

# **‘Alam in the Shi’a Traditions of Pakistan**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper deals with the sacred object of ‘alam in the light of the Shi’a religious doctrine, group and individual religious experiences. The battle of Karbala is the most important symbolic event which serves as a religious model among the Shi’as of the world. Aim of this paper is an attempt to highlight the significance of ‘alam in Shi’a rituals of daily life. This exploratory study was carried out in district Chakwal, Pakistan, which is predominantly populated by Shi’a Muslims. Direct observation technique was used to collect the field data and the findings of the study are mainly based on the empirical evidence. This paper, first describes the symbolic meanings of ‘alam. Secondly, it discusses ‘alam rituals in Pakistan and importance as symbol in Shi’a rituals. Thirdly, it explains the ‘alam in Shi’a historical perspective. It also discusses the ‘alam colours in detail. This also paper traces ethno-historic evidence of ‘alam symbol and rituals as mannat in Chakwal.*

**Keywords:** ‘Alam, Shi’a Traditions of Pakistan, Symbol, Ritual

## **Introduction**

Cole describes that Muharram rituals of Shi’as were introduced in Pakistan by Mahmood bin Amir Wali who was a traveler from Bukhara. He described celebrations of Muharram in Lahore around 1635 (Rizvi 1980:191). In the late eighteenth century processions of ta‘ziyah (replica of Hussain’s tomb) and ‘alams (battle standards used at Karbala) became spectacular events in Awadh and spread from Lucknow into rural areas. The Iranian practice of chest beating was introduced into India by Syed Dildar Ali Nasirabadi (1762-1819) and the concept of Zul jinnah (the horse with two wings) processions, also from Iran, was introduced into Lahore by Nawas Ali Raza Khan Qizilbash in the nineteenth century (Cole 1988:108).

## **Religious Symbols and Rituals**

Religious symbols are found all over the world. People perform religious rituals to memorize the religious events. Researcher observed that these sacred symbols provide historical and religious information about the Shi'a people of Pakistan especially in district Chakwal where Shi'a are the main religious group who are powerful and influential.

According to Wilkinson, rituals include the various worship rites and sacraments of organized religion and cult. The common subject matter practices of rituals in all the world religions is rituals that vibrate with the standard and regular system of human life give believers chances to connect with the absolute authority at specific stages of development, at particular times of year, or as an ingredient of customary worship (Wilkinson 2008: 30).

### **'Alam as Religious Symbol**

'Alam is deeply rooted with Shi'a faith. The term 'alam is an Arabian word and its meaning is "worry and be troubled". 'Alam is a distinctive (sacred) flag that can be interpreted as religious identity of Shi'ism in all over the world.

Findings and Discussions:

### **'Alam in Pakistan**

It is the most vital and necessary representation of Shi'a majales and procession especially in Pakistan. It is a religious sacred idea, a holy flag which is one of the essential and main symbols of the Shi'a Muslims. The 'alam is not an ordinary or just a piece of coloured cloth but is the representation of war or battle standard of the Shi'ism.

Chakwali Shi'as have 'alam mostly in rectangular shape, however there are several colours of 'alam such as black, red and green which are plain as well as decorated with different sacred sayings/scripts (slogans), colourful ribbons and laces.

Aghaie explains that 'alam is the key symbol of Shi'as and have great importance in processions as, in front of the Shi'a processions, there are usually large and heavy banners, such as the 'alam, in addition to black flags adorning religious phrases (Aghaie

2004: 149).

There are a lot of traditional rituals and *mannat* perform by Shi’as like holding of ‘alam with procession (*Matami jalus*) in Imam Bargah and walk through streets of the already defined area in the month of Muharram, Saffar, Zul haj and Rajjab (months of Islamic calendar).

The ‘alam is not only a piece of cloth but also having the religious and sacred slogans like “*Allah o Akber*” (Allah is great) “*Ghazi Abbas Alamdar*”, “*Ana majnun al-Hussain*” (I am the lover of Imam Hussain) “*Ya Ali Madad*”, “*Salam Ya Hussain*”, in Arabic script and these words are labeled sometimes in painted or in embroidered form on fabric.

In Chakwal, *zakirs* and ‘ulamas address the *majlis* or before the procession and had a number of ‘alam.

“In *majales*, ‘alam is placed on the table of the *zakir*. Most of the *zakir*, swear ‘alam just to lament their addressees or to make their argument more assailable. On the other hand, ‘alam are used to lead the processions during the Muharram. ‘Alam which are used for the *majalis* and processions are kept in the *noor mehel*-a room in Imam Bargah, where ‘alam, *ta’ziya*, and other sacred items are placed. An ‘alam is permanently borne on or attached to a poll with length of hundred feet in the centre of the courtyard of the Imam bargah. This is the same place where *ta’ziya* is displayed on 10th of Muharram” (Khan & Rehman 2012: 33).

During data collection researcher observe that Shi’a ‘ulama and *zakir* place an ‘alam in front of them and reason is ‘alam sacredness and holiness. Presence of ‘alam is oath of ‘ulama and *zakir* that they would defiantly talk about authenticity and realism of the events and pray under the shadow of ‘alam which is Shi’as identity and source of their empowerment.

### **Significance of ‘Alam Rituals in Shi’a Traditions**

Chakwali Shi’a people have great respect for ‘alam. They highly considered this religious sacred flag that’s why when they remember holy personalities in *majalis* placed ‘alam in centre. This show their intimacy with Panj tan Pak and especially Hazrat Imam

Hussain (R.A) who fought for the right against the wrong and got success in his mission.

“In processions Shi’a walks through streets in the shape of groups and they sing devotional songs (*mersiya* and *nohey*) of the Imam’s martyrdom and do *matam* (beating one’s own breast, a sign of mourning and sorrow). They call out the names of Hazrat Ali (R.A), Ghazi Abbas A.S), Imam Hassan (R.A) and Imam Hussain (R.A). At first the momentum of *matam* is slow but increases to a climax. There are different types of processions as ‘*alam berdar* procession, *panja berdar*, *mushel berdar* etc. These rituals also performed by some Sunnis as well” (Bauman and Abrahams 1981:303).

Shi’as use to tying *dopattas* with the sacred ‘*alam* but they believe in *mannat* and *neyaaz*. Shi’a people consider that it has deep inside influence of these rituals in their lives. They consume reasonable handsome amount on these rituals like *mannat*, *neyaz* and *sabel* etc for ‘*alam berdar* (holding ‘*alam*) processions. Shi’a consider that the compassionate eye of Hazrat Ali (R.A), Hazrat Imam Hussain (R.A), and Hazrat Imam Hassan (R.A) upon them and for memorizing them, Shi’a observe *mannat* and it is believed that all *mannat* will fulfill sooner or later.

### **‘Alam in Historical Perspective**

In Muslim traditions, especially Shi’a people have kept the remembrance of the sacrifice of the Imam Hussain (R.A) (Grandson of the Prophet Muhammad (PBHU) and son of Hazrat Ali (R.A) and his fellow’s tragic demise. In this regard ‘*alam* is the fundamental idea.

#### ***‘Alam in Black Colour***

‘*Alam* in black colour is symbol of “Ghazi Abbas Salar”. Hazrat Abbas (R.A) was the son of Hazrat Ali ibn Abi Talib and half-brother of Imam Hussain (R.A).

#### ***‘Alam in Red Colour***

In Chakwal, researcher found the idea of ‘*alam* in red colour is the symbol of Imam Hussain (R.A). Red colours is the representation of blood. Blood of Hazrat Imam Hussain (R.A) who was martyred by the Yazidi army in Karbala. Imam Hussain was the

son of Hazrat Bibi Fatima (R.A), Hazrat Ali (R.A) and the grandson of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH). For whom the Holy Prophet said,

“Hussain is from me and I am from Hussain. May God Love Whoever Loves Hussain”.

### ***‘Alam in Green Colour***

Shi’as symbolized ‘alam in green colour with Imam Hassan (R.A). It is said that he was poisoned by his enemy Mu’awiyah with the help of his wife Jaa’dah. Green colour is a symbol of poison that is why Shi’a people symbolized green colours of ‘alam with Imam Hassan (R.A). Imam Hassan was the elder brother of Imam Hussain (R.A) and Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) had great love and affection for these two grandchildren Hassan and Hussain (R.A).

### **Conclusion**

‘Alam is an identical and inspirational symbol in Shi’a tradition and it has deep inside spiritual worth in Shi’a lives. Findings of the study lead to a conclusion that the ‘alam symbol is the recollection and remembrance of all important historical Islamic events. It is observed that ‘Alam is a primary vehicle in the narrative of Karbala and Shi’as has their own justification about their religious acts. They memorialize these events in socio cultural space through major symbol ‘alam and perform religious ‘alam rituals and observe the great sacrifice of the Ehl e Bait (People of the House of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)). Shi’a symbolized ‘alam in different colours which are mentioned earlier. In Chakwal, ‘alam rituals are carried out as their *mannat*. Shi’a religious people make new ‘alam when they clean. They do not even touch ‘alam when they impure and pollute. Observing *mannat* is part of Shi’a norms and values and they observe several *mannat* like make a new ‘alam and decorate with the different colourful ribbons, beads and laces. Making and holding an ‘alam is considered a great chance and good luck for a particular person in processions especially in the month of Muharram and Saffar. It is also believed that if a Shi’a has guilt of wrong deed, he observes a *mannat* and offer *namaz* (prayer) under the shadow of ‘alam and request to Ehl e bait for help in purity of his soul with whole heartedly. It is considered that Allah redresses his grievances and helps him

becoming a pious man. In Chakwal, It has been observed that ‘alam are also erected on the roofs of the Shi’a people’s houses as a symbol and usually black ‘alam on their house which make them different from mainstream of population when ‘alam is seen on the roof of the house. It is used to protect the house from the evil eye or malevolent thoughts. This is also a mark of Shi’a house identity. It is symbol of honor and regard as well. In fact it is considered that supporting the ‘alam is a religious duty for Shi’a on religious merit. People tie *dopattas* as a *mannat* with the ‘alam and kiss it as a tradition. It could be related with their prosperity, protection, marriage, birth of a male child and for the health of any person. It is evident from the findings of the study that ‘alam is a source of purify body and soul spiritually and in particular Shi’a participate in ‘alam rituals to fulfil their worldly desires. Furthermore ‘alam is a foundation of Shi’as success and relief in the world.

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## Figure



Figure 1. Image of a black '*alam* without symbol fixed in central *Imam bargah* of district Chakwal.



Figure 2. Image of red waving '*alams* without symbol fixed in a Shi'a graveyard near central Imam Bargah in Chakwal.





Figure 3. Another image of a black '*alam* decorated with silver ribbon, the *panj tan* sign seems to have been set as crown. *Panj tan Pak* is a symbol of five holy personalities - Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH), Hazrat Ali (R.A) (R.A), Hazrat Bibi Fatima (R.A), Hazrat Imam Hassan (R.A) and Hazrat Imam Hussain (R.A) which is erected in *central Imam bargah* in Chakwal which is at least four to fifteen feet high.



Figure 4. Image of an '*alam* decorated with the silver colourful ribbon erected in Shi'a graveyard behind the *central Imam bargah* Chakwal.



Figure 5. It's a speculative image representation of Hazrat Abbas (R.A) dying in the lap of his beloved brother Imam Hussain (R.A). This image has been taken from a Shi'a rational religious scholar Hafiz Imtiyaz Haider. He has displayed this image in his house.

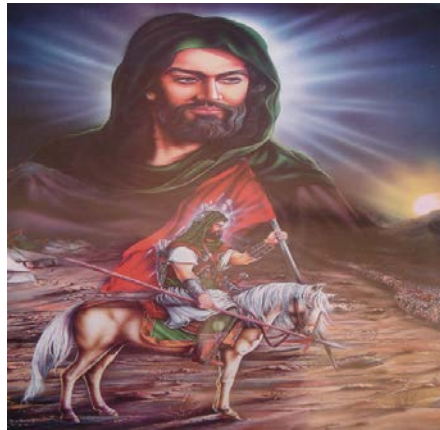


Figure 6. This is a speculative reflection of Imam Hussain (R.A), who is carrying red 'alam with lamenting gestures on the ground of Karbala on tenth Muharram and here red 'alam is a symbol of blood. This image is also taken from Shi'a scholar Hafiz Imtiaz Haider.



Figure 7. Image of a green 'alam without mark tied with the branches of tree in courtyard of central Imam bargah Chakwal