

HISTORICITY OF SHI'ISM: THE REALITY BEHIND THE MYTH

By

Ali SamailaDepartment of Religious Studies, Gombe State University, Gombe
08142635077; ismailaliyyu@gsu.edu.ng**Saleh Hassan**Department of Religious Studies, Gombe State University, Gombe
08165603299; hassansaleh67@gsu.edu.ng**Haruna Ubaida**Pen Resources Academy, Gombe
08146458441; harunaubaida46@gmail.com

and

Maryam UmarSchool of Primary Education, Federal College of Education Technical, Gombe
08030569116; Mamanzarah50@gmail.com**Abstract**

Scholars and researchers have expressed different opinions concerning the origin of Shi'ism and its first appearance. Others have attempted to evaluate it, approaching it from different points of views. The opinions of the Shi'ites themselves differ on the origin and development of Shi'ism. Some Shi'ite scholars opined that Shi'ism began right from the very birth of Islam, whereas others see it to begin long after the death of the Holy Prophet (S.A.W), still, others view it as having a non-Islamic origin. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to give an analysis on the origin and development of Shi'ism. The work suitably adopted historical and analytical method of research. The research found that Shi'ism emerged first in Islam during the dispute between 'Ali and Mu'awiyah which then did not denote any belief that is distinct to that of Muslim majority but later metamorphosed to become an independent sect. The paper finally recommended that Muslim should strive and learn the refined history of Islam so that they should differentiate between truth and falsehood concerning the Sunni-Shi'ite's disagreement.

Keywords: *Origin, Shi'ism, scholars, views, belief.*

Introduction

The Muslim world is broadly divided into two main sects namely the Sunnis and the Shi'ites. The majority of the world's Muslim population follows the Sunni while approximately 10-15% of Muslims follow the Shi'a (Shi'ite, Shi'a, Shi'ite) branch.¹

Shi'ite populations constitute a majority in Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, and Azerbaijan. There is also a good number of Shi'ites in Afghanistan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen.² The separation of Islamic community into these two broad sects stemmed from

political distinction; while the Sunnis recognise the first four caliphs as the Prophet Muhammad's rightful successors, the Shi'ites believe that the Muslim leadership after the death of the prophet should belong to Ali Ibn Talib and his descendants alone.

Shi'ism is described as adherence to the teachings of the twelve Imams of *Ahlul Bayt* (Prophet's Household).³ It initially started as a political group supporting Ali (R.A.⁴) during his disagreement with Mu'awiyah (R.A.) over the assassination of the third caliph 'Uthman Ibn Affan (R.A.). However, it subsequently changed shape to become a distinct sect in Islam.⁵ Shi'ism has a long history and its ideologies are distinct from that of Muslim majority.

Islamic Origin of Shi'ism

A group of scholars uphold that Shi'ism started from the life time of the Prophet and that its seed was first planted by him. This view is held by most Shi'ite scholars and, according to them, there were many Prophetic traditions in this regard. An outstanding Shi'ite scholar A'li Kashiful Ghita' revealed the following with regards to the origin of Shi'ism:

Shi'ism is not a new religion. It begins with the beginning of Islam. The embodiment of the code of religion, that is, the seal of the Prophets (S.A.W.) planted the tree of Shi'ism together with Islam; with his own hands, he watered it and looked after it. The plant grew up to be a green tree which began blooming in the life-time of the Holy Prophet (S.A.W).⁶

Tabataba'i also reiterated the above opinion thus:

Shi'ism began with a reference made for the first time to the partisans of Ali (*Shi'atu* Ali), the first leader of the Household of the Prophet, during the lifetime of the Prophet himself. The course of the first manifestation and the later growth of Islam during the twenty-three years of prophecy brought about many conditions which necessitated the appearance of a group such as the Shi'ites among the Companions of the Prophet.⁷

However, Sunni scholars opine that most *Ahadith* reported on the issue of Ali's party were either fabricated or weak traditions centered on promoting sectarian view among Muslims. They argue that the Prophet was not sent to propagate Shi'ism but rather to proclaim Islam, and also the Companions of the Prophet were one nation; they all submitted their loyalty to the Prophet. Secondly, the Companions who were said to be members of Ali's party never believed in the Shi'ites' beliefs of today contradicting some principles of Islam such as cursing the Companions and the like. Thirdly, belief in existence of Ali's party in the life time of the Prophet was in conflict with the principle of unity which is one of the fundamental principles of Islam.⁸ Moreover, making such claim would be like making Ali (R.A.) a partner to Prophet Muhammad in his Prophethood though there is no single evidence in the divine revelation to support this claim.⁹

Going by the above explanations by the two groups of scholars it is clear that establishing the existence of Ali's party during the time of the noble prophet Muhammad peace be upon him is like making the first Muslim community to be divided based on personal affiliations which was not recorded in the history that companions were divided into groups. Similarly the statement of Ali Kashiful Gita' portray the picture that Prophet Muhammad was sent with two different tasks first to extend the message of Islam and secondly that of Shi'ism which is known to everybody that the prophet was sent to preach Islam only.

Conversely, Musavi Lari, a Shi'ite scholar of high repute, upholds that the designation "*Shi'ah*" during the time of the Prophet did not apply to a group that was separated from the rest of the Muslims. It was rather pointing to a number of Muslims in the time of the Prophet who considered Ali (R.A) superior to all others in his knowledge of the truths of Islam and the values and aims of the Prophet's mission. He inspired them as a perfect specimen of humanity worthy of their emulation. He, however, admits that the Shi'ah first appeared as a distinct group after the death of the Prophet when the close Companions of Ali refused to pay allegiance to Abubakr during the meeting at the *Saqifah* thereby proclaiming themselves a party dedicated to defending the clear and unambiguous texts providing for the entrusting of rule over the Muslims to Ali.¹⁰

The above view has a strong connection with the views of scholars

who uphold the emergence of Shi'ism to be shortly after the death of the Prophet. The only difference is that while Musavi Lari believes in the occurrence of the party of Ali long before the death of the Prophet, the other scholars contend otherwise. According to the latter's view Shi'ah was a group which appeared after the death of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in the wake of the disagreement over succession to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). They were therefore the ones who considered the leadership of the Muslim community to be exclusive right of the Prophet's bloodline, specifically Ali bin Abi Talib. Therefore, the origin of Shi'ism is, in essence, a political dispute over succession and authority. Jafri vividly articulated this in the following caption:

The division of the community of Islam into Sunni and Shi'i branches has commonly been explained in terms of purely political differences. Its origins have been attributed to basically political partisanship with regard to the leadership of the Umma, a partisanship which later exploded into conflict in the civil war between Ali and Mu'awiya. This war not only established the Umayyads in power, but also supposedly marked the advent of Shi'ism as a religious Movement divergent from the main body of believers.¹¹

In contrast, another group of scholars mostly the Sunnis opposed this view by maintaining that if Shi'ism started as result of some people supporting Ali's candidature for the Caliphate, there was also a group that supported

the view that the Caliph should be from the helpers (*Ansar*). They therefore supported Sa'ad Ibn Ubbadah. Then, why was it that there was no *Shi'ah* (party) of Sa'ad Ibn Ubbadah? Thus, this view gives no support for their opinion. The Companions on the Saqifah occasion did not leave the place until they reached an agreement. Had it been that Shi'ism started that period, it would have manifested during the time of Abubakr.¹² But even some Shi'ite authorities believe that Shi'ism did not raise its head in the time of first Caliph. For instance Ali Kashiful Ghita' acknowledges that Shi'ism did not manifest as a sect during the time of the first caliph.¹³

A number of scholars place the emergence of Shi'ism during the Caliphate of Ali Ibn Abi Talib (R.A), while others claim that it started towards the end of the Caliphate of Uthman Ibn Affan. Yet, others regard Imam Ja'afar Al-Sadiq as the founding father of Shi'ism.¹⁴

Another group of scholars opined that Shi'ism began during the dispute between Ali and Mu'awiyah. Ilahy Zaheer, for example, argues that this view seems to be correct because labels do not precede the phenomena they serve to depict. The phenomena appear first and the labels follow them.¹⁵ In connection to this, Addimaqshiyya writes:

The word *Shi'ah* was first used as a description to two factions that arose because of the dispute between Ali (R. A) and Mu'awiyah (R.A), i.e in the sense of supporters. Thus "*Shi'atu* Ali means supporters

of Ali, likewise "*Shi'atu* Mu'awiyah" means Mu'awiyah's supporters.¹⁶

Upholders of this view claim that Shi'ism started as a political group used to qualify the supporters of Ali or Mu'awiyah but later restricted to a person who was a supporter of Ali and his children and who held beliefs and convictions derived from the perverse practices of Abdullah bin Saba and his Jewish accomplices, that were accused of wanting to demolish the structure of Islam and to disfigure Islamic beliefs and convictions.¹⁷

The above view sound rational since the history has recorded the political crises occurred between Ali and Mu'awiyah and its division of the companions into two different camps.

Additionally, majority of historians, Muslim and western scholars including some outstanding *Shi'i* authorities maintained that Abdullah bin Saba' the Jew was the very first person to openly declare the Imamate of Ali (may Allah be pleased with him); the first to defame Abubakar, Umar and Uthman (may Allah be pleased with them) and the first to openly say that Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) was Allah.¹⁸

Going by the above submission, one can safely argue that it was this personality, Abdullahi Ibn Saba who invented the Shi'ism ideology and openly proclaimed it or at least one cannot deny the fact that his ideology influenced in no small measure the

Shi'ites' ideology, since Shi'ism revolves round the idea of the superiority of Ali and believing in his Imamate.

Al-Hassan An-Nubukhti, a Shi'ite scholar, elaborated more on Ibn Saba by saying:

As-Saba^ciyyah are the Companions of ^cAbdullah bin Saba', who was among those who openly defamed Abubakar, ^cUmar, ^cUthman and the rest of the Companions (of the Prophet). He dissociated himself from them and proclaimed that ^cAli (may Allah be pleased with him) ordered him to do so. However, Ali eventually got hold of him and questioned him about his proclamations. He answered to the affirmative and Ali ordered for his killing.¹⁹

He further said:

A group of scholars amongst the disciples of Ali (Allah be pleased with him) narrated that Abdullah bin Saba' was a Jew who embraced Islam and became a supporter of ^cAli. He was known, before his Islam, for proclaiming that Yusha' bin Nun, after Musa, was Allah. Then he made the same proclamation about Ali (Allah be pleased with him) after the death of the Prophet (PBUH). He was the first to openly claim that the Imamate of ^cAli (Allah be pleased with him) is compulsory and whoever was his enemy is dissociated from (and are disbelievers).²⁰

However, some Shi'ite scholars mostly of the later period maintained

that ^cAbdullahi Ibn Saba' is nothing but a concoction of historians and Sunnis in order to blackmail the Shi'ahs.²¹ On the contrary, the Sunni scholars reply that to suggest his non-existence is simply baseless, because it opens the doors to doubt the existence of thousands, if not millions, of historical personalities. On this note, Ilahy Zaheer comments thus:

The denial of Ibn Saba's existence is like denying the sun when it is at its maximum blaze because he was not mentioned only by a handful of his supporters or detractors, but he was mentioned also by each and every person who has spilled the ink on biography, history, character analysis and the theme of the evolution of sects.²²

Non-Islamic Origin of Shi'ism

Some scholars and researchers give Shi'ism an alien origin, in which some of them believe that it originated from Judaism because Abdullahi Ibn Saba', whom they considered as the inventor of Shi'ism, was a Jew before his acceptance of Islam and his ideas such as *Raj'ah* (meaning that Ali Ibn Abi Talib would return back to life after death), and *wasiyya* (meaning that the Prophet peace be upon him made a bequest that Ali Ibn Abi Talib will be his successor) which were later developed into religious and theological doctrines in Shi'ism were borrowed from Judaism.²³

In the same vein, others saw the origin of Shi'ism to be from Persia, as a result of a wish for revenge harboured by the Persians,²⁴ because of the destruction of their empire by the Muslims.²⁵ They claim that, based on

the consideration that Shi'ism is largely dominated by Persian superstitions. For example, the exaggerated view of the Shi'ite Imamate, raising them to positions of divinity, reflects the ancient creed of Persian/Zoroastrian belief in the divine origin of their kings.²⁶

Additionally, another group of scholars uphold that Shi'ism has Judea-Christian connection in some ways. For instance, the Shi'ites have always believe that they are an oppressed group by the vast majority of Muslims. They therefore look forward for a liberator who is now in hiding. This group of scholars believe that this is a reflection of messianic ideas associated with Christianity. Also related to Christianity are Shi'ites' funeral practices which involve playing music, singing of songs, beating of drums, laying wreath on grave-sides and writing inscription on headstones in the Cemeteries.²⁷

Shi'ite scholars on the other hand reply by saying that one's belief with a concept found in Judaism or Christianity would not be a determiner for one's creed to be originated from that religion, claiming that for instance the Muslims believe in the oneness of Allah, the Jews also worship one Allah. As a result of these shared views, can anyone have the courage to talk of the influence of Judaism?²⁸ In the light of this, it is obvious that the argument which attributes Shi'ism to non-Islamic source is far-fetched.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As far as the above mentioned is concerned it could be logically inferred that the starting point of the Shi'ism was during the dispute between Ali and Mu'awiyah and that the first use of the word refers to both Ali and Mu'awiyah's groups but later restricted to the supporters of Ali only. In addition, it could be established based on the presented arguments that the practices and views of Abdullahi Ibn Saba' influenced to a great extent Shi'ites' belief system. In effect, this was the main reason why some scholars hold that Abdullahi Ibn Saba' was the founder of Shi'ism. Therefore the paper recommends the following:

1. The Muslim scholars should teach people the pure teachings of Islam concerning the disagreement of Sunnis and Shi'ites. And to also should teach them to exhibit good teachings of the religion of maintaining kind manners of disagreement.
2. The Muslims should learn and study the true history of Islam so that they should not be misled by the Sunni-Shi'ite's controversy.
3. In order to maintain unity among Muslims of different sects, and to remove any ill-feeling between Sunnis and Shi'ites, the adherents should guard their tongues against incendiary utterances that may bring strong emotion among the brethren of other sect.

Notes and References:

¹ Shi'ah Islam Accessed December 21,2018 <http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shi'ah>

²Emad Khalili, "Sects in Islam: Sunnis and Shi'ahs in " International Academic Journal of Humanities 3 no. 4, 2016, pp. 41-47.

³ Yasin T. Al-Jibouri trans. *The Shi'ah are the Real Ahl as-Sunnah* New Jersey:Pyam-e- Aman, nd,15 Accessed January 3, 2019, www.islamic-sources.com

⁴ R.A is an abbreviation of *Radiyallahu anhu* meaning may Allah be pleased with him

⁵I.I Zaheer *Genesis and Evolution of Shi'a and Shi'ah'ism* Accessed November 23, 2018, <https://archive.org>

⁶ Kashiful Gita' M.H, *The Origin of Shiite Islam and Its Principles* (Najaf: np, 1931) 18.

⁷Hossein Nasr trans. *Shi'ite Islam* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1975) 34

⁸Nasir A.*Ussulu Mazhabish Shiah Ithna Ashariyyah Aradun wa Naqdun*(Al-Jiizah: DarurRidha, 1998) 80-81.

⁹ Zaheer, *Genesis and Evolution*, 7.

¹⁰Hamid Algar trans. *Imamate and Leadership: Lessons on Islamic Doctrines(book four)* (Qom: foundation of Islamic Cultural Propagation in the world, 2003)114-115

¹¹S.H.M Jafri, *The Origins and Early Developments of Shi'ah Islam* (Qum: Ansariyan Publications, 1976), 5.

¹²Nasir*Ussulu Mazhabish Shi'ah*, 84-85.

¹³ M. H A'li Kashiful Gita' *The Origin of Shi'ite Islam*, 21.

¹⁴ Hamid Algar trans. *Imamate and Leadership: Lessons on Islamic Doctrines(book four)* (Qom: foundation of Islamic Cultural Propagation in the world, 2003)111

¹⁵ Zaheer *Genesis and Evolution*, 5,

¹⁶A Dimashqiyyah, "A Calm Dialogue Between Ahlus Sunnah and the Shi'ah" in S. Yunus (Eds) *Shi'ism Exposed: An Analytical Exposition of Shi'ahh Belief from their Original Sources* (Malaysia: Dakwa corner publications sdn.bhd.,2015), 27.

¹⁷ Zaheer, *Genesis and Evolution*, 4.

¹⁸A.S Al-shathri, *Doctrines of the Twelver Shi'ite: Enquiry and Response* (Riyad: King Fahd National Library, 1434) 27

¹⁹An-Nubakhti, *Firaq Ash-Shi'ah*, (Karbala:np, n.d) 50

²⁰An-Nubakhti, *Firaq*, 50.

²¹ S.M Sani *Tarihin Shi'a da Akidojinta* Juz'i na Daya (Gombe:Ahlul Bait Muslim Community, 2001)16

²²Zaheer, *Genesis and Evolution*, 4

²³ Nasir, *Ussulu Mazhabish Shi'ah*, 100-101

²⁴ Algar, *Imamate*, 111.

²⁵ U. Labdo *Fallacies of Shi'ite Belief with Preamble by Professor Abdullahi Mahadi*(Zaria: ABU Press,2018)115.

²⁶ Labdo *Fallacies of Shi'ite Belief*, 33.

²⁷ Labdo *Fallacies of Shi'ite Belief*, 40-41

²⁸ M. H A'li Kashiful Gita' *The Origin of Shi'ite Islam*, 13.