

“CHARISMATIC APPEAL OR COMMUNITAS? VISITATION TO THE SHRINES OF THE IMAMS”

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This paper examines the Shi'i practice of visiting the shrines of the imams (*ziyara*) and other rituals associated with the pilgrimage. It argues that Shi'i rituals at the shrines of the imams differ markedly from those practiced by the Sufis when they visit the shrines of their holy men. The paper also argues that the shrine complex in Shi'ism is an amalgamation of hereditary authority, *baraka*, extraordinary powers, prayers, *communitas*, and a place for expressing socio-political grievances. The various rituals in the shrine complex allow for an emotional encounter with the sacred characters in Shi'ism. They also recreate and reenact events in Shi'i sacred history and encourage a public affirmation of solidarity with Shi'is from other ethnic and cultural background. Furthermore, the pilgrimage helps to draw and establish sectarian boundaries, delineating between those who share in the love and grief for the family of the Prophet and those who do not.

A salient feature in twelver Shi'i theology is the belief that, based on the principle of hereditary charisma, the imam inherits the comprehensive authority of the Prophet Muhammad (Dabashi 1989:38-42). A corollary to this principle is that the imam is believed to be divinely appointed, infallible, and invested with extraordinary knowledge. The authority of the imam is also predicated on his purported intercessory powers, special hermeneutical abilities, his devotional, and spiritual exercises.

Apart from the comprehensive authority, the imam also inherits the esoteric powers of the Prophet. The spiritual powers of the imam enable him to have intimate communion with and experience of the *numinous* in an intensive way thus making him a holy man who can rival the Sufi saint. (1) The imam's authority is also contingent on his performing miracles that exhibit his extraordinary powers. For example, just like Jesus, Musa al-Kazim (d. 799), the seventh Shi'i imam, is reported to have spoken from the cradle (Kulyani n.d: 86). The fifth imam, Muhammad al-Baqir (d. 733-737) reportedly had knowledge of hidden matters (Kashshi 1969:359) and could provide vision to a blind disciple, Abu Basir al-Asadi (d. 767) (al-Saffar 1983:269). Al-Baqir is also reported to have resuscitated the dead (al-Saffar 1983:269). Some traditions further claim that the imams could traverse the universe with great ease, heal the sick, and walk on water (Amir-Moezzi 1994:94-95). Miraculous acts are the most articulate and tangible expression of the supernatural abilities of the imam and a vital component in the recognition of his authority. More specifically, the miracles that the imam performs are seen as veritable evidence that he has experienced the *numinous* and that, in return for his piety and devotion, he has been empowered with spiritual and temporal authority by the divine.

The Shi'i belief in the authority and special sanctity of the imams has generated the practices of visiting and venerating the places where the imams are buried. (2) This paper will examine the Shi'i practice of visiting the shrines of the imams and other rituals associated with the pilgrimage. I will argue that Shi'i rituals at the shrines of the imams differ markedly from those practiced by the Sufis when they visit the shrines of their holy men.

Pilgrimage to the Shrines of the Imams

The Shi'i belief in the charismatic authority of the imams (Dabashi 1989: 38-42) and their extraordinary powers gave rise to the notion of holy places, especially where these holy men are

buried. The sanctity and authority that are associated with the imams are transferred to the places that contain their bodies as the spirituality of the imams is believed to be embodied in the space they have sacralized. Thus, pilgrimage to the shrines of the imams has become significant as it allows for a spiritual encounter with sacred figures. The pilgrim is able to experience the “*praesentia*,” or presence of the holy men at the shrine. (3)

The *praesentia* of the imam at the shrine is interwoven with his *potentia*, his power to assist the pilgrims. The *potentia* of the imam manifests itself in various forms, from the healing of the sick, alleviating calamities afflicting the people, to the restoration of their socio-political rights. Those who are healed or benefit from the *potentia* of the imam enjoy enhanced social status as they have been touched by the special powers of the imam. Due to his *potentia*, the imam is also believed to bring to God the needs of his community. Just like the holy man in other traditions, the mediatory function of the imam is a testament to his *potentia* and makes him a focus of hopes and an agent of cure. It is these curative and intercessory powers that enable him to impart blessings and intercede for his followers long after his death. Due to his spiritual connection, the imam offers the profane world a sacred encounter.

The *potentia* of the imam is also evident in the *baraka* that is experienced at the shrine. Literally, the term “*baraka*” refers to blessings. *Baraka* also refers to a “... beneficent force, of divine origin, which causes superabundance in the physical sphere, prosperity and happiness in the psychic order” (Colin 2001:1032). *Baraka* accompanies the imam even after his death since it is believed that the *baraka* is embodied in the tomb of the imam and in the line of his descendants. As in Sufism, Shi‘ism locates *baraka* on the dead as much as on the living.

The presence of the imam in the grave provides the laity the opportunity to experience the *baraka* that pervades the imam because it is believed that his shrine is an important channel for the transmission of divine blessings. Touching the shrine of the imam or any object associated with it is seen as an effective medium to experience this *baraka*. Thus, the shrine of the imam becomes an institution for transforming divine energy into mundane ones. At the center of this is the imam whose holiness is a conflation of sacred genealogy, inherited *baraka*, charisma, and personal asceticism (Geertz 1968:51). It is the shrine that makes the imam’s charisma widely felt and accessible for it is here that he is able to disseminate *baraka* to the pilgrims. Spiritual emanation or *baraka* of the imam is acquired through the recitation of the *ziyara*, supplications, expression of grief, and the performance of other rituals that I shall describe.

Experiencing the *potentia* of the imam is often a consequence of showing due reverence (*reverentia*) to him. According to Peter Brown, *reverentia* implies, “... a willingness to focus on invisible persons ...in such a way as to commit the believer to definite rhythms in his life (such as the observation of the holy days of the saints), or to direct his attention to specific sites and objects (the shrines and relics of the saints)” (Brown 1982:119). *Reverentia* of the imam is demonstrated by remembering his attributes, glorifying him, and by seeking his intercessory powers. In Shi‘i devotional literature, *reverentia* for the imam is also expressed by accentuating the sanctity of the places where the imam is buried. Many traditions stress the importance of Kerbala, where Husayn (d. 680), the grandson of the Prophet, was martyred and buried. Traditions recorded by Ibn Qawlawayh (d. 980) state that the sand of Kerbala has special merit. The believer is urged to prostrate on and have it inserted in his grave. Since it is believed to possess curative powers, it is even recommended to consume the sand of Kerbala (Qawlawayh 1938:285, 275). To emphasize the sanctity of the shrines, the contemporary Shi‘i jurist, Ayatullah Seestani, states that it is better to pray in the shrines of the imams than in a mosque. He further states that the reward for offering prayers in the shrine of ‘Ali is equivalent to two hundred thousand prayers (Seestani 1994:171-72).

Reverentia to the imam is also expressed by stressing the importance of visiting his shrine. In Shi‘i sacred literature, heaven is promised to one who visits the shrines of the imams (Qawlawayh 1938:10-11). The merit of visiting the shrines of the imams can be further discerned from the following tradition, which is reported from the sixth Shi‘i imam, Ja‘far al-Sadiq (d. 765). He is reported to have told his companion Ibn Maarid: “One who walks to visit the Commander of the Faithful (‘Ali), Allah writes for him the reward of performing one *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) and one *‘umra* (4) for every

footstep he takes. O Ibn Maarid, I swear by Allah that He will not put in the hellfire a foot that is covered with the dust of the pilgrimage to the Commander of the Faithful, regardless of whether the pilgrim walks or rides [to get] there” (Talib 2000:2). Another tradition states that God visits Kerbala every Friday night. Thus, visiting the shrine of Husayn is equated with visiting God and his throne. (5)

The Etiquette of the Shrine

Pilgrimage to the shrine of an imam is an integration of a series of rituals that begin with pre-entrance etiquette (*adab*) and other acts of devotion that attest to and cement the deep emotional attachment that the Shi‘i has with the imam. *Reverentia* to the imam requires learning and inculcating the *adab* associated with pre-entrance rituals. It is from the elaborate pre-entrance etiquette that the differences between the Shi‘i pilgrimage and the Sufi shrine rituals becomes manifest. In contrast to the Sufi visitation to the shrine, the pilgrimage to the imam’s grave is more formal and structured in its sequence, a feature that becomes evident even before the pilgrim enters the shrine.

Visiting the shrines of the imams was accepted and even encouraged by the orthodox and legally-minded Shi‘i scholars. Since they were against Sufi practices, the Shi‘i *‘ulama* fixed and regulated the pilgrimage so that it conformed to a series of acceptable rituals that showed due respect to the imams without engaging in the various forms of *dhikr* and music sessions evident at the Sufi shrines. (6) It is probably for this reason that the *ziyara* is more rigid and formal.

Before entering the shrine, the pilgrim is recommended to express *reverentia* to the imam by performing a series of rituals. In one tradition, Ja‘far al-Sadiq explains that when he wishes to visit the shrine of Husayn in Kerbala, the pilgrim should first perform a ritual bath (*ghusl*) in the Euphrates river and send salutations to Husayn. By performing the *ghusl* in the river, the pilgrim becomes as pure as the day he was born. (7) The pilgrim is also told to wear two pieces of clean clothes, walk in peace and tranquility, take short footsteps, be in a state of humility, to weep, and praise God while sending greetings to the Prophet. The pilgrim is also to curse those who killed Husayn (Talib 2000:72). As part of the pre-entrance *adab*, Ja‘far al-Sadiq instructs another companion, Muhammad b. Muslim al-Thaqafi (d. 767) to give money to charity and to visit those in need (Qawlawayh 1938:131). The imam then enunciates the method of greeting Husayn at the door of the shrine (Talib 2000:67-68).

Such detailed and formal pre-entrance rituals clearly invoke a sense of reverence for the imam and the holy place that he has been buried at. Psychologically, it prepares the pilgrim for the encounter with the imam. These rituals can be construed as representing a pre-liminal state. The *ghusl* demarcates the beginning of this state and represents the pilgrim’s symbolic separation from social structures and temporal bonds (Roff 2001:84). The emphasis placed on the *ghusl*, wearing clean clothes, and fixing the mind on God denotes a state of physical, spiritual, and mental purity. (8) This observation is corroborated by the fact that the pilgrim is asked to recite at the time of performing the *ghusl*: “O Allah, purify me and purify my heart for me, expand my chest and make Your praises, love, and adulation flow on my tongue, for indeed, there is no power except through You.....O Allah, make this a source of cure and light for me, for You are powerful over all things” (Talib 2000:142).

Reverentia for the imam is also expressed in the etiquette to be observed and prayers recited when entering the shrine (Qawlawayh 1938:20-21). The following report epitomizes some of the rituals to be performed when entering the shrine of ‘Ali in Najaf. Safwan al-Jammal, a companion of Ja‘far al-Sadiq, is reported to have said:

When I was traveling with imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq to Kufa as he was going to meet Abu Ja‘far al-Mansur (the ‘Abbasid caliph), he said to me: O Safwan, stop your camel here for this is the grave of my grandfather, the Commander of the Faithful. So I stopped it there. Then he got down, washed himself, and changed his clothes. Then he walked barefoot and said to me: Do as I have done. Then he moved towards al-Zakwa and said: Take short footsteps and lower your chin towards the earth. For every footstep you take, 100,000 good deeds will be written for you and 100,000 evil deeds will be removed, you will be elevated by 100,000 stations and 100,000 of your needs will be fulfilled... Then he walked, and I walked with him with peace and tranquility glorifying and praising Allah and reciting the tahlil (the utterance that there is no god but God)

until we reached al-Zakwa. He stopped, looked to the right and left, drew lines with a stick, and said to me: Seek your needs, so I sought them. When he reached the grave, tears started rolling down on his cheeks and he said: From Allah do we come and to Him we shall return (Talib 2000:8).

Reverentia to the imam is also expressed by kissing the door and even bowing towards the shrine (Mottahedeh 1985:23). Although it is forbidden to prostrate in front of any human being, some jurists have maintained that it is permissible to prostrate to the shrine of an imam if the intention of the pilgrim is to thank God for granting him the opportunity to visit the imam. The extreme reverence accorded to the imam is also evident when the pilgrim leaves the shrine. Some pilgrims will leave the shrine by walking backwards since showing one's back to the tomb is deemed to be disrespectful to the imam (Mottahedeh 1985:23).

The *Praesentia* of the Imam

The elaboration of the pre-entrance rituals was necessary so as to understand the sense of extreme *reverentia* that is instilled in the pilgrim. The *reverentia* to the imam prepares the pilgrim to experience the imam's *praesentia* as he enters the shrine. Even at this point, he performs certain specified rituals. As he is about to enter the shrine, the pilgrim is recommended, though not required, to seek the imam's permission (*idhn al-dukhul*) to enter the sacred precinct. The *idhn al-dukhul* takes the form of praising God, the Prophet, all the imams, and seeking permission to enter. A request to enter the shrine of Husayn in Kerbala reads as follows:

Peace be on you, O Abu 'Abd Allah. Peace be on you, O son of the Prophet of Allah. Peace be on you, O son of the Commander of the Faithful. Your slave and son of your slave and maid, one who acknowledges with humility and one who does not oppose you, he befriends your friends and is an enemy to those who are your enemies. He intends to come to your sanctuary and seeks refuge at your holy place and seeks closeness by coming to you. May I enter, O Prophet of Allah? May I enter, O Messenger of Allah? May I enter, O Commander of the Faithful? May I enter, O leader of the successors? May I enter, O Fatima, leader of the women of the universe? May I enter, O my master, O Abu 'Abd Allah? May I enter, O my master, son of the Prophet of Allah? (9)

As he enters the shrine, the pilgrim sends salutations to the Prophet, the angels stationed near the shrine, and greets the imam. Once inside the shrine, some pilgrims will reenact the pilgrimage ritual in Mecca by circumambulating the shrine (Mottahedeh 1985:23). The pilgrim will proceed to recite the *ziyara*, which is often printed in booklets that are freely available. The *ziyara* normally begins by praising God, sending blessings to the Prophet, Fatima, and all the imams. The *ziyara* is a mixture of salutations, praises, pledges of allegiance, and complaints of violated rights and social injustice.

Unlike the *'urs* (the holy man's death anniversary) that is celebrated at the Sufi saint's shrine, the *ziyara* is far more somber and structured. There are no *qawwalis* (devotional music), *dhikr* (chanting of the names of God), *sama'* (mystical) dances, or music sessions held in the shrines of the imams. Instead, the pilgrim recites from a booklet, which recounts the imam's status, virtues, achievements, and the oppression that the imam endured.

In the *ziyara*, (10) the imam is praised in different ways. Some imams are addressed as radiant stars and bright lights who are born of pure lineage (Talib 2000:17). Even the earth that the eighth imam is buried in is deemed to have become pure as it contains the pure imam (Talib 2000:152). The pilgrim testifies that the imam is a pillar of religion and that he upheld and fulfilled Qur'anic injunctions (Ayoub 1978:256-57). It is in the various praises and adulations of the imam that the imam's function as a role model is affirmed. The *ziyara* helps construct a particular image of the imam and reminds the pilgrim of his heroic and supernatural attributes.

The Emotional Encounter with the Imams

An important feature in Shi'i biographical accounts of the lives of the imams is the view that they were all poisoned or martyred on the battlefield. (11) In particular, the massacre of Husayn and his

forces at Kerbala was an important milestone in Shi'i history as it affirmed notions of injustices endured by the progeny of the Prophet and exacerbated a passion for martyrdom. The 'martyrdom complex' has generated the demonstration of grief and passion for the models located at the shrine. It is the martyrdom factor that clearly distinguishes the Shi'i pilgrimage from the Sufi visitation to the shrine. This is because the *ziyara* recited at the shrine is integrated with a sense of shared affiliation with the calamities endured by the imam. Thus, rather than celebrating the imam's union with God, the pilgrim often weeps as the sufferings of the imam are recounted in the *ziyara*. Due to the grief generated at the shrine, the *ziyara* provides a platform for the pilgrim to express his protest at the injustices meted out to the Prophet's family and a way of cementing his bonding with the imam. (12)

Weeping for the imam also reinforces his soteriological function for it is believed that even a tear shed in the memory of the sufferings of an imam will result in him exercising his intercessory powers (Ayoub 1978:143). By participating in the sorrow of the family of the Prophet, the *ahl al-bayt*, the sins of the faithful are obliterated. The importance of weeping during the *ziyara* can also be seen from the belief that weeping reenacts the cosmic drama. According to some traditions, the heavens and earth wept for the blood of Husayn (Ayoub 1978:145). As a matter of fact, the whole of God's creation cried for Husayn (Qawlawayh 1938:79-80). Other reports state that forty thousand angels will cry at his grave until the day of judgment (Qawlawayh 1938:83) and will seek forgiveness for the pilgrims (Qawlawayh 1938:86). Such reports make weeping almost an essential part of the *ziyara* (Mottahedeh 1985:23).

The *ziyara* invites the pilgrim to participate in the sufferings of the imam. Ja'far al-Sadiq, for example, is reported to have instructed his followers to visit the grave of Husayn in a state of sorrow and grief. They are also recommended to be hungry and thirsty since Husayn died without food or drink (Ayoub 1978:188). Shi'i remembrance of Kerbala and the suffering of the imams are interwoven into the pilgrimage as the *ziyara* becomes an event of profound grief punctuated by cries of sadness and incessant weeping. The passion and emotion generated at such occasions makes the *praesentia* of the imam even more real as he is integrated into the lives of his followers long after his death. The emotional encounter with the imam is also evidenced by acts like those of kissing the shrine, pressing cheeks against it, placing letters in and circumambulating the shrine.

Apart from the display of grief, the Shi'i *ziyara* differs from the Sufi shrine rituals in that as they recite the *ziyara*, Shi'is re-live and often narrate events in their sacred history that shape their spiritual and moral lives. As it recalls and reenacts the scenes of Kerbala, the *ziyara* further induces grief and weeping from the participants. For example, in the *ziyara* of Zaynab, the grand daughter of the Prophet, her complaints to the Prophet at the slaying of her brother, Husayn, are recounted. Zaynab is quoted in the *ziyara* as complaining, "O Muhammad, this is Husayn, the eastern winds are passing over him, his head has been cut from the back and the children are wandering. O my weeping for you, O Abu 'Abd Allah." Addressing Zaynab, the pilgrim then recites, "Peace be on the one whose heart cried out for Husayn, the oppressed one, the naked, the one who was abandoned on the ground. .. Peace be on the one who cried at the body of her brother when he was killed until all the enemies and friends cried with her; people saw the tears of horses dropping on their hoofs" (Talib 2000:171).

Another *ziyara* of Zaynab recounts her diatribe with Yazid, the Umayyad caliph of the time. "Then she (Zaynab) said (to Yazid), "Trials have driven me to address you. So plan all your strategies and do what you can, exert every effort. I swear by Allah that you will not be able to erase our memories, you cannot kill the revelation [sent] to us, nor can you reach our stature. You cannot wipe your shame off. Your views are totally wrong, your days are numbered and your people are divided" (Talib 2000:174). A *ziyara* addressed to Husayn graphically describes the final moments before his death. "When the women saw your mount without a rider and your stirrup empty, they rushed out of their chambers, their hair disheveled over their cheeks. They ran to behold your death while Shimr sat on your chest putting his sword to your neck with one hand, and grasping your grey beard with the other" (Ayoub 1978:257). The Kerbala epic is integrated into the pilgrimage ritual, inducing a sense of grief and passion in the pilgrim. As they recite the *ziyara* and weep together, the *ziyara* also reinforces the bond between the pilgrims and retrieves a sacred experience and defining moment in Shi'i sacred history.

By recollecting the events of Kerbala, the *ziyara* helps the pilgrim internalize the sufferings of Husayn and revives a spirit of revolt within him. Lamentations and wailing during the *ziyara* are integrated with various forms of powerful invocations and complaints about injustices and violations of rights. The pilgrim seeks help from the imam by placing letters in the tomb and by pleading with him to restore his violated rights. Through the *ziyara*, the imam is integrated into the fabric of the lives and aspirations of the people. The complaints to the imam reflect the pilgrim's socio-political conditions and are indicative of his relationship with and expectation of the imam. The *ziyara* also reflects the demands for social justice, and symbolizes the role of the imam as a model for those defying tyrannical regimes (Talib 2000:127-28).

Since God remains ontologically separate from and inaccessible to creation, the Shi'is emphasize the role of the prophets and imams as intermediaries between the divine and human worlds. Hence, salvific efficacy of the imam lies in his being seen as a medium of divine-human interaction. As a holy place where people visit to seek forgiveness and intercession, the shrine embodies the authority of the imam and mediates with the divine in the same way that the imam did during his lifetime. It is here that the Shi'i beseeches the imam to intercede with God and to protect him from the fire of hell (Talib 2000:17). It is commonly believed that supplications are answered in Kerbala and that every disease is cured by the soil of the tomb of Husayn (Qawlawayh 1938:284-85). Al-Sadiq is also reported to have instructed a companion to pray towards Mecca with the grave of the imam in front of him. (13) Such rituals both express and enhance the image of the imam as a salvific figure and a focus of devotion.

The importance of pleading to the imam is seen in the following *ziyara* addressed to 'Ali: "I ask for your intercession so as to be saved from hell. I seek refuge from hell through you, running away from my sins that are a burden. I have come running to you hoping for the mercy of my Lord. I have come to you seeking your intercession, O my master" (Talib 2000:15-16).

The Covenant in the Ziyara

Although it is not mandatory to visit the shrines of the imams, the pilgrimage is seen as a mark of piety, for a believer's faith is not complete if he does not visit the imams (Qawlawayh 1938:193). The *ziyara* becomes a statement of Shi'i piety and reinforces the emotional attachment and devotion to the imams. It is also seen as an affirmation of the pilgrim's love and commitment to the cause of the imams. As a matter of fact, love is the nexus of all beliefs and practices surrounding the shrines.

The love for the imams is seen in another function of the *ziyara*, the renewal of the pilgrim's covenant with the imams. For the Shi'is, the trust that God offered to human beings (33:72) refers to accepting the imamate of the twelve imams (Ayoub 1978:58). In the *ziyara*, the pilgrim renews this covenant with God as he pledges to be dedicated and faithful to the imams and their cause. Such pledges of allegiance are accompanied with dissociation from and cursing of their enemies. (14) Some reports suggest that even the prophets cursed those who killed Husayn. Hence, by cursing the enemies of the imam, the pilgrim is simply replicating the practices of the prophets (Qawlawayh 1938:67). By dissociating from the enemies of the imams, the *ziyara* also assumes political connotations. The pilgrim distances himself from those who perpetrated acts of injustices during the time of the imams and all perpetrators of injustices in contemporary times.

It is in the pledges of allegiance and statements of dissociation that another difference with the Sufi visitation to the shrine is manifested. Through such utterances, the pilgrim makes certain fundamental theological statements. He reiterates Shi'i doctrines and recalls the historical incidents that precipitated the stances of dissociation from the enemies of the imams. Other doctrines that are affirmed in the *ziyara* include those of the infallibility (*'isma*) of the imam and his extraordinary capabilities as an infallible and impeccable guide (Talib 2000:152). The pilgrim not only affirms the distinct Shi'i doctrines but, at the same time, asserts the differentiation from the Sunnite other. In this way, the *ziyara* becomes a polemic device to construct boundaries of identity and exclusion. It identifies and marginalizes the 'other' and affirms the imamate of the imams as a cardinal Shi'i doctrine.

Communitas and the Liminal in the Ziyara

As I mentioned earlier, pilgrimage to the shrine of the imam is marked by a pre-liminal mode that is characterized by the performance of various pre-entrance rituals. The *ziyara* is also important in Shi'ism because it allows for the creation of a liminal reality. This refers to a state between two states, when the pilgrim is temporarily freed from his structural identity. Through the supplications, weeping, identification, and bonding with the imam, the pilgrim is pulled out of normal time and enters the liminal realm before he is reintegrated into society at the end of the ritual. Thus, during the *ziyara*, he is in between the past and the future.

In the liminal state, the *ziyara* allows the pilgrim to enter a subjunctive, "what if" mode. The pilgrim is separated from the ordinary realm and, as he recalls the various historical anecdotes, Kerbala is brought alive in his mind and the barrier between him and sacred event is broken. The pilgrim feels Husayn's sorrow and contemplates on what he would have done if he had been in Kerbala. The *ziyara* also challenges him to re-evaluate his contemporary life. The *ziyara* to the companions of Husayn who were killed with him is indicative of this subjunctive mode. It states: "You are pure and the ground in which you were buried has also become purified. All of you achieved tremendous success! I wish I had been with you, I would have triumphed with you" (Talib 2000:79). Rituals such the *ziyara* not only embody rites of passage but also reinforce values that are important in the lives of the pilgrims and express relationships with powers that embody those values. By initiating the subjunctive, contemplative mode, the *ziyara* becomes both transformative and salvific.

Viewed in this context, the *ziyara* can also be considered to be a rite of passage. Rites of passage involve a three-stage process, marking a person's transition from one stage of social or religious life to another (Bell 1997:95). Rites of passage also entail detachment of the individual or group from an earlier fixed point in the social structure and engender change within the person engaged in the rituals (Schubel 1993:3). As I have mentioned, the *ziyara* indicates separation (pre-entrance rituals and purification), liminality (a subjunctive mode and a complete identification with the object of visitation), and, as I shall discuss, social integration.

According to Victor Turner, the state of liminality often destroys existing social structures since a person is no longer classified at a fixed point in the structure (Turner 1995:97). The various statements uttered during the *ziyara* affirm allegiance and a sense of devotion to the imam while, at the same time, engender a sense of *communitas* among the participants, one that transcends their ethnic and cultural affinities and creates a sense of equality between the participants at the shrines. Victor Turner defines *communitas* as, "a spontaneously or normatively generated relationship between leveled and equal total and individuated human beings, stripped of structural attributes" (Roff 2001:96-97).

The significance of *communitas* is that it dissolves norms that govern structured or institutionalized relationship and is characterized by a sense of equality and solidarity. The emotional power of grief and absorption that accompanies the *ziyara* means that, during liminal periods, individuals who are normally differentiated from others based on class or economic differences submit or perform rituals together and the pilgrim is undifferentiated from fellow Shi'is who come from different parts of the globe. As intense bonding between the followers of the imams dominates the state of liminality, the pilgrim seeks identity not only with the imam but also with fellow Shi'is who share in the love for the imams and weep for the sufferings of the Prophet's family.

In the process, the *ziyara* and shrines of the imams perform an important function. By giving access to *communitas*, they offer an alternative socio-ethical order, one that is uncircumscribed by territorially defined notions of power and authority (Werbner & Basu 1998:11). They also invite the Shi'is to experience and create an egalitarian order, one that is devoid of socio-economic stratification and is interwoven to the love of the family of the Prophet.

The last phase in the rites of passage is the reintegration in society. Before the pilgrim leaves the holy place, he is recommended to recite the farewell *ziyara*. Here, he will bid farewell to the imam, pray that he is granted another opportunity to visit him in the future, his sins be forgiven, and that he be allowed to join the imam in heaven. This marks the point where the pilgrim is ready to be

reintegrated in society. A typical farewell *ziyara* is the following that is recited at the shrine of al-‘Abbas, who was also killed in Kerbala:

I bid farewell to you and I send my greetings to you, believing in Allah, His Prophet, the book and in what has come from Allah. O Allah, record us among those who have witnessed, do not make this my last visitation to the grave of the son of the brother of Your Prophet, peace be on him and his family. Grant me a chance to visit him for as long as I am alive. Gather me with him and his ancestors in the gardens. Bring me closer to him, Your Prophet and friends (Talib 2000:84).

At the end of the *ziyara* rituals, the pilgrim is reintegrated in society imbued with the imam’s *baraka* and love, and returns having experienced the salvific and, possibly, the curative powers of the imam.

The *Ziyara* through Objects & Relics

The *ziyara* of the imam is also connected to the use of a whole range of paraphernalia associated with the imam, his shrine, and related material objects. It is in this context that we can comprehend the importance of holy objects. An object becomes holy when it manifests or acts as a medium with the sacred. In a sense, the divine reveals itself through holy objects, which have expressive power as vehicles of supernatural meaning, and are an important means to the attainment of personal holiness (Raphael 1997:37) Holy objects offer salvific opportunities because the *praesentia* of the holy man can be experienced by objects that come into contact with the shrine.

Objects help construct the physical presence of the imam and extend his sanctity beyond the shrine. In this way, these vehicles anthropomorphize the sanctity of the imam. In popular Shi‘i culture, tying a sick person to the shrine is believed to be therapeutic. When it is not possible to bring him to the shrine, then bringing home a thread that has been tied to the shrine is believed to be an equally effective method to cure an ailment. Such objects recreate the presence of the imam, extending the possibility of attaining his *baraka* and curative powers even without performing the *ziyara* at the shrine. The imam acts through the objects just as he acts through his physical presence. Objects and the shrine itself collectively create an image of a miraculous agency working through the imam long after his death. At the same time, objects extend the *praesentia* and *potentia* of the imam beyond the shrine complex, allowing distant Shi‘is to experience the imam’s curative and other miraculous powers. Objects obviate the need for pilgrimage as they extend the presence of the imam and provide a modicum for constructing his sanctity and extending his authority to distant parts of the world (Mills 1998:32).

This marks the universalization of the *praesentia* and *potentia* of the imam and the transmission of *baraka* through secondary objects that have made contact with the shrines. These contact relics, as Brown terms them, are believed to be as full of the saints’ *praesentia* as any of the physical remains (Brown 1982:88). Thus, translations (movements of relics to people) can become as important as, and even replace, pilgrimages (movements of people to shrines). Due to the shrines and objects, the *praesentia* and *potentia* enhance the authority of the imam long after his death.

Pilgrims return bearing symbolic substances (like relics or the soil of Kerbala) imbued with sacred power. Such objects perform another important function. They evoke the memories and emotional passion associated with the shrines of the imams and facilitate the performance of pilgrimage in the home country if the pilgrim cannot travel to the shrines themselves. Thus, the objects that are kept at homes are used to interact with and grieve for the imams in the same way that a pilgrim would at the holy places.

The *praesentia* of the imam can be felt from a distance in another way. Besides the use of objects, the *ziyara* itself can be recited from a distance. (15) This enables the Shi‘is to attain the reward for reciting the *ziyara* and facilitates the emotional encounter with the imam from a great distance. In many Pakistani and Khoja (16) communities, the *ziyara* is recited from home after every prayer or mourning ceremony. Through the distant or remote *ziyara*, the institution of visiting the shrines of the imams becomes fixed in the hearts of the believer.

The *Majalis* and Other Rituals at the Shrines of the Imams

The *ziyara* is often accompanied by other rituals that augment the emotions and grief expressed for the family of the Prophet. In fact, it is correct to state that the shrine of the imam is an amalgamation of various rituals that encompass cultural, religious, social, and political forms. Apart from the *ziyara*, Husayn is mourned through *majlis al-'aza* (gatherings for mourning), drama, passion plays, poetry, flagellations, and weeping, all of which are frequently undertaken around the shrine complex.

Connected to the pilgrimage is the *ta'ziya*, or expression of condolence or mourning over the martyrdom of Husayn. The *ta'ziya* was established soon after the martyrdom of Husayn when his son, the fourth imam, Zayn al-'Abidin (d. 713), recounted the sufferings of his father (Qawlawayh 1938:107). Later on, under the Buyids (945-1055), official ceremonies were organized to mark Husayn's martyrdom. Subsequently, the *ta'ziya* has assumed different forms as various Shi'i groups have expressed their devotion to Husayn in a myriad of culturally conditioned forms. In the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent, for example, *ta'ziya* refers to a replica of the tomb of Husayn that is constructed, paraded in processions, and then kept in special sanctuaries within the compound of the mosque. In Iran, the same term signifies passion plays that depict the events in Kerbala. *Ta'ziya* are frequently held in the courtyard of the shrine or local mosque (Chelkowski 1986:219). In Lebanon, *ta'ziya* refers to a gathering to mark Husayn's martyrdom.

Apart from performing the *ziyara*, the Shi'ite faithful congregate at the shrines to hear repeated affirmation of the historical injustices endured by the progeny of the Prophet. The *majalis* (pl. of *majlis*) are lamentation assemblies where the stories of the martyrs of Kerbala are recited for the evocation of grief. Narratives associated with the imams are often heard in the *majlis*. In addition, their virtues, miracles, and valor are recounted. In this way, the human and supernatural qualities of the imams are enshrined in the hearts and minds of the pilgrims and other attendees. Due to their virtuous and heroic conduct, the imams become the compelling paradigm of correct demeanor.

The *majlis* is an important ritual as it helps mediate Shi'i Islam to the community. The lectures or sermons delivered at the shrines seek to prove the verities of Shi'i beliefs and liturgical practices, thereby reaffirming the authority of the imams over the populace. The *majlis* also acts as a catalyst for moral edification, teaching Shi'is that their sacred history demands allegiance to the family of the Prophet even under the most inimical circumstances. Thus, the shrines and the rituals that are performed there become important tools in perpetuating Shi'i heritage and ethos (Takim 2000). Historically, these gatherings have been used to recount the persecution endured by the Shi'i Imams, evoking thereby, the emotions of the audience.

Other rituals that are often enacted in the courtyard of the shrine include passion plays, which attained their full expression in Iran during the Safawid dynasty (Mottahedeh 1985:174). The plays reenact the events of Kerbala and confront the issues of martyrdom, intercession, and the pivotal role of the imams in the lives of the Shi'is. Passion plays are often held after a procession passes through the town especially during the month of Muharram. (17) The processions often highlight political and social grievances and represent anti-government protests. It is because of this factor that some Sunni regimes have tried to stop the processions (Nakash 1994:157-58).

Powerful symbols (called *shabih*) accompany the processions and passion plays in the courtyard of the shrines. Especially in the Indo-Pakistani community, specially designed flags (called '*alams*) and biers are paraded to remind the crowd of the suffering that Husayn had to endure. *Jhula* (cradles) are paraded in processions to remind the faithful of the innocent youthfulness of 'Ali Asghar, an infant son of Husayn who was also killed in Kerbala. A horse, popularly called *dhu'l-jinah*, representing Husayn's horse in Kerbala, is a focal point in some Muharram procession (Pinault 2001:144-45). As it is paraded among the crowd, the horse triggers an outburst of grief and initiates wailing. Like the other rituals performed in the shrine complex, the purpose of the *shabih* is to encourage weeping and engender a sense of commitment and devotion to the imams. Through the symbols, the Shi'i is able to identify with the imams and the suffering they endured.

Emotions are also aroused by the recitation of poetry. As poetry is able to touch the hearts of listeners and make people weep, poets have played an important role in Shi'i mourning ceremonies. During the Umayyad dynasty (681-750), poets composed elegies for Husayn in the *majalis*. An important poet, Isma'il b. Muhammad al-Himyari (d. 886/891), is reported to have composed numerous odes (*qasida*) arousing sadness and passion for Husayn (Ayoub 1978:165-66). The imams encouraged the recitation of poetry in memory of Husayn. Ja'far al-Sadiq is reported to have told the poet Abu Harun al-Makfuf: "Heaven is decreed for one who recites poetry about Husayn, weeps, and makes others weep." (18) Although not as popular or widespread as the other rituals, poetry gives a different expression to the pilgrimage, using symbolic language to express love and devotion to the imams.

The Ritual of Flagellation

An important ritual that often accompanies the *ziyara* in the month of Muharram is that of flagellation. In Shi'ism, flagellation is a composite term that includes the use of swords and knives to cut the head (*tatbir*), chains (*zanjir*), as well as striking of the chest. *Tatbir* is the most violent of these acts and is practiced by only a small portion of the Shi'i community.

Together with other rituals, flagellation is important as it helps induce a state of altered awareness in which ordinary restraints of prudence are removed. The flagellant loses not only his sense of self-protection but also his sense of separateness from the imam as the flagellations generate a mood of identification with sacred Shi'i figures. The flagellant breaks the boundary between himself and his fellow flagellants and even between himself and the model he seeks to imitate (Motahedeh 1985:176).

Flagellation performs different functions. For many flagellants, the induced physical sensations help in the attainment of spiritual states. Blows to the body stimulate identification with the blows inflicted on Husayn and allow the historical tradition not only to be intellectually apprehended but also emotionally and physically experienced (Pinault 2001:384). Shedding blood is seen as the pilgrim's way of demonstrating grief for Husayn's suffering and identification with the mortal wounds of the imam. Symbolically, it is also his way of stating that had I been in Kerbala, I would have protected the imam with my blood (Pinault 1992:103). Flagellation also helps to propagate Shi'i beliefs and reminds both Shi'is and non-Shi'is of the atrocities committed against the family of the Prophet.

During the month of Muharram, the shrine of the imam is electrified by the thousands of pilgrims who are engaged in recitation of the *ziyara*, prayers, weeping, flagellation, and other rituals. The intense rituals at the shrine embody the fusion of holy place, holy time, and holy man. It is on such occasions that the charismatic appeal of the imam becomes most evident. Besides the *baraka* associated with the shrine, the multitudinous rituals performed within the shrine complex engender a closer relationship with the imam and reflect the pilgrim's love for and devotion to him. Collectively, these rituals further accentuate the cult and cultivate the legacy of the deceased imam.

The Shrines and Corpse Traffic

The charismatic appeal of the imams gave rise to the belief in the sanctity of their burial places. According to a tradition reported by the fourth Shi'i imam, Zayn al-'Abidin, God had sanctified Kerbala twenty four thousand years before he created the earth (Ayoub 1978:181). The special sanctity of the shrines of the imams and the emotional bonding with them precipitated the belief that it is meritorious to be buried in close proximity to their burial place. Just as the believer sought to visit the shrine of the imam when he was alive, he chooses to be close to him after his death.

It is commonly believed that purgatory (*barzakh*), identified as the period between death and resurrection, should be spent in close proximity to the imams. The cemetery in Najaf, called Wadi al-Salaam, (valley of peace) is a favorite burial ground for many Shi'is. The significance of Najaf is connected to the burial site of 'Ali. Not only was 'Ali a powerful religious, political, and spiritual figure in his life, it is commonly believed that he can also be implored and beseeched for help after his death. Shi'i traditions relate that burial in the vicinity of 'Ali's grave will obviate the questioning by the angels in the grave when a person is initially buried (al-Khu'i n.d:96). A prominent jurist of the

last century, Ayatullah al-Khu'i (d. 1992) states that, according to some traditions, those buried in Najaf will not be punished in the grave (al-Khu'i n.d:96). Other traditions even claim that those who are buried in the vicinity of 'Ali's tomb will enter heaven without being questioned (Nakash 1994:196). This is based on the belief in 'Ali as a protector and intercessor and is further evidence of the purported salvific efficacy of the imams.

The fact that burial near the shrines of the imams is emphasized and sought after by the Shi'is corroborates the view that both the *praesentia* and *potentia* of the imam can be experienced after his death. The special sanctity of and rewards for burial near the shrines of the imams generated the practice of corpse traffic, a practice that was encouraged after the Safawids came to power in Iran in 1501. Although Shi'i scholars have ruled that it is prohibited to exhume bodies, this is allowed under some circumstances. They have permitted the practice of exhuming and transporting the corpse to a holy place so as to gain the rewards of burial near the imams. Shaykh Ja'far Kashif al-Ghita (d. 1812), an important jurist, issued a ruling allowing the transportation of corpses (Tunkabuni n.d:198). According to a contemporary Shi'i jurist, Ayatullah Seestani: "When the deceased has willed that his body be transferred to sacred places before burial, and if it was intentionally or forgetfully buried elsewhere, then the body can be exhumed, provided that doing so does not result in any disrespect to the deceased" (Seestani 1994:121-22).

The transportation of corpses to the holy places increased through the ages especially as the number of Shi'is living outside of Iraq increased. Gradually, transportation of corpses became an integral part of the lives of many Iraqis. The notion of transporting a corpse indicates that both the *praesentia* (burial in the proximity to the imams) and *potentia* (in the form of intercessory powers) of the imam can be experienced even after the death of the faithful Shi'i. The corpse traffic also reflects the enduring authority of the imam long after his death.

The Shi'i Imam and the Sufi Shaykh

As I have mentioned above, the rituals performed at the shrines of the Shi'i imams differ markedly from those performed at the shrines of the Sufi holy men. It is also important to note some significant similarities and differences between how the Sufis and Shi'is conceptualize their holy men. In many ways, Shi'i archetypal notions of their imams resonate closely with Sufi conceptions of their holy men. Like the Sufi shaykh, the imam is believed to possess the divine light that he transmits to his successor. Each imam is said to designate his own successor and transmit the esoteric lore that enables him to discover and authentically interpret the sacred meaning of scripture (Nasr 1991). Similarly, Shi'is seek a path to God through the mediation of the imam just as Sufis seek union with God through the instruction of the shaykh. Like the Sufi holy men, the imams lead an active social life and interact with the community. As a matter of fact, social interaction reinforces rather than replaces their spiritual authority.

However, there are significant differences that exist between the how the Shi'is and Sufis conceptualize their holy men. Due to the comprehensive authority of the imam, Shi'ism predicates a much broader definition of the holy man. Unlike the Sufi shaykh, the authority of the Shi'i holy man rests on other features like *'ilm* (extraordinary knowledge), *nass* (divine appointment), and *'isma* (infallibility). Among these three principles, *'isma* ensures that the imam acts in a just manner and provides an infallible interpretation of the Qur'an. It is this factor that also ensures that the imam is free from corruption and enables him to preserve and transmit the holiness he inherits. The doctrine of *'isma* makes the Shi'i holy man an infallible spiritual director, a spiritual figure that the Sufis could not produce.

The holy man in Sufism emerges through time when he is sufficiently empowered to display saint-like qualities and perform miracles. He is also recognized on the basis of inherited capacities (the *sayyid* form), (19) or on the basis of demonstrating ascetic qualities in his demeanor. The Shi'i holy man, on the other hand, is born holy since Shi'ism posits holiness as an intrinsic rather than an acquired trait of the imam. It is his lineage, the knowledge bestowed on him, and God's will that determine his sanctity. Stated differently, the Shi'i imam cannot choose not to be holy. The Sufi holy man, on the other hand, may attain his holy status by being a disciple of a shaykh, or by acquiring his lore and knowledge, and often after

undertaking extensive ascetic exercises. Furthermore, whereas the Sufi holy man acquires *baraka* because of his acts and piety, the Shi'i holy man is infused by it at the time of his birth. As a matter of fact, *baraka* pervades the figure of the imam from his very birth.

The Sufi shaykh can only perform miracles once he has traversed some stages on the path (*tariqa*). For a Sufi, miracles are incidental occurrences that can distract him from his goal of self-realization. For the imam, miracles are intrinsic to him. Just like the ability to dissipate *baraka*, the imam is believed to be capable of performing miracles from birth. The twelfth Shi'i imam, the Mahdi, for example, is reported to have testified to the imamate of his eleven predecessors at birth (al-Saduq 1985:425). A distinction should also be made between the Shi'i and Sufi view of the miracles performed by their holy men. Whereas prophets and imams can work miracles, Sufi saints are deemed capable of *karamat* (lit. favors from God), a lesser form of this type of occurrence (Schubel 1993:23). Many Sufis distance themselves from such narratives, seeing them as potential snares on their path to God.

Conclusion

Religious identity, expressions of love, loyalty, and grief are revitalized through the pilgrimage rituals at the places where the imams have sacralized by their presence. Collectively, the *ziyara*, *majlis*, passion plays, poetry, and flagellations renew the memory of the sufferings endured by the Prophet's family and evoke the *praesentia* and *potentia* of the imams, indicating to the participants that the imams are as powerful and charismatic in their deaths as they were in their lives. Through the *ziyara*, the pilgrim is also able to experience the charisma, curative, and salvific powers of the imam.

The rituals perform various functions, the most important being to facilitate an emotional encounter with sacred figures and to reaffirm loyalty to the cause of the Prophet and his household. In the process, the pilgrim is able to bond more closely with the imam and other Shi'is, dissociate from his enemies, enter into a subjunctive mode, and remind himself of the distinctive Shi'i beliefs and praxis. These features distinguish the Shi'i *ziyara* from the Sufi visitation to the shrine of their holy men.

ENDNOTES

¹ Rudolph Otto calls feelings or awareness of the presence of the divine "the *numinous*." The word is derived from the Latin *numen*, referring to a divine spirit or localized power that the Romans perceived in nature. The *numinous* is the object of religious experience or feeling, and is held by the religiously devout to be a reality transcending the experience of an individual. Experience of the *numinous*, Otto claims, is an intrinsic component that is associated with any encounter of the holy, because it lies at the heart of all types of religious experiences. See Oxtoby 1997:423-433; Raphael 1995:151.

² In Shi'i devotional literature, the term *ziyara* is used to refer to the pilgrimage to the sites where the imams are buried and to the salutations and greetings that the pilgrim offers to the imams. I will use the term in its secondary sense, the greetings offered to the imam at his shrine.

³ In his *The Cult of the Saint*, Peter Brown explores the medium through which the laity could experience the sanctity of the dead saint in Late Christian Antiquity. He coins the term "*praesentia*" to denote the presence of the holy man at his shrine. See Brown 1982:88.

⁴ This refers to the lesser pilgrimage to Mecca in an off-season.

⁵ Qawlawayh 1938:47. For a list of the special dates recommended to perform the *ziyara* see Shams al-Din 1985:40.

⁶ As in Sunni Islam, Shi'i jurists were suspicious of music as it could intoxicate or corrupt the soul. The Shi'is also prohibited other Sufi practices such as the Sufi dances and criticized some of the Sufi states on the path. For example, sensing the challenge of Sufism, the Shi'i jurist, Muqaddas al-Ardabili (d. 1585) declared Sufism to be characterized by an unacceptable belief in unification with the divine and the manifestation of the divine in human beings. He also condemned the Sufis as being *kafirs* (unbelievers) and *zindiqs* (atheists). Another jurist, al-Hurr al-'Amili (d. 1693), wrote a tract refuting the views and practices of Sufism. Seventeenth century Iran witnessed a great tussle for authority between the gnostic Shi'is, led by Sadra al-Din Shirazi, also known as Mulla Sadra (d. 1641), and the legally minded jurists, led by 'Allama Majlisi the second (d. 1699). In his *Sih al-Asl*, Mulla Sadra attacks the '*ulama*' for their overly legalistic approach. He is highly critical of the ignorance and stifling attitude of the scholars who were committed to the letter of the law and exoteric dimension of religious teaching. See Cooper 2000; Turner 2002: chapter four.

⁷ On the special merits of the river Euphrates, see Qawlawayh 1938: 47-48.

⁸ The view that the *ghusl* purifies a pilgrim is corroborated from a prophetic tradition which states: “the sins of one who performs *ghusl* in the water of Euphrates will be erased, [he will be] as pure as the day he was born”. See Talib 2000:71.

⁹ Some reports suggest that if the heart becomes soft and tears begin to flow from the eyes then permission to enter the shrine has been granted. Talib 2000:74.

¹⁰ The contents of the *ziyara* differ depending on which imam is being addressed. In some cases, the pilgrim can choose from a number of *ziyara* to address the same imam. See for example, al-Qummi 1992.

¹¹ This view is challenged by al-Mufid in his *Kitab al-Irshad*. He states that there is no proof to suggest that the ninth imam, Muhammad al-Taqi al-Jawad (d. 835), was poisoned. See al-Mufid 1981: 495.

¹² Historically, the practice of expressing grief and lamenting at the shrine of the imams probably began at the time of the penitents. Before their uprising against Yazid in 683 C.E., the penitents, led by Sulayman b. Surad al-Khuza‘i, wept and grieved for the death of Husayn at Kerbala.

¹³ Qawlawayh 1938: 235. In Shi‘i jurisprudence, a traveler is required to break his fast and recite shortened version of prayers if he stays at a place for less than ten days. However, to emphasize the special sanctity of the mosques of Kufa and the shrine of Husayn, the traveler is permitted to offer the full prayers at these two sites. See the discussion on this Takim 1990:chapter six.

¹⁴ For example, the pilgrim recites in the *ziyara*: “I will be with you, not with your enemies.” Shams al-Din 1985: 65.

¹⁵ For a tradition on this see Shams al-Din 1985: 40.

¹⁶ On the origins of the Khoja community see Takim, forthcoming.

¹⁷ This refers to the first month of the Muslim new year, when Husayn was killed. For an example of a passion in the courtyard of the shrine see Mottahedeh 1985:141-42.

¹⁸ Qawlawayh 1938:104. For a history of poets who recited poetry eulogizing Husayn see Shams al-Din 1985:58, 90.

¹⁹ The term *sayyid* refers to a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. In many Muslim communities, the superior status of the *sayyids* is reflected in the extra privileges they enjoy.

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