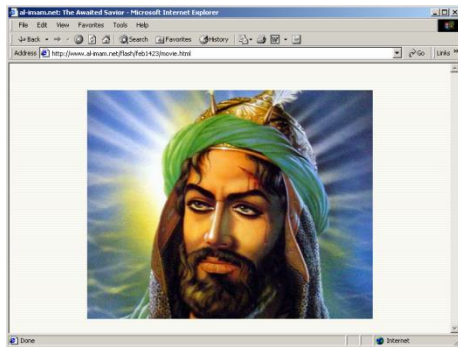


VI. Shi'a Networks



Screenshot: *al-imam.net*

There is a rich religious, political and cultural diversity throughout the Islamic world. Naturally, historical and cultural influences have interacted with the core values of Islam. One of the most interesting examples of this can be found within the varied interpretations of Shi'a Islam. The popular image of Shi'a Islam in western contexts has been informed primarily by developments in Iran since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 – where the symbols of Ayatollahs, veiled women, Holy War, and Holy Law proliferated in the media.

The images of soldiers marching with Ayatollah Khomeini's picture pinned to their chests, and crowds of men flagellating themselves in religious processions were frequently encountered media images of Shi'i Islam - further stimulated by news coverage of events including the Iran-Iraq War and the civil war in Lebanon. This presented an image of Shi'a Islam as inherently warlike and hostile, with legal scholars and Ayatollahs 'dictating' holy law to the masses. This stereotyped Shi'a Islam as authoritarian and restrictive, without acknowledging – as with other forms of Islamic expression - there is considerable diversity under the general banner of 'Shi'a Islam'. There can be disagreement between and within 'nodes' of Shi'a networks, which might not recognise one another's interpretations of Islam. Throughout the Muslim worlds, at least 20% of Muslims are Shi'a in orientation. In minority situations, where there is a Sunni majority, there can be oppression of Shi'a communities (and vice versa). The position of Shi'a Muslims as victims of oppression has been highlighted in locations such as Iraq (during the era of Saddam Hussein in particular, despite being numerically in the majority) and in Saudi Arabia.

The term Shi'a is derived from “Shi'at ‘Ali” – “the party of ‘Ali (bin ‘Ali Talib)”, the group who (according to tradition) championed 'Ali as Caliph after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 (Abu Bakr was appointed). The reality of this paradigm is far more complex and open to interpretation. Distinguishing between historical and traditional readings of formative aspects of Islam raises a number of potentially contentious themes (many being beyond the scope of this module!). What can be established, in relation to the themes of this module, are the role of essential Shi'a beliefs in determining the subsequent development of Shi'a networks in historical and contemporary frameworks of understanding. These can be linked to specific

notions of religious authority and knowledge, which can distinguish them (in general terms) from the basic paradigms associated with 'Sunni' Islam. In reality, there can be complex communications, networking, and affiliations between these broad models of Islam – which can also draw in the paradigms of Sufi Islam (previously discussed). The complexity is intensified further when exploring intra-Shi'a networking – and the ways in which diverse branches of religious affiliation have emerged from core beliefs.

It can be helpful to determine what is *shared* between Shi'a Muslims, although even this raises issues of complexity, in order to explore how diverse networks of understanding emerged. Based on a traditional reading of Islam, ultimately, 'power' rests with God as Creator and "Master of the Day of Judgement" (Surah al-Fatiha, 'The Opening', 1:4 *The Qur'an*). Humanity is caliph or vice regent of God upon earth. The Prophet Muhammad was - after receiving the Revelation - the ultimate earthly authority:

"You who believe, obey God and the Messenger, and those in authority among you. If you are in dispute over any matter, refer it to God and the Messenger, if you truly believe in God and the Last Day: that is better and fairer in the end."(*The Qur'an*, Surah al-Nisa', 'Women', 4:59)

Problems arose after Muhammad's death in 632 AD in deciding whom "those charged with authority" were to be. The first three caliphs were Abu Bakr (d. 634), 'Umar (d. 644) and 'Uthman (d. 656). These Companions of the Prophet were selected by a committee from Muhammad's Meccan kinfolk, and – according to tradition - were judged eligible according to criteria based on acceptance of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, and membership of Muhammad's Quraysh tribe. The first three caliphs began to have practices and precedents attributed to them. Whilst the process of Islam's expansion continued, certain flaws, administrative problems, and defeats led to suggestions that the caliphs' status was unfounded.

This position is particularly taken in Shi'a hagiography, in which 'Ali bin 'Ali Talib - the fourth caliph - is seen as redeeming these failings. Such literature suggests that 'Ali - who was Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law (married to daughter Fatimah) - was intended by Muhammad as being his chosen successor, and that through the scheming of the appointment committee he was unable to become caliph until 656 CE. There is dispute as to whether 'Ali was the second person to believe in the Revelation received by Muhammad after his wife Khadija, or whether Abu Bakr was. 'Ali was ten or eleven years old at the time. 'Ali took part in many battles alongside Muhammad. 'Ali was later to oppose aspects of the administration of the first three Caliphs, suggesting that they were introducing innovations and being implicated of complicity in the murder of the third Caliph 'Uthman in 656. During his brief Caliphate, 'Ali was in conflict with the governor of Syria and the Kharajite 'outsiders', who believed that any pious worthy Muslim could become Caliph - not necessarily from the correct 'pedigree.

Mu'awiya sought revenge for his cousin Caliph 'Uthman's murder. This led to a battle between two massive armies in 37/657 at Siffin - some sources say 70,000 died - before Mu'awiya suggested that the "combatants resolve the

question by consultation of the Qur'an".(Glassé, 1989, 383) Soldiers hoisted copies of the Qur'an upon their lances. Ultimately, the situation between Mu'awiya and 'Ali did not resolve itself - and 'Ali was struck by a poisoned sword at Kufa mosque, dying two days later in the year 19th Ramadan 661 AD by Abd al-Rahman bin Muljam. It is thought by some commentators that he was buried in Najaf.

The (idealised) life of 'Ali bin 'Ali Talib encapsulates the founding virtues of Shi'a religious authority, which subsequent generations have attempted to follow. It is important to note that - according to Shi'a sources - 'Ali had the correct reasons for becoming caliph: he was not inspired by greed, nor 'power hungry'; Shi'a might claim that previous caliphs had elements of corruption and personal interest within their governmental systems - whilst maintaining a veneer of Qur'anic adherence. 'Ali is described as being reluctant to take office unless full power was restored to the Caliphate: "...he was the one capable of defending the most blessed and noble task..."(Kattani, 1983, 88) The poverty and humility of 'Ali is stressed in Shi'a traditions, together with the necessity that "...Whoever sets himself up as an Imam over the people must begin by teaching himself before teaching the people."(Kattani, 96)

'Imam' in this sense means 'a knowledgeable leader' (it can also mean the person who leads others in prayers). The ideals demonstrated within 'Ali's life, combined with the guidance of the Qur'an and the precedents associated with Muhammad, over time was to form a basis for a Shi'ism. The implication was that the 'Islamic nation' required leadership from an individual with correct qualities, which for some Muslims, were personified in 'Ali bin 'Ali Talib. This may have been an idealization, rather than based on realities.

After 'Ali's death, his first son Hasan bin 'Ali bin 'Ali Talib resigned the right to succession. There is considerable disagreement as to why this occurred. There may have been a military treaty with Mu'awiya, financial compensation, or a promise of Hasan succeeding Mu'awiya. According to some Shi'a sources, it may have been:

"...love of peace, distaste for politics and its dissensions, the desire to avoid widespread bloodshed - but it was also probable that he was aware that his cause was lost...."(Glassé, 242)

Within certain Shi'a traditions, Hasan is seen as someone with "pious detachment from mundane matters" (Glassé, 243), to whom are attributed many miracles.

Hasan's brother Husayn bin 'Ali bin 'Ali Talib put forth his own claim for the caliphate after the death of Mu'awiyah. In 680, Husayn and his supporters were forced to flee from Makkah, and the Caliph Yazid. Stopping in Karbala' en route to Kufa (in modern-day Iraq), Husayn's small force was starved and denied water before a momentous battle in which - according to Shi'a tradition - Husayn's supporters showed great piety and courage. Outnumbered, they were defeated and there was a slaughter - Husayn was decapitated, and tradition states there were seventy-two martyrs. Only Husayn's son 'Ali survived.

The stories of what occurred play a significant part in Shi'a Islamic expression. The Battle of Karbala' took place on Ashura Muharram - 10th day of the first month in the Islamic calendar. This became a day of mourning for Shi'a Muslims.

Husayn's head may be buried:

- at Najaf (beside his father)
- outside Kufa
- at Karbala with the rest of his body
- at Medinah
- at Damascus
- at Cairo.

Many legends and supernatural attributes are given to Husayn: verses in the Qur'an are interpreted by Shi'is as referring to him. The high regard for martyrdom within Shi'ism is linked to Husayn's death, annually 'recreated' in Ta'aziyah passion plays. Sunnis may also respect Husayn as Muhammad's grandson, and because of his martyrdom for a high religious ideal.

Husayn's son 'Ali survived, to carry on the Shi'a leadership of Imams. The Shi'a regard Muhammad, Imam 'Ali, Husayn and his descendants as being infallible leaders - whilst the *Ahl al-Sunnah* ('People of Tradition') saw the caliphs as fallible, only following Muhammad and the first four caliphs.

Thus, a distinct division was to emerge in conceptualisations of expressions of Islam. The Shi'a believed that a Mahdi - rightly guided one - had been prophesised to:

"... come at the end of time to 'fill the world with justice and equity as it is now filled with injustice and oppression." (Keddie & Richard, 1981, 7)

Until that time, the Imams were to maintain the traditions and line of 'Ali and his descendants, make new judgements on legal and governmental matters, and interpret previous Islamic thought. The line of Imams is fragmented in Shi'a history, which means that there are variations in Shi'a principles. These networks (and micro-networks) form the basis of Shi'a Islam as it is understood today in a variety of theocratic-, political-, legal- and/or spiritual models.

The hereditary Sunni leadership of the 'Umayyads was overthrown in 749 AD by 'Abu Muslim: his party became known as the Abbasids, because it claimed descent from Muhammad's uncle 'Abbas. Although supported by Shi'a, they did not keep their promise to appoint a Shi'i as Caliph. The Abbasid period, which ended in 1256, saw the emergence of three principal divisions (and other smaller divisions) within Shi'a Islam, following different descendant lines of 'Ali.

Within the confines of a module, it is not possible to determine all of the permutations, although the nature of some will become clearer through the

recommended reading. These lines promoted specific individuals as legitimate Imams:

(1) One significant division was the Zaidis, founded in 900 AD by the descendants of the fourth Caliph Husain, in Yemen. They revered the fifth Caliph, Imam Zaid ibn Ali. They invested authority and sanctity in descendants of Imam Ali and Muhammad's daughter Fatima. They believed that two or more Imams could rule legitimately, if there was sufficient distance between them; an Imam should have the correct pedigree, and be a warrior and a just ruler. This factor has led to a number of 'legitimate' overthrows of government in the Yemen. (I. Harik, "The Origins of the Arab State System" chapter in Luciani & Salamè, 1988, 8). It suggests that no Imam is infallible, contrary to other areas of Shi'a thought. There are greater similarities to Sunni Islam in Zaidi doctrine, than in other Shi'i systems.

(2) Following a dispute over the successor to the sixth Imam, Ja'far as-Sadeq, one faction opted for his son Isma'il to continue the line of living Imams. The Isma'ilis consequently fragmented at frequent subsequent intervals, forming such diverse groups as the Druze (the Assassins), the Fatimids, and the followers of Aga Khan. The Ismailis sought to overthrow the Sunni Abbasids, establishing themselves in Tunisia in 909 AD and in Egypt in 969 AD.

(3) Ja'far as-Sadeq's younger son Musa al-Kasim became seventh Imam, and maintained a branch of Shi'i Islam known as Jafarism. Al-Kasim died, imprisoned by Abbasids. The persecution of Shi'a led to 'underground activities, in which funding was established covertly, and secret practice of Shi'a rituals undertaken. The tradition of al-Ghayba - a concealed Imam or Mahdi - became prevalent. This Imam would rise to defeat the oppressive (Abbasid) Caliphate, lined to the hadith of *al-Qaim bi-l sayf*, "the one who will rise with the sword". A further hadith suggested – according to some Shi'a interpretations - that Muhammad has said there would be twelve Imams after him. (Hussain, 1982, 2, 19).

Thus Shi'ism became a waiting game, preparing for a future generation through secretive activities and networks, observance of independent Shi'i tradition, and the creation of an ideal which would liberate the Shi'i and lead to a 'perfect' theocracy. The lines of Imam descended from Muhammad and Ali was deemed infallible, and complementary to the Qur'an and the precedents associated with Muhammad. Whilst the line of Imams continued for the Jafaris, government issued from them on religious matters from the incumbent Imam. This was not without difficulty, because the Abbasid Caliphate felt threatened, and sought either to eradicate the Imam's line or incorporate it into the family fold. The Shi'a secret network continued to prepare for 'al-Qaim', whom they believed would establish an Islamic state applying shari'ah law.

Various prophetic signs were to herald the arrival of al-Mahdi, notably the simultaneous rise from the East and the West of military powers that would destroy the Abbasids. Expectations for Jafaris rose during the time of the eleventh imamate of Al-Hasan bin Ali al-Askari (845-874). Al-Askari's

relatively early demise led to rumours that he had been poisoned by the Abbasids, for whom he was obviously a major threat. Al-Askari had not revealed his elder son, the only possible candidate for Imam. This led to several schisms after 874.

The principal development was the concept of the Occultation of the Twelfth Imam. Al-Askari's son did exist: Muhammad bin al-Hasan al-Askari (869-940) was four or five when his father died, and remained hidden - in what is known as the 'lesser occultation'. To keep the decision making process going, during his lifetime Muhammad al-Askari was represented by four *safirs*. It was believed that Muhammad al-Askari did not die, but remained hidden to rise again as al-Qaim bi-l sayf. This remains the belief of the Jafaris, who were now known as Twelfth Imam Shi'ites - al-Ithna Ashariyya. It had been prophecised that "...the Mahdi of my nation is Muhammad", that was to say Muhammad al-Askari, not Muhammad ibn Abdullah of the Quraysh in Mecca.

In the absence of the Madhi - in occultation - government had to continue: decisions on matters had to be made. This led to more disagreement. One line of thought was to follow the judgement of mujtahids: these are legal and theological authorities, trained in all aspects of Islamic (Shi'i) thought, who offer opinions and decisions. These in themselves are not seen as being 'divinely inspired' through Revelation nor infallible. This general agency of Imam deputies is known as *al-wukala al-amm*. Other Shi'i thought indicates that any government on Islamic lines is adequate until the Mahdi arrives, because all non-Divine government is fallible.

Reading

Read on Shi'ism in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam: Online Edition*.

Then take a look at the 'History of the Shi'a' map in Smart (176-177)

"History of the Shi'a, The." In *Atlas of the World's Religions, Second Edition*. , edited by Ninian Smart, Frederick Denny. *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t253/e4/images/0195334012.history-of-the-shia-the.1.jpg>

Iran

The following is provided as background reading on Iran

In order to gather an understanding of contemporary Shi'a Islam, it is necessary to explore the background to issues in contemporary Iran. Should this be an area of specific interest to yourself, do take a look at a specialist title as well (for example, Keddie & Richard, 2003)

Prior to 1501, Persia was predominantly Sunni (although its leadership had been Shi'i). It incorporated parts of Central Asia, Afghanistan, Baluchistan, and Caucasia. In 1501 Persia was conquered by the Shi'i Saffavids, whose influence changed the structure and the religious affiliations of the country. Specific Shi'a institutions were created or imported to implement political and social government policies. Scholars emerged from Arabic speaking authorities, many from Bahrain and what is now the Lebanon, including Shaykhs and Mullahs.

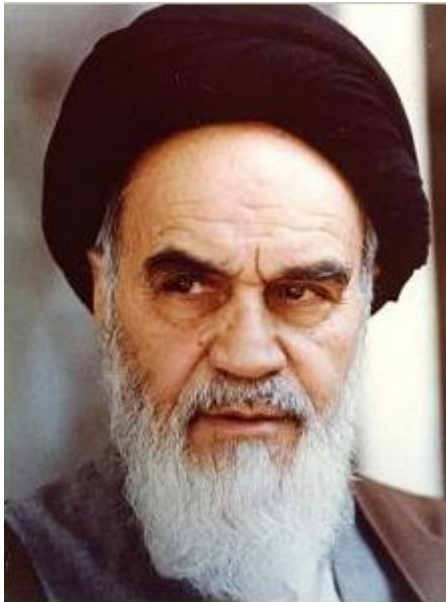
This provides some indication of the nature of Muslim networking, and its effect in the transformation of religious structures within Iranian society. For example, specific features were devised to encourage development of an individualistic form of Shi'ism, to which Persians would develop loyalties to counter insurrection. Such symbols often take hundred years for acceptance, so their success was remarkable. Saffavid Shi'i institutions included:

- sermons
- the Ta'ziyah Passion Plays, commemorating events such as the martyrdom at Karbala of Husayn.
- songs, sayings and poems
- the Sufrah feast
- visits to the tombs of Shi'i saints
- pilgrimages (Nasr, 1987, 61).

Many of these specific features of Shi'i theocracy in Persia remain today. The religious offices of ulama (religious scholars) were appointed by and dependent upon a specific theological line created by the state. There was also an independent theocratic system, incorporating the *mujtahids* (interpreters of religious texts), the ayatollahs and imams of mosques. This group offered judgements upon issues and problems, which were then added as 'binding' to a corpus of Shi'i theocratic thought.

Shi'ism developed in Persia despite subsequent conquests and colonisation. During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, a significant proportion of Persians felt threatened by British, French, and Russian influences - and a modernising government which they felt would threaten Shi'i Islamic values. Social unrest meant that Shi'i independent authorities played an increasing independent role. Governments were dependent upon the West economically and militarily, which meant that concessions were made that did not favour the Persian majority.

A University teacher and Islamic law authority, Ruhollah Khomeini, wrote in 1944 of a demand for a return to (their interpretation of) traditional Islamic values. He sought restoration of properly qualified law interpreters, and Islamic law to replace a western-style legal system. It was not a lone campaign: he received support from other Muslims seeking to change Persian society. The rulers of Iran - the Shahs - and the United States, were seen to epitomise an influence that had degraded Shi'i Islam - this degradation being seen as the central cause of other factors of decline in Persia. The culmination of this process was the 1979 Revolution, in which the Shah was deposed and an Islamic constitution introduced, under Ayatollah Khomeini. Khomeini endeavoured to apply Islam to every aspect of life. Khomeini and his successors sought to pave the way for al-Qaim bi-l sayf. The authority of Khomeini and his successors theoretically only extended to Iran: therefore, the fatwa (opinion) given by him and his government are not binding on other Muslim countries or communities. Since the death of Khomeini in 1989, different networks of political-religious authority in Iran have hotly contested their place within the hierarchy.



Ayatollah Khomeini

Further Reading

Jafri, Syed Husain M. and Hamid Dabashi. "Shī'ī Islam." In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, edited by John L. Esposito. Oxford Islamic Studies Online, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236MIW/e0736>

A more detailed overview on Iran can be found in John Esposito, *The Straight Path* 179-186; also see related Lebanon section 186-191. This should help to put Shi'ism in some kind of context, which is helpful when reading the following chapter:

Charles Kurzman 'The Network Metaphor and the Mosque Network in Iran, 1978-1979 [in *Muslim Networks* book]. This provides an approach to concepts associated with Muslim networks, and suggests models around ever-changing networks and nodes, through a study of the Islamic Revolution. You may wish to consider whether such a model is useful when studying other forms of Muslim networks, and how you might adapt it (if necessary) when studying Islam and other religions.

To indicate the diversity within Shi'a Islam, the following readings provide an interpretation of a specific branch of Ismaili Shi'ism, in fact a node of the Daudi Bohra network. Like several other Shi'a networks, this is based in India, but maintains global connections. The Daudi Bohra form part of a study by Jonah Blank, the findings of which feature in his book *Mullahs on the mainframe : Islam and modernity among the Daudi Bohras* Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2001:

Chapter 1 (Blank, 13-52) provides an introduction to this branch of Shi'a Islam. This is significant, because it gives an indication of the complexity of relationships between and within different elements of Muslim religious belief (and challenges any over-riding assumptions or generalisations a reader might want to make about 'Islam').