linked to Shi'ism in Indonesia), Syed Husein al Habsyi, also spent time in Penang and Johor in the 1920s (Fahmi 2011).<sup>28</sup> This fact raises the possibility that Syed Husein al Habsyi propagated Shi'ism to his followers and students, especially in Madrasah al-Attas in Johor Bahru where he was a teacher. Madrasah al-Attas, together with Madrasah Darul Falah in the state of Melaka 'are the centre of the Shia movement' in Malaysia (Noordin *et al.* 2009).<sup>29</sup> Syed Husein al Habsyi also 'encountered Middle Eastern figures with whom he could discuss Islamic teachings, including Shi'a doctrines' during his early age in Surabaya (Assegaf 2010: 58-81). Jalaluddin Rakhmat (2000: 144-145), a well-known Indonesian Shi'a scholar, once noted that there were a number of Shi'a religious preachers who presented themselves as Sunnis to their contemporaries. As has been discussed earlier, people like Sayyid Muhammad ibn Ahmad al Muhdar (1861-1926), Sayyid 'Ali ibn Ahmad Shahab (1865-1944) and Sayyid 'Aqil ibn Zayn al-'Abidin (1870-1952) emerged as Shi'a figures (Zulkifli 2009; Endut 2012). An interview with an elderly Malay Shi'a from Melaka indicated that Indonesian religious scholars were actively teaching Ja'fari jurisprudence to exclusive and select groups both before and after the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, it is not correct to claim that Shi'ism only reached Malay societies after the Islamic Revolution.

Prior to Syed Husein al Habsyi's time, a heated debate amongst the Muslims in British Malaya was documented by Werner Ende. This controversy erupted in 1907 when an Arab Muslim named Sayyid Muhammad al-'Aqil al-Hadrami said that cursing Mu'awiyah, the first Umayyad caliph, was meritorious (Marcinkowski 2006b: 5).<sup>31</sup> Zulkifli (2009), in his doctorate thesis, identified Sayyid Muhammad al-'Aqil al-Hadrami as a local Shi'a from the Arab community.

Before its 1965 separation from Malaysia, Singapore's Sunnis had deep connections to their counterparts on the Malay Peninsula. The same could be said of the city's Shi'a. Other than Sayyid Muhammad al-'Aqil al-Hadrami, the active Shi'as in Malayan Singapore were of Pakistani or Indian origin. It is difficult not to include the Jumabhoy family in Singapore. Rajabali Jumabhoy (1970), a Shi'a, came to Singapore in 1918 and founded a multinational trading company. In 1955, Rajabali was

elected to the newly independent Legislative Assembly of Singapore for the Telok Ayer constituency, and, on account of that, he went to Karbala to pay homage or *ziyarat* in fulfilment a vow (*nadh'r*) (Jumabhoy 1970: 287). One of his sons, Ameerali Jumabhoy, was one of the founding members of the Singaporean opposition Workers' Party and became a member of its Executive Council until 1957. Ameerali Jumabhoy 'is perhaps the most important single sponsor of the Singapore Twelver Shi'a community' and is also the President of the Ja'fari Muslim Association of Singapore (Marcinkowski 2006b: 22-23). Today members of the Jumabhoy family can be found in Malaysia as well. According to the National Library Board of Singapore's web site, Mustafa Jumabhoy, Ameerali Jumabhoy's youngest brother, resides in the state of Penang in Malaysia (Mukunthan 2010). Mustafa was also the President of the Indian Chamber of Commerce, and the Rotary Club of Penang in 1970 (Jumabhoy, 1970: 287).

Another influential Shi'a family are the Namazies, a family of Persian origin. Just like Rajabali Jumabhoy, Mohamed Javad Namazie migrated from India to Singapore in the early twentieth century. In 1933 the Namazies were responsible for building the iconic Capitol Theatre in Singapore, the first live theatre on the island, which was later transformed into a cinema (Hong-Xinyi 2008). Currently, the Namazies are mainly involved in the legal profession in Singapore. The Jumabhoy and Namazies were also involved in formulating the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) of 1966. They are still active in Singapore's Muslim body, the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, where they help the committee to build mosques and manage *waqfs*, or permanent charitable endowments (Marcinkowski 2006b: 24-28). The Jaafari Muslim Association of Singapore's web site states that Shi'as already held 'Ashura gatherings before World War II, as quoted here:

Shia Ithna 'Asheri Muslims have been in Singapore since before the First World War of 1914 to 1918. Muharram *majalis* (gatherings to commemorate the tragic martyrdom of Imam Husain (a.s.) and his followers at Karbala)<sup>32</sup> were held and continued after the war for several decades at the homes of two prominent families – the Namazie family, and a Khoja family, that of Rajabali Jumabhoy. During the Japanese occupation of Singapore from 1942 to 1945, prisoners of war from the British Indian army and other local Shia were allowed to commemorate

Muharram and organize processions related to it.

In the late '70s Rajabali Jumabhoy and his wife Fatima Premjee bought a shophouse in Lim Ah Woo Road where Muharram *majalis* were addressed by an Urdu *vaiz* (speaker) from Lucknow in India, Maulana Mazahir, every year till 2009. The ladies' section was strongly supported by the late Mrs. Amina Jumabhoy, and her friend and guide the late Mrs. Shams Namazie, and their families. (Jaafari Muslim Association of Singapore n.d.)

On the Malay Peninsula, Shi'as of Pakistani origin also played active role in their community. Even the founder of the Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC), Syed Jafer Hussain Zaidi (2006), is a Shi'a.<sup>33</sup> Pockets of Shi'as are also believed to have existed among Sunnis, especially in Lembah Kelang before the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. They took part in closed religious classes alongside other Pakistani and Indonesian Shi'as. For instance, a Malaysian Pakistani named Syed Mohamad Hussein Shah or Pak Habib Hussein was a famous *ustad* (religious teacher) teaching aspects of Shi'ism in the 1970s at his house in Jalan Dang Wangi, Kuala Lumpur. Most of his students were Malays ('Al Marhum Pak Habib Hussein' 2010).

Notable Shi'as in Indonesia include Syed Husein Shahab from Palembang, Indonesia (the founding member of the Qum Iranian alumni association), who was an *ustad* who was frequently invited to Malaysia to give sermons to local Shi'as. In fact, due to his active participation within the Shi'a community (he denied promoting Shi'ism outside Shi'a society), Syed Husein Shahab was forced by the Malaysian authorities to leave Malaysia in 1997 after staying in Malaysia for three years (Zulkifli 2009). Syed Husein Shahab was also involved in helping the Shi'as in Singapore, as mentioned on the website of the Jaafari Muslim Association of Singapore.

Significantly, Lau-Fong Mak, a Taiwanese scholar on the subject of collective memory in genealogy, points out that Shi'ism remained intact amongst the Sunni believers in Aceh, Brunei, Pahang, Kelantan, and Terengganu:

With the Karbala issue as background, both the Shi'as and Sunnis began to revise Islam according to their own perspectives.



Of interest to us here is the Shi'a resistance to adopting the names of the first three caliphs, due to the Karbala incident. The names of Ali, Hussein and Hassan have special meaning for the Shi'as, and they are evocative of the Karbala tragedy and martyr spirit. The Muslims in Aceh, Kelantan, Terengganu and sometimes Brunei, are said to have experienced strong Shi'a influence and hence they are more inclined to adopt these three names. On the same basis, they are less inclined to take names of the first three caliphs. (Mak 2004:101)

If we use naming as an indicator, collective identity among Shi'as appears to be strongest in Aceh, followed by Brunei, and Pahang, Kelantan and Terengganu.<sup>34</sup>

Lau-Fong Mak (2004: 101) also maintains that Shi'as in many parts of Malaysia and Indonesia experienced 'structural amnesia' and started to name their children 'after the three Grand Sunni Imams' to 'avoid taboo' among majority Sunnis, in what he called the 'Muhammad Hanafiyah effect'. As was discussed earlier in this essay, a number of local historiography sources mention ancestors who were Shi'as and who concealed their faith due to suppression; as suggested by Lau-Fong Mak, they have been 'victims' of 'Sunnitization'.

Other than that, one might also note that respect towards *ahl al-bayt*, an important pillar of Shi'ism although not fully exclusive to Shi'ism, is also evident in many classical Malay texts (Musa 2010: 1-23). In fact, a notable Malaysian cultural anthropologist, Mohd Taib Osman (1987: 110-149), admits that Shi'a traditions have been visible and dominant in Malay cultures until now.

One Shi'a practice, which is proscribed in Sunnism, is *mut'ah* or short-term marriage. *Mut'ah* – or, as it was known, *kahwin dagang* (marriage with traders) – was a common practice during Malaysia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Ungku Abdul Aziz Ungku Abdul Hamid (2011: 23) for example asserts that this particular *pantun* below was a sign of this practice among the Malays:

*Kalau pulang puyuh di ladang  
Bersahut sambil berbunyi  
Kalau pulang orang dagang  
Jangan lupa saya di sini.*



Once a quail flew in a farm,  
 Twitting and making sounds.  
 Once the trader returns back,  
 Do not forget that I'm here.<sup>35</sup>

This assertion is supported by a report by *Asian Geographic*. According to Barbara Watson Andaya (2012: 73), 'the societies within Southeast Asia, which for centuries was a crossroad of long distance trade and cultural exchange, saw a long standing practice of temporary marriage between local women and foreign traders become the norm.'

Another Shi'a tradition is what is known in Lombok, Indonesia as *solat telu*. *Telu* means 'three'. Unlike other *fiqh* schools, Ja'fari *fiqh* simplifies the timings for the obligatory five daily prayers to three time frames. While the morning prayer is said at a time similar to other sects, Shi'as give one time frame for noon and afternoon prayers and another for their dusk and evening prayers, and may combine them without separating them. Thus, there are misconceptions by some people that Shi'as only perform their prayers three times a day (Tjandrasasmita 1981: 211).

We could treat the presence of Shi'a-influenced practices such as *mut'ab* and *solat telu* as just another local conundrum, or we could accept them as further evidence that the influence Shi'ism lies deep in Malay society, and that Ja'fari *fiqh* was historically accepted as legal school of jurisprudence by some Malays. This essay has explained how the Shi'a phenomenon in the Malay world emerged and how influences from local cultures including foreign elements helped Shi'a to become part of a rich culture where Sunnism was the strongest, but by no means the only, influence. The phenomenon was associated with Malays (with strong Indonesian, Indian, and Ayuthyan origins). It is important to note here that Shi'ism in this region flourished in very unique and complex conditions – on the one hand, in the presence of an unfriendly climate and strong inclination towards Sunnism; but, on the other hand, in a pluralistic and colourful environment. Furthermore, Malay culture traditionally encourages people to avoid directly stating their views and beliefs, but to rather express them artistically or aesthetically. This indirectness has allowed Shi'a to exist in Malay society while presenting themselves to the public as Sunnis. The fluid nature of Shi'ism in this Sunni-dominated society might lead to the inaccurate conclusion that these people are simply Shi'a sympathisers (that is to say, they hold to 'Alid piety). According

to Syed Hussein Alatas, even when 'a new society' is formed, it 'will not completely differ from the preceding society'. Thus, the presence of Shi'a influences can be traced to actual Shi'a practitioners in the Malay past. Indeed, this 'chain of causality will not break completely' but continue to reinvent itself as society develops (Alatas, 2007: 94). While Malay society may have, in the past, presented a seemingly uniform Sunni character, an enduring love towards *ahl al-bayt* has never been compromised. Shi'a activities may have been all but invisible to academics in the nineteenth and twentieth century Malay world. However, by connecting the chains of causality, it is clear that an enduring, subaltern Shi'a community remained intact within Malay society.

Though it is difficult to trace, Shi'a practice through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there are many indications of its existence. In 1960 a prominent politician, the former President of the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (or later known as Parti Islam Se-Malaysia), Burhanuddin al-Helmi (2005: 39), mentioned in his opening speech at a symposium on Sufism that the Shi'a-Sunni conflict in the society should be resolved and that the conflict was only instigated by greedy rulers. Years before, in 1953, a well-known linguist, writer, and religious persona, Za'ba (2009: 138), mentioned in an article that Shi'ism should be tolerated and that Malay Muslims should be more open to pluralistic ideas coming from various schools of thought. Za'ba's works were banned in Perak, and he was accused of disseminating Mu'tazilite doctrines (Hussain and Hussain 2000: 12). Thus, sectarian awareness was already present among Muslims in Malaysia, and this suggests that Shi'a practice never truly ceased among Malays.

In fact, in 1980, Syed Naquib al Attas (1980: 42) a well-known scholar, proposed that Shi'a interpretations of *fard 'ayn* should be integrated in Islamic education in Malaysia, further evidence that Shi'ism was already seen in a positive light by some religious authorities. These statements and calls to reject sectarian rifts made by leading figures of society signified that Shi'ism was visible then and existed in Malaysia both before and after its independence from the British in 1957. Other than that it is also significant to mention here that the Dawoodi Bohras (a branch of Isma'ilism)<sup>6</sup> also have a presence especially among local Indians in Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, Kedah, and Johor (Cruetz, 2011). In Penang, Bohra cemeteries are treated as national treasures and are listed as one of Penang's tourist attractions (Penang Travel Tips 2005).

This study is only meant to be preliminary, and it is hoped that it will lead to more investigation into the history of Shi'ism in Malaysia. The question that remains, however, is how many Shi'as there are in Malaysia today – a question that will be explored in the next section of the article, which addresses the situation of Malaysian Shi'a today.

### *Malaysian Shi'as and their fight for rights*

As stated earlier, on 5 May 1996, the Fatwa Committee of the National Council for Islamic Affairs in Malaysia (n.d.) outlawed Shi'ism in Malaysia. Before elaborating on the implications of these religious verdicts (*fatawa*), it is important to note that the verdict itself contradicts the view of Shaykh al-Akbar Mahmud Shaltut, the Head of al-Azhar University, in a fatwa dated 6 July 1959 which states that:

The Ja'fari school of thought, which is also known as *al-Shi'ah al-Imamiyyah al-Ithna 'Ashariyyah* (i.e., The Twelver Imami Shi'as) is a school of thought that is religiously correct to follow in worship as are other Sunni schools of thought. Muslims must know this, and ought to refrain from unjust prejudice to any particular school of thought, since the religion of Allah and His Divine Law (*shari'ah*) was never restricted to a particular school of thought. Their jurists (*mujtahidoon*) are accepted by Almighty Allah, and it is permissible to the 'non-*Mujtahid*' to follow them and to accord with their teaching whether in worship (*Ibadaat*) or transactions (*Mu'amilaat*). (Abbas 2001)

This particular al-Azhar verdict was never withdrawn or repealed. In fact, the previous Shaykh al-Azhar, Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, upon receiving his honorary doctorate from Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) in 2008, pointed out that Sunnis and Shi'as are one body of the *ummah* (community) as both hold to the same God – Allah – and the Prophet Muhammad (S). His statement was reported on the front page of a leading Malaysian newspaper (Tantawi 2008).

Yet, two years after Sayyid Tantawi's statement, on the evening of 15 December 2010, more than 200 Malaysian Shi'as – including children – who were attending a private religious gathering to commemorate the

martyrdom of Imam Husayn (the third Shi'a Imam who was martyred in 61 AH) were arrested by the Selangor Islamic Religious Department (JAIS) at a community centre called Hauzah Ar Ridha Alaihissalam. Two of them were then charged under section 12(c) of the Enactment 9 1995 Sharia Criminal Enactment (Selangor).<sup>37</sup>

According to this law any person who acts in contempt of lawful authority, rejects, is in violation of or disputes the orders or directives of (a) His Majesty the Sultan (for His position as the Leader of the Islamic Religion), (b) the Council, or (c) the Mufti, expressed or provided by a fatwa, is guilty of an offence and is liable to a fine not exceeding three thousand *ringgit* or imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years, or both. Being charged under this particular enactment implies that being a Shi'a is a crime in Malaysia, as only those who practice Sunnism are accepted as Muslims. In explaining Shi'a hardship in Malaysia, John Ling (2011), a Malaysian fiction writer based in New Zealand writes in his blog:

Among the marginalized in Malaysia, there is a single group perhaps more marginalized than many. They are the people that Malaysia has forgotten. They are the Shiite Muslims. No one knows how many there are. They could be as few as 10,000 or as many as 40,000. The one thing that is certain however is that they face such oppression that it borders on cultural genocide. They are raided. Imprisoned. Denied the freedom to worship. Denied the freedom to participate in public life. Left only one choice: convert to Sunni Islam or remain *persona non grata*.

Following the incident 15 December 2010, on 27 December 2010 the Shi'as converged on the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) to submit a memorandum.

The contents of the memorandum elucidated that the acts of abuse on the rights of Shi'as carried out by the religious authority are due to (i) lack of dialogue with the community and (ii) lack of study on their history, culture and ethnicity. The memorandum also highlighted that local scholars have traced their existence in the Malay world through the centuries, especially in Malaysia. In addition, the Shi'a minority in Malaysia claimed that they have their own specific identity and cannot

be generalized to be the same as Shi'a Muslims from other regions (Malaysian Shi'as Memorandum 2010).

But far from receiving recognition, Malaysian Shi'as were again intimidated and harassed on 24 May 2011 during an open luncheon commemorating the birth of Fatimah al-Zahra (A). Four were detained and charged under the same enactment.<sup>38</sup> This particular incident was reported in the 'State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2012: Events of 2011 Focus on Land Rights and Natural Resources':

Shi'a Muslims, listed as a 'deviant' sect by Malaysia's Islamic law in this majority Sunni Muslim state, also continued to face difficulties. In May, in the central state of Selangor, authorities broke up a gathering of Shi'a who were celebrating the birthday of a daughter of the Prophet, on accusations of proselytizing. Four people were reportedly detained (Walker 2012: 154).

As has been mentioned earlier, it is clear that Shi'ism is not a recent phenomenon and has been in Malaysia for a long period of time. It should be noted here that the development of Shi'ism never underwent 'a stage of quietism' either in South East Asia generally, or in Malaysia specifically, but became – borrowing the term used by Martin van Bruinessen (1992: 16-27) to define Indonesian Shi'as – 'an introversionist movement'. The points presented in this essay also show that the Shi'a have never been entirely wiped out in the Malay world. It is important to understand and to conclude this point as a fact as Azyumardi Azra, a well-known professor of Islamic history at Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University (UIN), stressed that 'the Shia community in Indonesia [author note: in this context, Indonesia and Malaysia is the Malay world] dated back to the arrival of Islam here, but grew rapidly after the Iranian revolution in 1979' (Rayda 2011). According to Zamihan Mat Zin, an officer of the National Council for Islamic Affairs in Malaysia, Shi'as in Malaysia are estimated to be as many as one million people (Manimaran 2011). This figure might be seen as an exaggeration, as the Ahl al-Bayt World Assembly in 2008 reported that the Shi'a population is approximately 200,000, while the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life recorded the Shia population in Malaysia as less than 331,000 (Ahlul Bayt World Assembly 2010). In 2013, the Malaysian Ministry Secretary-General Datuk Seri Abdul Rahim Mohamad Radzi claimed Shi'as in the

country have exceeded 250,000 (Idris 2013).

Shi'as in Malaysia, like other minority Shi'as in the world, choose to hide their faith or do *taqiyyah* for many reasons. According to Ismail (2006), in general, the main reason Shi'a perform *taqiyyah* is the discriminatory and unjust treatment levelled against them throughout history. A Malaysian researcher and lecturer in Islamic law, Mohamed Azam Mohamed Adil (2005: 175-176), for example, pointed out that Malaysian Shi'as are threatened with draconian laws. In 2001, Abdullah Hassan, one of Shi'as detained without trial under the ISA (Internal Security Act) between 2 October 1997 and 31 December 1999 complained to the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) that he 'was accused of receiving secret funds, distributing pamphlets, and sponsoring secret meetings [...] and certain activities on teachings deviating from the teachings of Islam that may cause confusion and disunity among the Muslims in Malaysia.' Four of the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia commissioners receiving him at the time were Harun Hashim, Zainah Anwar, Mehrun Siraj, and Hamdan Adnan. This complaint was filed following an arrest made under the ISA between 20 Oct 20 2000 and 5 January 2001 when six Shi'a followers were arrested under the ISA. Among the detainees were 'construction worker Norman Batcha, businessmen Zainal Talib, Ahmadi Asab, Syed Hassan Alattas, Mustapha Safar and Syed Mokhtar Al-Hadad' (Yen 2001).

Zainah, one of the commissioners, briefed the media that the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia would ask for 'clarification from the Home Minister and the Prime Minister's Department's JAKIM' regarding the 'clear violation of Article 11 of the Federal Constitution which guarantees freedom of religion'. Obviously nothing changed in between the complaint to the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia in 2001 and 2011. Over the decade, as can be from the arrests in 2010 and 2011, the conditions of the Shi'as worsened.

What types of discrimination do present-day Malaysian Shi'a suffer? *Free Malaysia Today* (2012) published a report regarding this matter summarizing their worsening isolation, repression, and state stigmatisation over the years:

The many misunderstandings have led to what Shiites regard as religious persecution. In 1997, the government detained 10 Shiites under the Internal Security Act (ISA) for not being

Sunnis. Three years later, six more Shiites were arrested under the ISA. Since then, there have been no ISA arrests. Even so, anti-Shiite sentiments in Malaysia do not appear to have died down, especially with a 1996 fatwa declaring Shiism as a 'deviant ideology'. In May 2011, a lunch celebrating the birthday of Fatimah Zahra, daughter of Prophet Muhammad was broken up by JAIS officers. Four Shiites were arrested that day, including Kamilzuhairi [sic]. Shiites were also allegedly targeted in mosques around the country. In September 2011, Kamilzuhairi said that the Islamic Affairs Department of Terengganu (JHEAT) issued anti-Shiite sermons to all mosques in the state, ordering them to be read on the 23<sup>rd</sup>. According to a police report lodged by Kamilzuhairi, the sermon included accusations that Ar-Ridha members beat themselves with chains to absolve themselves of sin and that Shiites used a different Qur'an than Sunnis did. Other alleged accusations by local clerics included the killing of Sunnis as halal. A Dec 20, 2010 Sinar Harian report said that the Malaysian government 'respected foreign Shiite teachings', but prohibited Shi'ism from being practised in the country. At the time, the minister in charge of religious affairs Jamil Khir Bahrom warned of bloodshed if more than one Islamic school of thought was allowed to be taught. (Lee 2012)

Christoph Marcinkowski (2006b: 28) observes in his research that Malaysian Shi'as prefer to 'congregate in secret due to persecution and the prevailing restrictive climate' in Malaysia.<sup>39</sup> His observation seems to be well founded, as evidenced by the raid on Hauzah Ar Ridha Alaihissalam.

What are the reasons of such intolerance towards the Shi'as in Malaysia? Kamil Zuhairi, the Malaysian Shi'a figure in the *Free Malaysia Report* (2012), blames it on the Wahhabis:

Before the [Iranian] Revolution, Shiites could mix with other people. Every year we call about 2,000 people [from all communities to join in our festivities]. Nobody here believes that we go out to slaughter people. Who believes this [slander]? The bad reputation comes from those who attack us [...] not

even the police [in Malaysia] disturb us [...] before 1997, we weren't that significant. The problem here is not the Sunnis, but the Wahhabis [...] they are hiding behind the Sunnis [...] JAIS and JAKIM are not Wahhabi, but there are elements that are trying to penetrate it (Lee, 2012).

Kamil Zuhairi's statement above leaves us to ponder. Was the rise of Wahhabism in Malaysia, whose preachers adopted extreme attitude towards the Shi'as also, the reason why Shi'as preferred to be in hiding? As a reminder, leading Islamic figures such as Syed Naquib al-Attas, Za'ba, and Dr Burhanuddin al-Helmi – as mentioned earlier – have already given their blessings to and expressed their tolerance towards Shi'ism within Muslim societies.

Before answering the above question, it should be borne in mind that extremism portrayed by the Wahhabis in Malaysia is clear. According to Hussin Salamon (n.d.: 35), who led a number of researchers from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia in analysing the effects of different schools of thought in Malaysia, he and his team confirmed that since the 1980s, the Wahhabis have caused many problems and rifts in local society.<sup>40</sup>

Could it be that Kamil Zuhairi's allegations regarding Wahhabism are true? In 2011, a Malaysian local newspaper, *Utusan Malaysia*, printed a front page report on Sulayman Salumi, a Saudi preacher who was invited to give sermons in Malaysia. Sulayman claimed that according to his 'research', the Shi'a believe that the Holy Qur'an was modified and that because of this the Shi'a Qur'an differs from that of the Sunnis. His bellicose claim is false: the Shi'a Holy Qur'an is exactly the same as the Sunni Holy Qur'an. This has been demonstrated by rigorous historical research. One of the most famous Iranian editions of the Holy Qur'an was translated by Sayyid Kazim al-Ma'azzi (1405 AH: 983). In his preface, the editor noted that his version of the Holy Qur'an was referred, arranged and translated according to the '*rasm al-mushhaf ya rasm 'Uthmani*', or the 'Uthmani edition. The same is true of the Sunni version of the Holy Qur'an. In fact, the Malaysian government, through the National Council for Islamic Affairs in Malaysia, has organized an International al-Qur'an Recitation Competition every year since 1961. Since then, ten of the male winners (*qari*) were Shi'as from Iran and Iraq. In 2009, the winner was Usamah 'Abd al-Hamzah, who is a muezzin at the *haram* of Imam Husayn in Karbala (Dar al Qur'an al Kareem 1432



AH: 46). Applying simple syllogism, Shi'as who believe in 'another Holy Qur'an' should not be recognized or even invited to such a prestigious competition, as they surely would not be Muslims. While international human rights standards would guarantee the rights of Shi'a even if their Qu'ran differed from the Sunni version, this is simply not the case.

While we may dismiss the content of Sulayman Salumi's sermons as factually incorrect, it is still significant that he was invited to Malaysia to give them. It is clear that Shi'ism is not a radical new ideology exported by the Islamic Republic of Iran: as this essay has demonstrated that Shi'a have been practicing in the Malay World for centuries. There is, however, ample evidence that another Middle Eastern power has put considerable effort into promoting an extremist new brand of Islam in Malaysia. The PBS news program *Frontline* has noted that over the past few decades the Saudi Arabian government has been financing the spread of Wahhabism around the globe under the pretence of funding charitable, educational, and religious institutions. The PBS program reported how, over the past few decades, 'Saudi charities established hundreds of religious schools, or *madrassas*, from Malaysia to Uzbekistan, from the Sudan to Pakistan' (Smith and Bergman 2001). Malaysia is a 'strategic ally' of Saudi Arabia (Khan 2010). In March, 2011, the Malaysian Prime Minister personally thanked Saudi Arabia for 'distributing an additional cash profit of US \$8.15 million to the 1Malaysia Development Berhad [also known as 1MDB]' in March 2011. Soon afterward, in response to the 2011 Bahraini uprising (keeping in mind that the ruling family of Bahrain is Sunni and allied to Saudi Arabia, whereas most Bahrainis are Shi'a), Malaysia promised to 'fully back all sovereign decisions taken by our GCC allies which have the aim of safeguarding stability and security in the region to ensure harmony and peace for their citizens' ('Malaysia Supports Saudi Arabia, GCC's Peace initiatives in Bahrain' 2011). The Malaysian Prime Minister went further, labelling the revolutionaries in Bahrain as 'terrorists that undermine the stability and security of the country.' This 'nefarious stand' was condemned by Liew Chin Tong (2011), a Malaysian opposition Member of Parliament:

Malaysia stands ready to contribute peacekeepers to the Kingdom of Bahrain, if invited to do so by the Bahraini leadership, according [to] Najib in a statement following a meeting with King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia in Riyadh.

Malaysia will consider it a great honour to offer assistance in this noble effort, he adds. I am shocked that the Malaysian government would consider violent response [sic] by the Bahrain government to crush civilians seeking to exercise their freedoms of expression as a noble effort. I wonder whether Najib understands that by such utterance he is risking being on the wrong side of history. Not only that the Malaysian government, as a self-[pro]claimed opinion leader of the Muslim world, did not voice support for the democratic uprising in the Arab world since early this year, it is now prepared to stand by dictators by sending our troops to oppress the democratic aspiration of the people of Bahrain. I am made to understand that leaders of the Malaysian Armed Forces are not in favour of such move as it has never been its duty to kill civilians, more so civilians of a foreign country. (Tong 2011)

Rizal Yaakop from the National University of Malaysia (UKM) and Asmady Idris from Universiti Malaysia Sabah (Sabah University of Malaysia), in an in-depth study of Saudi Arabian aid to the Malaysian government, highlighted the relationship of Wahhabism to this process. Indebted by financial aid, the government has chosen to look the other way as the Saudi kingdom has encouraged the spread of Wahhabism in Malaysia:

Since the affairs of religion have been granted to the rulers, and coordinated by the government, it provides more opportunities, especially for the governmental religious agencies, to run their own Islamic orientations [sic] as well as to directly monitor other Islamic activities and religious calls that might deviate from the true teaching of Islam or can pose some challenges to the government's image as the official guardian of Islam in Malaysia. In the case of the Wahhabi movement, however, its doctrine is not listed by the National Fatwa Council as one of the deviant teachings, unlike a few religious movements like Syiah, Qadiani, Tariqat Naqsyabandiah Kadirun Yahya which were officially declared as deviating from the true teaching of Islam. The study, however, believes that the main reason for the Malaysian government not considering the Wahhabi Doctrine

as deviant but only restraining its movement (except in Perlis), apart from acknowledging the differences in certain theological and legal concepts, is to safeguard its relations with the Kingdom, which is so vital for the welfare of the Muslim population in Malaysia as the former (as stated before) is regarded as the place of performing pilgrimage, acquiring Islamic studies, obtaining economic assistance and, to some extent, also standing as one of the leading nations in the Muslim world. Along with that, since the followers of this faction form only a small group of the Muslim community, and their emphasis is more on worship (*ibadat*), not political, the government has only restricted the operation of these religious factions, with the exemption of Perlis where they gained support from the royal as well as religious official of the state, in order to avoid any disintegration among Muslims in Malaysia. Hence, the controlled approach by the government has relatively caused the expansion of the Wahhabi Doctrine or any other religious reformations to be rather limited. (Yaakop and Idris n.d.: 9)

According to Natana J. Delong-Bas (2004: 84-90), in the Saudi Wahhabi interpretation of Islam Shi'a are usually portrayed as unbelievers. The effect of this is that Wahhabis in Malaysia tend to regard Shi'ism as 'another religion', and consider the Shi'as 'infidels', 'unbelievers', 'heretics', 'deviants', and 'non-Islamic'. Blaming it on Wahhabism may seem simplistic, but clear evidence has been raised here. Also, probably due to their 'fondness' towards Wahhabism, the Malaysian religious authorities have constantly denied Malay Shi'as their right to fair dialogue and discourse. As stated earlier, Malaysian Islamic affairs were influenced by the 'orthodoxy' of Wahhabism and this is kept alive and empowered by the government. According to Judith Nagata (2011: 25), under the Malaysian government, Sufism and Shi'ism have been repressed to the point of desperation:

It is noteworthy how expressions of Sufism, once the most widespread form of Islam in Southeast Asia, and active in the Malay states until the Pacific War, have been repressed under the narrow, Sunni *Shariah* style of Islam promoted as orthodox by the UMNO state. Likewise, any hint of Shi'ism, once again

more evident in local history, has been shunned as heretical by the government.<sup>41</sup>

In the memorandum to the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM), Kamil Zuhairi, a Malaysian Shi'a leader, stressed that:

*oleh kerana tiadanya dialog dan wacana di antara pihak berkuasa agama tempatan dengan komuniti kami (Syiah) di Malaysia maka telah berkembang kejahilan, kekeliruan dan salah anggap yang sangat besar terhadap kami. Fitnah yang disebarkan mengenai kami Pencinta Ablul Bayt (keluarga) Rasulullah Muhammad s.a.w. (Syiah) di Malaysia mengakibatkan salah faham yang sangat buruk terhadap kami. Salah faham yang buruk ini mendorong pewartaan undang-undang yang tidak adil buat kami.*

Due to the lack of dialogue and discourse between the local religious authorities and our community, Shi'as in Malaysia have become the victims of ignorance, confusion, and great misconceptions. The slander spread about us, the lovers of the *abl a-bayt* (the progeny of the Prophet Muhammad (S)) have resulted in very bad misunderstandings towards Malaysian Shi'as. This misunderstanding has led to proclaiming unfair and unjust laws in the name of *shari'ah*.<sup>42</sup> (Malaysian Shi'as Memorandum 2010)

Kamil also made a very interesting remark on how their cultural rights have been violated:

*Etnik Melayu yang berketurunan Aceh, Minang, Bugis, Jawa, (banya beberapa contoh) dan umat Islam dari keturunan Siam-Ayuthya, Pakistan dan Arab terdapat sebahagian kecilnya adalah pendokong Ablul Bayt (keluarga) Rasulullah Muhammad s.a.w Syiah sejak turun-temurun (daripada nenek moyang). Kami mempunyai bukti atau hujah akademik serta warisan sejarah keluarga yang mesti diperakukan menurut Piagam Hak Asasi Manusia Pertubuhan Bangsa-Bangsa Bersatu, dan Perlembagaan Persekutuan Malaysia bahawa kami adalah bermazhab Syiah atau mengamalkan fikah Ja'fari sebagai mazhab asal kami.*

Among us there are descendants of Aceh, Minang, Bugis, Javanese – just a few examples — and Muslims from the descendants of the Siamese-Ayuthya, Pakistanis, and Arabs. We are the followers of the *ahl al-bayt* school of thought passed down from generation to generation (from our ancestors). We have the evidence or arguments on academic ground together with our family heritage that must be endorsed by the Human Rights Charter of the United Nations Organization, and the Constitution of Malaysia that we are from Shi'a or Ja'fari jurisprudence, and we practice our original sect. (Malaysian Shi'as Memorandum 2010)<sup>43</sup>

The above statement maintains that there are native Shi'as within the Malay-Muslim community and that their history, tradition, and cultural heritage have been neglected for a long period of time. As shown here previously, Kamil Zuhairi's points cannot be disputed. Today, as explained in length, Malaysian Shi'as include Muslims of Arab, Pakistani, and even Malay descent.

Another daring explanation that should be noticed in the context of cultural anthropology is that Kamil Zuhairi's expressed regret that they were alienated and oppressed due to academic ignorance. His words are quoted here:

*Ekoran tiadanya dialog dan kajian sejarah, budaya dan etnik yang tersusun dari pihak berkuasa dan juga sarjana akademik tempatan menyebabkan kami telah disudutkan dan tidak diketahui kewujudannya sekian lama. Komuniti Pencinta Ahlul Bayt (keluarga) Rasulullah Muhammad s.a.w. (Syiah) di Malaysia tidak boleh disamakan dengan masyarakat Syiah di rantau lain, seperti rantau Indo-Pakistan, Asia Tengah atau Timur Tengah yang mempunyai tradisi dan kebudayaan berbeza. Kami minoriti Syiah di Malaysia mempunyai jati diri yang khusus. Adalah kami minoriti Syiah di Malaysia tidak boleh digeneralisasikan sama seperti umat Islam Syiah di rantau lain.*

Following the systemic lack of dialogue and study on our history, culture, and ethnicity by the authorities and local academic scholars, we have been confined into a corner, and

this has lead us to become alienated and unknown for so long. The Shi'a community in Malaysia should not to be confused with the Shi'a communities in other regions, such as the Indo-Pakistan region, Central Asia or the Middle East which have different traditions and cultures. We, the Shi'a minority in Malaysia, have a specific identity. Shi'as as the minority in Malaysia cannot be generalized as [being identical to] Shi'a Muslims in other regions.<sup>44</sup>

The view of the official sect in Malaysia (Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah) is that Shi'as are 'sesat', or deviants from Islam. The term *sesat* gives strategic justification to the religious authorities to deny Shi'a their rights, as they are not considered to be Muslims, and are even classified as non-Muslims.

It is important to understand that even non-Muslims are allowed the right of freedom of religion in Malaysia. However, Mohd Aizam Masod, a Deputy Director of Research Department, boastfully implied in his on-line article that other sects or doctrines that contradict the teachings of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah should be dealt with harshly, even suggesting that capital punishment is justified:

*Sejarah Islam sendiri telah membuktikan bagaimana para khalifah Islam pernah mengharamkan, bahkan bertindak tegas terhadap pembawa pemikiran yang menyeleweng daripada akidah ASWJ. Sebagai contoh Ma'bad al-Juhani, pengasas mazhab Qadariyyah telah dibukum bunuh oleh Khalifah Abdul Malik pada tahun 80 Hijrah.*

The history of Islam itself has proven how the Caliphs forbade, and took harsh actions against, those who deviated from the path of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah. For example, Ma'bad al-Juhani, the founder of the Qadariyyah, was executed by Caliph 'Abd al-Malik in the year 80 CE. (Masod 2010)<sup>45</sup>

The recent attitude by the establishment towards the Shi'as in Malaysia has reinforced the desperate situation of this minority. Shi'as are indeed Muslims and their discrimination has been condemned by the Islamabad Declaration, adopted by the thirty-fourth session of the

Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers (2007: 91-93), which stresses that:

no Muslim, whether he or she is Shi'a or Sunni, may be subject to murder or any harm, intimidation, terrorization, or aggression on his property; incitement thereto; or forcible displacement, deportation, or kidnapping. All Muslims [are] to refrain seriously from any provocation of sensitivities or sectarian or ethnic strife, as well as any name-calling, abuse, prejudice or vilification and invectives.<sup>46</sup>

In other words, while there are differences between Sunni Muslims and Shi'a Muslims, this should not be an excuse for disunity among Muslims.

Commenting on their situation, Kamil Zuhairi (2011) recounted what happened during the raid on 15 December 2010:

The officers broke into and damaged our prayer hall, a private property where we were having special prayers for the Prophet Muhammad's grandchildren. We were condemned, criticized, slandered and threatened in local media just because we practice what had been preached by our ancestors who were Shi'a and have lived in Malaysia for centuries. If other communities like Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, Sikhs and others have their right to worship and practice under the constitution, then why not us? (Zuhairi 2011)

It is worth mentioning that even foreign Shi'as, such as Iranians, have been intimidated by the growing discriminatory climate. In fact Malaysian mosques do not welcome them to pray there (Chi 2011). To make matters worse, the Islamic Affairs Department of Selangor (JAIS) has even alleged that Iranian missionaries used the carpet business as a front for the propagation of Shi'ism among Malays. This outrageous accusation was even reported in Malaysia's leading newspaper, the *Berita Harian* (Hussin 2011).

Tariq Ramadan (Loone 2012), when commenting on the state of Malaysia's pluralistic society, stressed that 'sectarian[ism] and racism, they are of the same mould'. He also added that, 'every citizen, no matter what their origin or their religion, should be treated equally. Equal citizen means don't ask me about my history or where I come from but where we

are going together.' Again, Tariq Ramadan, in commenting on the Sunni-Shi'a division around the globe – including Malaysia – has expressed his regret on what he calls a 'dangerous game' played by the authorities:

This is not acceptable. There are differences and disagreements on some issues but we are both Muslims. We should not use this division to colonise our way of dealing with Muslims because that would be creating division and by creating divisions we are promoting discrimination and nurturing trouble. (Habib 2012)

Significantly Singapore, Indonesia and Thailand, which all neighbour Malaysia, have recognized Shi'ism and Shi'as as part of their society.<sup>47</sup> These nations have invited Shi'a to contribute to local society and nation-building by allowing them their cultural rights. As suggested by Chris Barker (2002), minorities can only participate in nation building if the state recognizes their rights and cultural identity. Surely Malaysia, a country of dignified bearing, can learn from its South East Asian counterparts how to manage and accept the historical and cultural facts of the existence of a historical Shi'a minority.

While their numbers and influence have fluctuated over time, Shi'a have been a continuous presence in the Malay world for centuries. This point is mentioned by Hasan ul-Amine (1997: 28) in the *Shorter Shi'a Encyclopedia*. According to him:

Shi'ism continued expanding and contracting, increasing and decreasing, and rising and falling depending upon the persecutions and tyrannical attitudes of different governments, so much so that their total number in the world today comes up to a quarter of the total Muslim population. Presently they are found in Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Masqat, Umman, Soviet union, Syria, Lebanon, Afghanistan, India, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Ceylon, Burma, Tibet, Singapore, East Africa, Somaliland, Albania, Turkey, Hijaz, Yemen and a number of other territories.

As I have shown above in length, geo-politics have played a crucial role in spreading Shi'ism to the Malay world. The arrival of Hadramis,



the Safavid traders and preachers, the marginalized groups of Ottomans in exile, migrant labourers, the hajj phenomenon in the 1920's, the immigration of the Indian-Pakistani Shi'as to Malaysia, and British colonization were only a few of the factors that led Shi'ism to take root in Malaysia. The 1979 Iranian Revolution encouraged Shi'as in Malaysia to become more confident in identifying themselves as Shi'a Muslims. This is understandable as globalisation shows how interconnected the world is, and the globalised nature of religious identity – here, Shi'ism – has helped Shi'as in Malaysia to strengthen their identity. 1979 was also a turning point for many Shi'as, as many of them abandoned *taqiyyah* and became more daring and active in asserting their identity while calling others to it. Over the years, developments in information technology, especially social media among the younger generation, emboldened the Shi'as in Malaysia to question their rights, thus becoming more visible in the society.

### *Conclusion*

It was commonly assumed that almost all Chinese Muslims were Sunnis from the Hanafi school of thought until Fahmi Huwaydi (1981b) wrote two of his famous works, 'Fi Buyut Muslimin al-Sin' ('In The House of Chinese Muslims') and *al-Islam fi al-Sin* (Islam in China) (1981a). Huwaydi, who reported from the field, brought forth evidence that there are strong indications of Shi'ism in China demonstrated in a 'Sufism shirt'. Raphael Israeli (1988: 49-66) praised Huwaydi's findings for bringing us 'one step further into Shi'a territory'. Similarly, it is widely thought that all Malays are Sunni Shafi'is. The findings in this essay have problematized this view. By stepping into the Shi'a community in Malaysia, this essay has shown how Shi'ism has been part of the Malay world for centuries. Surely, the findings presented here will open the door to further academic study on this matter. Shi'as in Malaysia have been marginalized by mainstream Sunnis through ideological and institutional tools aimed at maintaining the status quo. As Shi'as were forced to adapt to an oppressive and intolerable climate, they have widely employed *taqiyyah* as allowed by their school of thought. The Shi'a precedent for concealing one's faith, the hostility of religious enforcers, the belligerence of *Kaum Muda* and Wahhabi scholars, misleading media reports, and neglect of human rights have all contributed to a social environment in which Malaysian

Shi'as feel compelled to hide their faith and identities. As overwhelming as this environment of oppression as been, traces of Shi'a values or Shi'a beliefs can still be found either in cultural production and among small groups of Malays. Denying the existence of Shi'as in Malaysia has led to long-standing academic confusion, and part of the aim of this essay is to solve this identity riddle. The most logical stance for the twenty-first century is that the Shi'as of Malaysia should be allowed to reclaim their identities after generations of stigmatization. Their long-denied cultural rights, and their freedom to exercise their own interpretation of religion, must be restored. This can be achieved if the appalling treatment of the Shi'as in Malaysia receives international attention. This article is but a small attempt to achieve this.

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> It is a common notion among religious authorities in Malaysia that Shi'ism arrived in the country after 1979 and thus Shi'a should not be given the same rights as the Christians, Buddhists or Hindus. See, for example, 'Penyelewengan Syiah' (Federal Territories Islamic Department n.d.). However, it is important to note here that under the contemporary convention of human rights, namely the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (2012), Shi'a should not be persecuted in Malaysia regardless of whether or not they have a historical presence there.

<sup>3</sup> The Kaum Muda and Kaum Tua (traditionalist-reformist) schism took place a hundred years ago in Malaysia and led to a narrow interpretation of religion and intolerance in religious practice.

<sup>4</sup> The Fatimah Admonitions are part of the Malay canon of classical literature, and appear in series of stories about the Prophet. A few examples of the Fatimah Admonitions are *Hikayat Nabi Mengajar Anaknya Fatimah*, *Hikayat Fatimah Berkata-kata dengan Pedang Ali*, *Hikayat Ali Kabwin dengan Fatimah*, *Hikayat Bulan Terbelah* (*The Prophet Admonishes his Daughter*, *Fatimah Conversing with 'Ali's Sword*, *The Marriage of Fatimah and 'Ali*, and *The Story of the Splitting of the Moon*, respectively). The admonitions focus on the role of a faithful wife, duties to God, and reward and punishment in the Hereafter. See also Pusat Studi Sunda (2004), *Fatimah in West Java: Moral Admonitions to Sundanese Gentlewomen*, Bandung: Didistribusikan oleh Kiblat Buku Utama.

<sup>5</sup> The untranslated text reads: '*Persoalannya ialah apakah hubungan keluarga Jamalullail Perak dengan latar belakang Kerajaan Abbasiyah, Mazhab Jafari serta pengaruh Parsi terhadap keluarga ini?*' It should be mentioned that, after a preliminary analysis of the Ninety-Nine Laws of Perak, it was not immediately clear which elements came across as Ja'fari. However, an analysis by an expert on Ja'fari jurisprudence might reveal more.

<sup>6</sup> The same phenomenon is, of course, found in Islamic history; for instance, in early Islamic Iraq, many people held loyalties to 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, due to his presence there, but could otherwise be classified as Sunni. Similarly, the line between Sunni and Shi'a has been blurred in many Sufi *tariqahs*. That being said, this article is not embracing or

supporting the theory of the 'proto-Shi'a' as outlined by some contemporary authors.

<sup>7</sup> The definition of Hadramaut in the 1953 edition of *al-Munjid* does not support Rakhmat's claim. I emailed him asking for clarification but have not yet received a response.

<sup>8</sup> In a conversation with Syed Farid Alatas at the National University of Singapore, who is now writing a book on Ba'lawi Sufis, Alatas confirmed that most Hadramis acknowledged Shi'ism as a sect. I share his view that Shi'ism and Sufism, particularly the Ba'lawi Sufi order, share similarities. Alatas, a Ba'lawi Sufi practitioner himself, stressed that, sharing six of the Shi'a Imams, the Ba'lawi Sufi order is the Sufi group which is nearest to Shi'ism. The conversation took place on 11 February 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Anonymous interview, 13 July 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Anonymous interview, 4 March 2007. Today, a small group of Qizilbash are still found in Afghanistan, and they are also said to practice *taqiyyah* (Blood 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Also see *Tin Mosques and Ghan Towns: A History of Afghan Camel Drivers in Australia* (Stevens 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Anonymous interview, 13 July 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Anonymous interview, 25 November 2004.

<sup>14</sup> These Shi'a were from the Nakhawilah clan, who were primarily date-farmers and resided just outside the Baqi' cemetery in Medina. Farahani also mentions that the Hasani Ashraf clan were Shi'as. They lived inside the city of Madinah, tended to be landowners, and rented houses and rooms to pilgrims. Lastly, he says that Shi'a from Wadi Fatimah were residing near Bir 'Ali (one of the places where pilgrims don the *ihram*), while another clan of mostly Twelver Shi'as were found all along a popular route from Medina to Mecca known as the Sultan Highway. For more information on Shi'a in Saudi today, including the Nakhawilah, see 'The Saudi Ulema and the Shi'a of Saudi Arabia' (Ismail 2012).

<sup>15</sup> The number of British-Malayan pilgrims dropped significantly in 1925 due to Ibn Sa'ud's success in occupying Mecca in 1924 and the spread of Wahhabism.

<sup>16</sup> Anonymous interview, 25 November 2004. Ja'faris break their fast about ten to twenty minutes later than Sunnis in the month of Ramadan.

<sup>17</sup> I met a Shi'a gentleman of Burmese origin whose family was Shi'a for many generations, and who is married to a Malay lady from the state of Johor.

<sup>18</sup> I also met a gentleman of the Tausug ethnicity, from Zamboanga in the Southern Philippines, who is married to a Malay Shi'a woman whose entire family practices Shi'ism. Apparently, the gentleman is an ordinary Malaysian civil servant who wishes to avoid trouble and who therefore employs very heavy *taqiyyah* while corresponding with the majority Sunnis. They live in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, but at the time of writing, they had relocated to Kuala Lumpur. For more information on Shi'ism in the Philippines, see 'Muslim Filipinos in The Context of Shiism: Past Present and Forward' (Morales n.d.).

<sup>19</sup> I concluded this after interviewing eighty-one Malaysian Shi'as. In fact the practice still continues today as some young male Shi'as with Sunni spouses admitted that they have chosen not to reveal their faith to their wives, and, instead, pass 'the truth' only to their most beloved ones. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this practice is also found in parts of Africa where Shi'a are a minority.

<sup>20</sup> The generic four line poem is a common Malay literary form. For more information, see Shanmugam (2010).

<sup>21</sup> Author's translation.

<sup>22</sup> See also Amin (1980).

<sup>23</sup> This particular stone is one of the earliest pieces of archaeological evidence chronicling the presence of Islam in Malaysia. It was discovered in the state of Trengganu in 1899. Among the inscriptions on the stone are ten Islamic laws and their punishments. The sentence on the inscription reads: '*Rasulullah dengan orang yang sanabi mereka. Esa pada Dewata Mulia Raya beri hamba meneguhkan agama Islam.*'

<sup>24</sup> Scholars and experts on Thai history generally concur that Shahr i-Naw was situated at the Chaophraya river basin, in the southern part of Ayuthya. However, Vladimir Braginsky disputes this and suggests instead that Shahr i-Naw is somewhere near Aceh, not a city in Ayuthya (Braginsky 2004: 619). Al-Attas later named Fansuri as the 'father of modern Malay literature' (Al-Attas 1972: 20).

<sup>25</sup> *Boria* is obviously a Shi'a cultural product and was popular in Penang (in the northern part of Malaysia).

<sup>26</sup> This practice is forbidden by Ayatollah Khamene'i, whom – as I learned from my research – many Malaysian Shi'a choose to follow. See Musa (2013).

<sup>27</sup> I have met many Malay Shi'as from central and southern Thailand during Shi'a religious occasions in Klang Valley. Malaysian Shi'as have maintained links with Thai Shi'a through marriage and collaboration in observing the Ramadan and Shawwal *hلال* (crescent moon) to determine the new *hijri* month. For instance, from 2010 to 2013, Malaysian Shi'a determined the beginning of the month of Ramadan in collaboration with Shi'a from Pattaya, Thailand. During the pilgrimage to Iran and Iraq that I joined in 2009 for my research, one of the participants was a Malay woman originally from Bangkok, Thailand. According to her, many of her Shi'a relatives are scattered around Malaysia and Indonesia and have intermarried between themselves for many years to maintain their religion. She also told me that even on the tourist island of Phuket there are Malay Shi'a, who mostly handle resort and hotel businesses.

<sup>28</sup> Also see Latief (2005).

<sup>29</sup> Their conclusion was based on a newspaper report originally published in *Utusan Malaysia*, 25 February 1993.

<sup>30</sup> Anonymous interview, 27 September 2011.

<sup>31</sup> In an interview with a local Malay Shi'a from Singapore who wanted to remain anonymous, the interviewee maintained that Sayyid Muhammad al-'Aqil al-Hadrami was obviously a Shi'a since Sunnis usually refrain from cursing Mu'awiyah since he is still considered one of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad.

<sup>32</sup> Parenthetical comments are quoted from the website.

<sup>33</sup> According to Syed Jafer Hussain Zaidi's son in an interview conducted on 14 July 2011, his entire family has held to Shi'ism despite the oppressive attitude towards Shi'as in Malaysia.

<sup>34</sup> To understand the 'Muhammad Hanafiyyah effect', see Wierenga (1996). According to him, after a certain amount of time, Sunnism became dominant in the Malay world. This was followed by de-Shi'a-ization in Malay classical literature. Thus, the Shi'as' cultural memory and heritage were also affected. Still, remnants of Shi'ism can be found in *Hikayat Muhammad Hanafiah* and other 'Shi'a-friendly' texts.

<sup>35</sup> Author's translation.

<sup>36</sup> See Taib (2006) for more information on the Dawoodi Bohra movement.

<sup>37</sup> Kamil Zuhairi Abdul Aziz, a respected figure in the Malaysian Shi'a community,

was put on trial from January 2011 to 2013 for those charges. Muhammad Muhsin Radmard, an Iranian cleric, also faced trial. Both were acquitted for technical reasons on 14 January 2013 (Hakim Syarie Kamarulzaman Ali 2013).

<sup>38</sup> The charges against them were dropped by the Gombak Barat Sharia Court on 8 July 2011 while the charges for the 15 December 2010 gathering continued from January to September 2012. See 'Tuduhan terhadap syiah digugurkan' (2011).

<sup>39</sup> For more information on the treatment of Malaysian Shi'a see 'Freedom of Religion in Malaysia: The Muslim Perspective' (Hussain 1999).

<sup>40</sup> Wahhabism is named after its founder, Muhammad 'Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1787), although its adherents prefer to call themselves Salafis (Karim 2007: 796), a term propagated by the Wahhabi scholar Muhammad Nashir al-Din al-Albani (Saqaf 1992:20). Wahhabis follow the theological teachings of Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728 AH) and the Hanbali school of jurisprudence, which, according to Ahmad Ibrahim (1965: 77), 'seemed on the verge of extinction from the 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards' but 'was revived by [the] Wahhabi movement in the 18<sup>th</sup> century'. For more on the differences between Wahhabism and Salafism in Malaysia, see 'Salafism in Malaysia and Jordan: An Overview' (Abu-Bakar 2007). For more on the systematic defamation of Shi'as by the Wahhabis, see Qazwini 2011.

<sup>41</sup> Echoes of Judith Nagata's argument can also be found in the work of Norshahril Saat (2012), who is currently working on his doctorate thesis at the Department of Political and Social Change College of Asia and the Pacific at the Australian National University.

<sup>42</sup> Author's translation. This is a partial text of the memorandum.

<sup>43</sup> Author's translation.

<sup>44</sup> Author's translation.

<sup>45</sup> Aziz, an associate professor of law faculty in the International Islamic University (IIUM), gives another view (Aziz 2011). These two common points of argument are based on the interpretation of law – the first by a religious enforcer and the second by an academic – and are often raised by those who are concerned with the struggle of the Shi'a to gain the freedom to practice their religion. These excuses are somehow superficial and baseless when compared to the Islamabad Declaration of 2007 by the OIC which says that Shi'a should not be harmed and their right to practice their faith should be given and preserved.

<sup>46</sup> Malaysia as a member of this body also signed the Islamabad Declaration in the thirty-fourth session of the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers in Islamabad, Pakistan. Malaysia was represented by its Foreign Minister, Syed Hamid Albar.

<sup>47</sup> Shi'a in Singapore are allowed to have their own communal organization. According to the website of the Jaafari Muslim Association of Singapore (<http://www.jaafarimuslim.com>), 'the Association is a registered society under Singapore law. It was formed in 1998 to serve the growing Shia Ithna Asheri muslim community in Singapore.' In Indonesia, K. H. Umar Shihab, the head of the Majelis Uagama Islam Indonesia or the National Council for Islamic Affairs of Indonesia, confirmed Indonesia's recognition of the existence of Shi'ism in Indonesia while visiting Indonesian students studying in Qom, Iran. See 'Syiah Sah Sebagai mazhab Islam' (2011).

<sup>48</sup> Unfortunately this link is no longer available; however, an official video of the memorandum is available at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=otF6Xw1X8Co>>.