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The Hullabaloo Surrounding the Origin of the Muharram Festival Amongst the Sunni Malays: The Myth of the Shi'a Indian Sepoys in Nineteenth Century Malay Peninsula¹

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ABSTRACT: There is a tendency, within and outside academia, to connect the public observance of the Muharram festival to the Shi'a school of Islam. In consequence historic reports of the Muharram festival in places such as the Americas, Africa, and in Southeast Asia are linked directly to Shi'a Islam. This article looks at the historic presence of the festival, survival as *boria* (choral street performance) and alleged Shi'a roots in Malaysia. Nearly all scholars believe that it originally arrived there in the nineteenth century via Shi'a Indian soldiers/sepoys who accompanied the British. Yet a detailed study of the sepoys reveals that they were actually Sunni Muslims or else Hindus. The article concludes that most studies discount the Sunni Muslims historic participation in spreading the festival as their 'own'. The study also high-lights a need to move away from using contemporary interpretations and parameters of Shi'a and Sunni Islam as they were formerly observed and practiced.

KEYWORDS: Muharram, Boria, Malaysia, Sepoys, Shi'a, Sunni

In their recent articles on the Shi'a Islamic influences in historic and contemporary Malay-Indonesian world, published in the *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies*, Mohd Faizal Musa (2013) and Majid Daneshvar (2014), have separately discussed the rich historic links of the regions' literary

and religious Islamic past to that of Iran/Persia, and the Shi'a school of Islam. Both studies argue that Shi'a Islamic influences amongst the predominantly Sunni population in the region can be dated to the early days of Islam in Southeast Asia more than five hundred years ago and that it continues to be of relevance in the region's internal and external policies, politics, identity, and international relations today. Focusing on contemporary Malaysia, Musa (2013) observes that since 1996, for a combination of political reasons, the government has gone as far as to commit human rights violations by denying the rights of its Malay Shi'a population and in being dismissive of Malay historic links to Shi'a Islam. These attempts to downplay influences and sever the historic ties to Shi'a school of Islam amongst the Sunni Malays in Malaysia have utterly failed since the connections are too deep and well-integrated in Malay social, literary, and religious life. Furthermore, Shi'a influences tend to enrich Malay indigenous systems rather than pose a threat. About Shi'a influences in Malaysia Musa (2013: 425) writes 'because of the pre-modern presence of Shi'ism, it is not surprising that Shi'a influences are apparent in Malay performing arts. For instance, the origin of *boria* shows that Shi'ism is nothing new in Malaysia, especially in Penang'.

Other scholars have similarly discussed the origin of *boria* to the island of Penang (founded as a British settlement in 1786 C.E.) tracing it to the nineteenth century Muharram festival (Wynne 1941: 184-188; Wilkinson 1957 [1908]: 62; Mahd. Ishak Abdul Aziz 1979: 6, 8-9; Bujang 1982: 5-7; Gullick 1991: 340-341; Khoo & Ranjit 1993: 28; Yousof 1994: 31-32; Mahani 1999: 156). In the words of the Malaysian intellectual Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof (1994:32) Penang *boria* certainly has 'Shi'a origins' since 'Sunni Muslims do not observe in any substantial fashion the activities connected with the martyrdom of Ali's family'.

The above-mentioned Muharram festival refers to the annual observance of the horrific slaughter and death of Imam Hussein and his immediate family, friends and companions at the hands of the Umayyad dynasty in the ninth century C.E. in modern-day Iraq (in the field of Karbala). Imam Hussein was the grandson of Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatima, and son-in-law Imam Ali. The festival generally takes place during the first ten days of the Islamic-Arabic lunar month of Muharram. As discussed elsewhere (see Mozaffari Falarti 2004) the occasion involves a combination of private and public gatherings including lamentations, chants, processions, rituals (such as fasting), re-

enactments (particularly passion plays) and performances. Traditionally popular with members of the Shi'a school of Islam, the connection of Muharram to Imam Hussein has been historically valued and attended by many within the Sunni schools of Islam.

Most scholars argue that in nineteenth century Penang the local Sunni Malays by either observing or through marriage with Indian Shi'a sepoys (i.e. native soldiers from India employed and brought there by the British colonial authorities) simply adopted the solemn Muharram festival as their own and before long changed it into the non-religious, choral and jovial *boria*. On the Malay choice for adapting the word *boria*, instead of the more accepted and known terms associated with the Muharram festival, it is believed that its origins are either from Persian or Indian languages meaning 'sackcloth' (Shepard 1965: 39; Bujang 1987: 5-6; Khoo & Ranjit 1993: 28; Yousof 1994: 31-32; Mahani Musa 1999: 156.). Both origins are thought to have been introduced into the Malay language directly from India through the 'sackcloth' worn formerly by Shi'a sepoys and by the participants of the religious Muharram festival.

On theories surrounding the Islamic Muharram festival's origin, participants and transformation in the late nineteenth century Malaysia, most scholars remain heavily dependent on a short two-page article by G. T. Haughton (1897: 312-313). The present paper is a pioneering study on *boria* to be written in either English or Malay. Haughton's report that the word was of Persian origin and that it arrived specifically in the year 1845 C.E. to Penang by south Indian soldiers from the 21st Madras Native Infantry or M.N.I. (refer to an early photo and a drawing of the regiment in Figure 1 and 2) rather than a direct Persian one is broadly accepted and acknowledged by nearly all scholars (Wynne 1941: 185-187; Wilkinson 1957: 62-64; Shepard 1965: 39-40; Mahd. Ishak Abdul Aziz 1979: 6; Bujang 1982: 5-6; Fujimoto 1988: 169-171; Gullick 1991: 340; Mahani Musa 2003: 54-57).

In an earlier article, 'Critical Study of theories surrounding the historic arrival of a popular Shi'ite festival in contemporary Sunni Malaysia' (Mozaffari Falarti 2004), the author concluded that neither the word and public displays of *boria* could in fact come from Persia, nor could they have their roots solely in the wider Shi'a religious Muharram festival. Additionally, the author points out that Haughton's (1897) article makes no reference to Muharram as observed in Penang to being of Shi'a origin and/or having Shi'a sepoy participants. Rather the article proposed

that in order to examine the historic roots of *boria* in Malaysia and its links to the Muharram festival, one should separate the name given to the festival from the actual public displays. Henceforth, through this division we could study the two aspects of the festival separately.

In this article, I will therefore limit my study to the public aspect of the Muharram festival and its alleged Indian Shi'a sepyo origin rather than tracing the origin of the word *boria*, since a search for the word has been done to some extent in the previous study (see Mozaffari Falarti 2004). Establishing a Shi'a connection to that of *boria* in historic Penang is imperative, as it can shed further light on the festival's historic roots, persistence, agents, and dynamics in the Malay Peninsula. Indeed the view that the festival was brought by sepoys from Madras does seem logical, since Madras regiments (in contrast to Bengal and Bombay) appear to have been the most active, regular, and current in nineteenth century Penang (Stephens 1899: 262; Rai 2013: 366, 393).

There is, however, a missing Shi'a link to Muharram, the sepoys and *boria* in historic Malaysia. Consequently re-examining Haughton's (1897) short article is key for such a link as it is considered the earliest study on *boria*, and since nearly all scholars refer to his work for their theoretical and historical arguments on the centrality of Shi'a sepoys in the Penang's Muharram festival.

A Sunni sepyo origin of Penang *boria* and the Muharram festival would indeed point at the difficulty that exists in separating our modern-day parameters of religious and political understanding of what constitutes mainstream Shi'a and Sunni Islam; as well how they are currently justified, perceived, embedded, and practiced in their historic manifestation (on the politics of religious and ethnic justifications in postcolonial Malaysia refer to Judith A. Nagata 1974 and Musa 2013).

Haughton's article and boria's origin through Madras Native Infantry (M.N.I.)



Figure 1: Group of sepoy's from the 10th Madras Native Infantry (Scott 1862: 53)

Haughton's (1897: 312-313) information on the origin and historic arrival of Penang's Muharram was given to him by an 'Indian in Penang'. According to this account the word *boria* can be traced back to the year 1845 C.E. when the native Indian

21st Regiment was transferred from Madras to Penang. At this time, the Muslim members of this Regiment were given ten days off during the month of Muharram simply 'for the purpose of mourning for the grandson of the prophet'. They then used to 'dress up in clothes made of mats' and 'form parties and sing songs of mourning' while representing: 'four persons, *Nanak Shah, Jogi Majnun, Balva Ghaghri* and *Boria*' [Sic].

Following these developments the 'Indian in Penang' proposes that

ultimately with time ‘the Malays have given their own different names to it, but they call all of them ‘*Boria*’ for the purpose of asking charity for them.’ (Haughton 1897: 313) Consequently, the ‘Penang Indian’ offers yet another perspective on the use of the word ‘*boria*’ in Penang as the name of one of the ‘persons’ represented in the Muharram festival. Hence there is no indication that *boria* referred to the religious Muharram festival. Furthermore, from comments made by the ‘Indian in Penang’ it seems that the Malays were already participating in *boria* as an existing practice and simply adopted the term at a later stage. Thus, what is intriguing is that the ‘Indian in Penang’ would still recall the year 1845 and the ‘21st native regiment’ travelling from Madras to Penang some fifty years earlier than his report. This aspect of the ‘Penang Indian’ report will be examined further below.

M. L. Wynne, who wrote as part of a British Intelligence Report on conspiracies in colonial Malaya circa 1940/1941, is perhaps the only researcher that has questioned and studied the validity of the report about the 21st Regiment in Malaya. According to Wynne’s (1941: 186), 1935 informant (Dr Randle, Librarian of the India Office):

‘A detachment of the 21st Madras Infantry embarked from Madras to Penang on 4th April, 1846. Troops and followers of the 21st M. N. I. proceeded to Singapore on 11th April, 1846. They appear to have left Penang and Singapore between April 1849 and July 1849.’

Wynne confirms this information by citing in his footnote an article from *Singapore Cathedral Courier* of 1936 that mentions the 21st Madras Native Infantry (MNI) being stationed in 1846-49 Singapore, without mentioning Penang. He then examines the question of other earlier nineteenth century native Indian Regiments visiting the Straits Settlements (i.e. Penang, Melaka and Singapore). Concluding that since other Indian Regiments visited the area earlier than 1846, it is possible that the Muharram festival was introduced into the Straits Settlements much earlier (Wynne 1941: 186-187). Following this remark, Wynne goes on to examine the composition of the Bengal and Madras infantry corps as they appeared in an investigative report following the Indian mutiny of 1857 called the ‘Report of the Royal Commission appointed in 1859 to enquire into the organisation of the Indian army’. In this report Wynne

discovered that the majority of native soldiers from the Madras infantry corps were not Muslims and that they were originally from various parts of central and southern India (Wynne 1941: 187). Nonetheless, Wynne continues to believe and suggest that the nineteenth century Muharram festival was certainly introduced into Penang by Muslim Indian soldiers (Wynne 1941: 187-188):

‘good natured horse-play among Indian Shi‘ah Mohamedans, with doubtless a number of Hindu members of the regiment joining in the festivities, supported by such other civilian settlers as happened to come from those parts of India where the festival was customarily observed.’

To the above participants of the Muharram festival in Malaya Wynne adds what he calls ‘direct Shi‘a criminal influence’ comprising Indian criminal convicts (Thugs and Thuggees) brought in as prisoners to the Straits Settlements (Wynne 1941: 188). However, Wynne fails to provide a reference from either the ‘1859 Royal Commission Report’ or other sources as to whether members of the Madras corps, civilian settlers and convicts in either India or Malaya were indeed members of the minority Shi‘a school of Islam. Moreover, he fails to document if any of the above was Muslim, or Hindu or whether they may have participated in any aspects of the Muharram festival thus giving little credence to Wynne’s assertions.

Conversely, unlike Wynne’s regular references to Indian Native regiments in Singapore and Melaka, he only cites a visit to Penang in 1809 by the 25th Bengal Native Infantry and another by the 46th M.N.I. in 1832 (Wynne 1941: 186, 186n). It therefore appears that Wynne was unable to gather extensive information on the historic visit of M.N.I. or other regiments to Penang (see Figure 1 and 2). Nonetheless, it is possible to agree with Wynne on the possibility that other Indian Regiments earlier than 1846 from Madras could have introduced the Muharram festival of Malaya. Examples of this at Penang could include the 25th and 35th Madras Native Infantry visit in 1829 or the 12th M.N.I. visit in 1838 (Harfield 1982: 88). Moreover, as Wynne suspects and *Straits Settlements Records* (a source not cited by Wynne) confirm, the native Indian ‘21st Regiment’ from Madras is conclusively the 21st Madras Native Infantry that visited Penang, Malacca, and Singapore for a duration of three years from 1846

to 1849 (*Straits Settlements Records*, Volume 14, 1849: 211-212; *Straits Settlements Records*, T3, 1849: 151).

This brings up the earlier question on how or why did Haughton's informant (Penang Indian) remember an almost correct date (1845 as opposed to 1846/1849) and the 21st Infantry visit from Madras in comparison to other Indian regiments visiting the Malay Peninsula throughout the nineteenth century. This aspect of Haughton's article has not been examined by Wynne or other scholars. Indeed a search for the 21st Madras Native Infantry in *Straits Settlement Records* reveals that in the year 1848 the regiment came almost to a head-on collision with the British authorities at Penang. This incident followed a vicious insult (throwing contents of a spittoon) by a 'European police constable' at the members of the Madras regiment during their annual Muharram procession and his subsequent 'public dismissal' (*Straits Settlements Records*, Volume 14, 1848: 62-64; *Straits Settlements Records*, T3 1849: 152).

The members of the 21st M.N.I. were then officially congratulated for keeping their cool and not retaliating, since it was believed the situation could have easily escalated and turned violent. Moreover, in a rare gesture, a letter of recommendation of 'exemplary conduct' was sent by the Governor W. J. Butterworth of Singapore to the Secretary of the Indian Government at Ft. St George (Madras) prior to their departure from the Straits Settlements in 1849 (*Straits Settlements Records*, T3 1849: 150-153). It is therefore entirely possible that this event may have been a contributing factor towards the account of the 'Indian in Penang', and his association of this regiment with the Muharram festival.

Whether the Muslim members of the Madras Native Infantry belonged to the Shi'a or Sunni schools the 1859 *Calcutta Review* citing official British sources and documents records (The Madras Native Army 1859: 134-135) specified:

'The MAHOMEDANS [Sic] constitute one-fourth of the total strength of the corps...'

Also:

'Our men are, with very few exceptions, Soonees [Sic]; as are the mass of the Deccan Mahomedans wherever found. They are the real staunch worshippers of the prophet with a proper

respect for all the Saints, and a reverential observance of all festivals and ceremonies.'

Consequently, the portion of Muslims constituted only a quarter of all Madras Native Army and they were predominantly Sunni Muslims who came from the Deccan. Likewise, these Sunni Deccan Muslims (rather than the Shi'a) were considered to be active participants in various religious festivals, including the Muharram festival. A fact noted again in an early twentieth century report from the Deccan by Brown (quoted in Hollister 1953: 177) according to which the Muharram 'is the carnival of the year; observed more by Sunnis than Shi'a'.

Reports earlier than 1859 on the overall composition of the Madras native regiments (formed by the British East India Company in 1746 C.E.) similarly give the Muslim numbers as low and their place of origin chiefly in central and southern parts of India (Phythian-Adams 1948: 7-8; Crowell 1990: 259-273). Regrettably these sources do not discuss what percentage of the Madras Muslim sepoys members either belonged to the Shi'a or Sunni school of Islam. An early estimate on the Muslim component of Madras regiments was noted down in 1793 by Colonel James Welsh (1830a: 14). According to this information Muslims constitute one third of all the soldiers in Madras regiments. Apart from the place of origin of Madras sepoys compiled from random muster-rolls taken between 1808 and 1829, it can be observed that about 97% came from the Telugu, Kannada, Dakhini, and Tamil speaking parts of central and the southern India where the overall Muslim population is diminutive (Phythian-Adams 1948: 125-127; Hollister 1953; Cole 1984; Jones 2012). In an early discussion about castes and peoples of the Deccan region in nineteenth century central India, Sinclair (1874: 190) does not provide any statistics but notes that the number of Shi'a were quite insignificant compared to the Sunni's; they can only be found amongst the smaller Mogul (generally those with Persian and/or Turkic Central Asian ancestry) and *Sayyid* (people claiming historic ancestry from the family of Prophet Muhammad) class of the Muslim population. This early information by Sinclair (1874) is significant because according to the previously mentioned muster-rolls taken circa 1808-1829, nearly 40% of the Madras sepoys were originally recruited from the Deccan and were the largest group. Other scholars have similarly noted that the Shi'a of central and south India despite being well represented traditionally

amongst the region's nobility (including several dynasties), intellectual, foreign and the merchant classes, they historically remained a marginal minority within the overall Muslim population and restricted predominantly to the urban areas (Rizvi 1986; Pinault 1992; Howarth 2005; Sadeqi-Alavi 2012; Ruffle 2016). It is therefore unlikely that the Shi'a constituted a significant portion of the small Muslim constituent of the 21st M.N.I. or any of the Madras regiments.

Besides, between 1806-1815 Sultanu'l-Waizin Abu'l-Fath Hasani Husayni a Persian Shi'a religious authority (*Mujtabid*) on a visit to Madras issued a *fatwa* (decree) upon that 'service under the British promoted the enemy interest' and thus it was 'unlawful' to work with them at any capacity (see Sultanu'l-Waizin Abu'l-Fath Hasani Husayni 1815 cited in Rizvi 1986b: 26-27). A somewhat similar religious decree was issued and reiterated again later by another Shi'a *Mujtabid* in 1830 in the northern Indian city of Lucknow (Yann 1995: 144). Both decrees undoubtedly had much impact and influence on the central and southern India's larger *Ithna Atharia* or Twelver (also referred to as *Jaffari* or *Imami*) Shi'a segment of Muslims limiting and preventing their employment in either the civil service or in serving any of the Indian regiments under British rule. Equally the possibility that there were members of the smaller Shi'a Ismailia branches of *Bobora/Vohora* and *Agha-khani/Nisari* amongst the Madras regiments is low, or non-existent. These branches are predominantly of the mercantile profession, coming from the north-western state of Gujarat rather than south India, and preferring to observe the Muharram festival essentially indoors (Hollister 1953: 304; Mozaffari Falarti 2004; Green 2011: 162). Consequently it is safe to presume that Madras regiments visiting Penang in the nineteenth century constituted predominantly of Hindu and Sunni sepoys, hailing from central and south India. Thus scholars who suggest that the Malaysian and Penang Muharram festival or *boria* is of Shi'a origins must certainly rule out the Madras Native Infantry theory.



Figure 2: A group of Madras Native Soldiers (Welsh 1830b: Vignette on Title Page)

The problem of envisaging the non-Shi'a roots of Haughton's Indian sepoys in Malaysia

There is no doubt that most Muslim and non-Muslim nineteenth century members of Indian sepoys in the Malay Peninsula, India, and elsewhere would have all been taking part in the public aspect of the Muharram festival. The festival was certainly the most popular Muslim religious occasion and festival amongst the sepoys. A study of the Madras regiments published from official documents in 1859 reveals that ("The Madras Native Army" 1859: 136) amid all the Muslim festivals attended by the sepoys the 'Muharram is most thoroughly enjoyed in our Regiments'. But as discussed earlier there is virtually no evidence that nineteenth century Indian sepoys and regiments, particularly those from Madras visiting Penang, were Shi'a. Rather most sources and reports suggest that they were an eclectic group of Hindus and Sunnis. Although beyond the scope of this study, a preliminary study of the Bombay and Bengal regiments similarly has the Muslim sepoy numbers to be in the minority, the Shi'a numbers insignificant and that the Muharram festival

(using regional terminologies and adaptations) was popular amongst them (see Callahan 1970: 95; Peers 1991: 546, 549, 551; Alavi 1993: 150-151; Roy 2001: 939; Bryant 2007: 2-28). It is therefore unlikely that regiments from Bombay and/or Bengal, instead of Madras, were the ones that introduced the Muharram festival with Shi'a colourings or sepoy to Penang.

In his recent study of 'Islam and the Army in Colonial India', Nile Green (2009) similarly discusses the centrality of the Muharram festival for the native regiments and sepoy hailing from central and south India and the limits and extent that they would go to partake in it (including committing mutiny if barred from attending the festival, such as the 1855 sepoy mutiny in Bolarum, central India) for much of the nineteenth century. In fact an attempt earlier by the Madras Government and the British Commander in Chief of the Army in 1836 to ban Indian members of the Madras regiments from participating in local festivals was opposed by the regiments and ultimately they were forced to be overturned a year later by the Supreme Government of India (Wilson 1882, IV: 462-467; Oddie 1987: 36-37, 40n).

Similar reports on the introduction of the Muharram festival by Indian sepoy (including from Madras) serving the British in the nineteenth century in Sumatra (Indonesia) are also conferred by Margaret Kartomi (1986: 144-145) and Michael R. Feener (1999: 95). Suggestions that Shi'a sepoy from Bengal and/or Madras introduced the Muharram festival there are questionable, however. As Green (2009: 76) points out, it was the official British policy for all native Indian sepoy to be given time-off for the Muharram festival throughout much of the nineteenth century. Giving them a break to take part in the festival was believed to be good for their 'moral' and for the 'legitimacy of their officers'. It seems that a somewhat similar rule and time-off along with political intent by the British military in India existed at Penang and the Straits Settlements.

There is an 1859 letter to the acting secretary of the Governor in Singapore by the Chief Engineer of the Straits Settlements (*Straits Settlements Records*, W31, 1859: 354) regarding fire safety concerns of a building structure adjoining a Penang mosque. The mosque was located in the vicinity of the native infantry barracks and belonged to the 'Regiments' of Penang. In the letter the building structure is identified as an *Ashura-Khaneh/Khana* that was used by the 'troops or others' as a

'place of worship' during the 'Muharram festival'. The Chief Engineer of the Straits Settlements then questions the peculiarity of British Government and military policy stipulating it did not pay for repairs to religious structures in India but did so in the Straits Settlements and Penang (*Straits Settlements Records*, W31, 1859: 354).

The existence of such a structure in connection to the sepoy regiments in the Malay Peninsula is not only of interest, but has not been studied to date. The use of the term *Ashura-Khaneh/Khana* (literally means the house of *Ashura*, i.e. the tenth and last day of the Muharram festival) in this context is significant since it signals a central and southern Indian usage of the word (Pinault 1992; Mozaffari Falarti 2004; Howarth 2005). By contrast in much of north India (including Bangladesh and Pakistan) the more popular north Indian terms such as *Tazia-Khaneh/Khana*, *Jamaat-Khana*, and *Imambargah/Imambara* are used (see Hollister 1953; Cole 1984; Mozaffari Falarti 2004; Jones 2012). Moreover it is remarkable that the British in the Straits Settlements paid for the cost of repairs of such religious structures but did not in India where the sepoys hailed from. From the letter it is difficult to say if the structure adjoining the mosque at Penang was intended to be used for the indoor, private commemoration, aspects of the Muharram festival or whether it was simply a location connected to the mosque where items associated with the outdoor observance of the festival (such as flags, and standards) were kept, stored or displayed throughout the year and revered by worshipers as religious relics (Ruffle 2016). What is noteworthy is that in the letter there is no indication whether the mosque, the sepoys, and those identified as 'the others', were Shi'a.

From the various reports and accounts of the Muharram festival and *boria* throughout much of the nineteenth century at Penang, it emerges that it was popular and tolerated by most classes of the Indian, Malay and the non-European segment of the population. This popularity of the festival amongst people of all creeds, disciplines, and social classes (especially those from India) is in actual fact not unusual, and can be documented elsewhere in the region. Certainly the aura surrounding the theatrical, moral and emotional aspect of the Muharram was above and beyond a major factor in its popularity and wider reception. William O. Beeman (1993:386) in his study of the social impact of theatre from a multidisciplinary perspective in the humanities refers to the public aspects of the Muharram festival to have the widespread effect to 'more

than engage participants and spectators in the immediate context of the theatrical event.’ This pervasive appeal of Muharram therefore underlines the general popularity, message, and flexibility of the festival that has survived regardless of what political and social restrictions or circumstances it has been subjected to.

Feener (1999: 92, 107-110) in his study of the history and popularity of the Muharram festival amongst the Sunni population in Bengkulu (west Sumatra, Indonesia) similarly discusses its flexibility and survival to adhere its message to the changing times and political circumstances. With the socio-political, economic (expansion of tourism in particular) and religious changes happening in modern-day Indonesia, Feener (1999) uncovered that the festival now survives branded as part of a symbol of ‘local Bengkulu culture’. Hence giving it an ‘acceptable’ political outlook and making it publicly ‘desirable’. This adaptability of the Muharram festival to historically adjust itself with the times and changing socio-political circumstances would have surely helped its popularity, acceptance and survival as *boria* amongst the Sunni Malays in Penang.

In the case of Madras Muslim and Hindu sepoys visiting Penang the festival was likewise decidedly popular, although there is no evidence that they were Shi‘a. Indeed by examining the historic observance of Muharram by Muslims and Hindus in central and southern India where most Madras sepoys originated from, it surfaces that the festival was so well integrated culturally across the population that it was ‘never seen as purely a Shi‘a prerogative’ (see Khalidi 1991: 8-9). This general view of Muharram as ‘their own’ may explain its popularity with the Madras Muslim and Hindu sepoys. Omar Khalidi (1991) and Mahmoud Sadeqi-Alavi (2014: 75) further elucidate that much of the central Indian Sunni love towards the family and descendants of the prophet, can be traced back to the Bahmani Sultanate (1347-1527) of central India and the Sufi orders who practiced a form of philosophy within Sunni Islam (generally held within the Hanafi school or *mazhab*), popularly referred to as *tafziliyya/tafzili*. The followers of this type of Sunni philosophy paid great emphasis on the moral and spiritual superiority and precedence of Imam Ali as the fourth Muslim *Caliph* in matters of religious knowledge, guidance, character, governance, and piety than the other three earlier Muslim *Caliphs* (i.e. Abu Bakr, Omar and Othman). Hence observing the Muharram ritual and mourning the death of Hussein particularly as the grandson of Prophet Muhammad and son of Imam Ali were intertwined

with Islam.

In a recent study on the Shi'a Muslim minority in India, Toby M. Howarth (2005: 23) further attributes the historic communal peace between the Shi'a, Sunni and Hindu population of the Deccan primarily to that of the 'Muharram festival'. He maintains that since the sixteenth century consecutive Shi'a and Sunni Muslim dynasties encouraged the participation of Muslims and Hindus to take part 'without them giving up their distinctive beliefs'. This historic and political attempt to promote the neutrality and relevance of the Muharram festival amongst the native Muslim and Hindu population would have undoubtedly contributed to its endurance and popularity amongst the region's native population and sepoys that often travelled beyond the borders of India.

Refereeing to the late nineteenth century arrival of indentured Indian labour in South Africa, Goolam H. Vahed (2001: 311-312) writes that the Muharram festival was popular and annually performed amongst predominantly Sunni Muslim and Hindus communities. With the shifting of politics, religious orthodoxy and new realities for all Indians in the twentieth century South Africa, the festival 'provided an opportunity for developing and expressing a self-conscious local community identity.' Conversing on the historic city of Bombay in India, Green (2011: 21, 53-54) remarks that in the nineteenth century the Muharram was central to nineteenth century 'Bombay labour culture', encompassing virtually all Muslims and Hindus alike. He continues that the festival at the time was simply considered as the 'city's great Muslim carnival', and thus 'far from being simply a Shi'a festival'. Green (2011: 215-230) argues that the festival was so well embedded amongst those from the Bombay labour classes that it travelled with them when they migrated to South Africa and places outside of India.

The popularity of the public aspect of the Muharram festival by the general Sunni and Hindu population of central and southern India as their 'own' is also attested by a number of Persian Shi'a clergy visitors and residents in India, as far back as the seventeenth century (Shushtari 1847 [1802]: 435; Shirazi-Saedi 1961 [*circa* 1650-1663]: 57-58; Behbahani 1994a [*circa* 1810-1820]: 388, 403; Massumi 2012: 173-190; Ruffle 2016: 8-9). According to these reports, Sunnis and Hindus were more than adamant to be actively involved in the various outdoor aspects of the festival. Moreover, what these Persian eyewitness report is that the Muharram festival they saw was exceedingly different and distinct to what they had

earlier experienced in the Middle East. A fact that was also noted by James Morier (1816: 196-197) during his official visit as part of a British mission to the Qajar dynasty king of Persia in 1809, which coincided with the Muharram festival. The mission was accompanied by a detachment of Madras Cavalry from India. During the visit to the Persian capital of Tehran sepoy from the Madras Cavalry entertained the local audience by performing the Muharram festival following their own version, mode and style (Morier 1816: 196-197, 199; Brydges 1834: 70, 280). The performance included the historic central and south Indian norms of dressing up as characters, and animals. These public displays of the Muharram festival by the sepoy were certainly well received by the crowd, especially the Persian king.

Morier' (1816) report is of much interest since the sepoy who accompanied him came from Madras, public displays of the festival differed to those in Persia, and the fact that the Qajar king and much of the local crowd were Shi'a Muslims. Thus the misconception that there is an orthodox prototypical version of the Muharram festival observed by the Persians and virtually all Shi'a Muslims can be dismissed. A further significance of the report is the eclectic dressing up of the Madras Cavalry sepoy as characters performing to an orthodox non-Indian Shi'a audience (which may have included court Shi'a clergies) without any objections or controversy. This notion contradicts the common viewpoint that Madras sepoy in Penang traditionally observed an orthodox religious and universal Shi'a version of the festival which was transformed in the second half of the nineteenth century into a buoyant and profane occasion at Penang when it was adopted as their own by their children from mixed marriages and by other Sunni Malays. The key evidence that this transformation took place is in the form of reports of Muharram mourners dressed up as characters and the associated jovial displays as part of *boria* on the island of Penang. But Morier's report (1816) there is no indication that the orthodox Persian Shi'a audience and the king objected to the Madras Cavalry dressing up, nor to their version of the Muharram festival. The eclectic dressing up as characters was thus already an embedded aspect of central and south Indian Muharram festival and not a transformation attributed to Penang.

What is consequently significant is the alleged arrival of the public aspect of the festival as practiced by an admixture of Sunni and Hindu sepoy from India as well as its adaptation, integration, and continuation

by the Sunni Malays in Penang. Conversely the possibility that the Sunni Malays already practiced a private or public version of the Muharram festival and *boria* cannot be ruled out. This brings forth the popular notion and the contemporary prejudicial misconceptions that anything to do with Persia, the family of the prophet Muhammad or his son-in-law Imam Ali (as previously cited from Yousof 1994: 32), Imam Hussein and the event of Karbala, is connected exclusively to the Shi'a school of thought. It also discounts the historical importance, contributions and realities of Imam Hussein and the events associated with Karbala within the four Sunni schools of Islam (i.e. Hanafi, Shafi'i, Hanbali and Maliki), literature and traditions. This notion is beyond the current scope of this study, and will be examined elsewhere. Consequently, assuming that the Sunni and Hindu Madras regiments introduced the Muharram festival and *boria* into Penang, it seems that the Muharram and mourning for the martyrs of Karbala went beyond merely being a 'Muslim' or Shi'a festival. Rather it had a universal appeal as well as a social and spiritual message that encompassed all peoples. Indeed there are no reports from India, the Straits Settlements or elsewhere that the Sunni Muslim members of the sepoy regiments objected to the Hindus and Shi'a taking part, or else wanting to stop it as un-Islamic, non-Sunni or an religious innovation.

Conclusion

To sum up, there is no doubt that nineteenth century sepoys from Madras and other regiments from India participated heartily in the Muharram festival. The popularity of the festival meant that the sepoys were given time-off to take part in by their British officers and superiors. This also seems to have been the case amongst Madras regiments visiting Penang. There is also a number of primary and secondary sources that similarly report on Indian sepoys taking part in Penang's Muharram festival, as well as a specific structure adjoined to a mosque solely to cater for the regiments as part of the festival.

Most scholars quoting Haughton (1897) propose that these Madras sepoys were in reality Shi'a Muslims and that with time their religious and orthodox version of the Muharram festival was transformed into an irreligious one as *boria* by a combination of Sunni Malays and children

of mixed Indian-Malay blood. Prior to the Madras regiment they further suggest there was no such Shi'a observance in Penang or in the Malay Peninsula. Scholars add that Muharram is in reality alien to Malay life, the region's history and Sunni Islam. This Shi'a and alien view of the Muharram festival is shared by modern-day religious and political entities in the region.

A close analysis of the history, make-up and composition of the Madras regiment that refers to official sources reveals that Muslims only comprised between 25-35% of the sepoys and that they were predominantly Hindu and Sunni and that there was traditionally a strong passion to observe the Muharram festival. Even in the regiments there were an insignificant number of Shi'a sepoys who were mostly recruited from central and southern India and not northern India where there is a larger concentration of Shi'a. Hence there was no evidence that there were Shi'a sepoys adjoined to the Madras regiments. Besides a number of Shi'a religious verdicts and decrees issued in the first half of the nineteenth century demanded that their adherents cease working with the British in India in any capacity. These decrees would have certainly stopped potential Shi'a sepoys in south India from joining any of the Indian regiments linked to the British. Consequently, the possibility that Haughton's Indian sepoys or other regiments visiting Penang were Shi'a seems unlikely. Similarly scholarly theories ascribing the origin of Penang's Muharram and *boria* to troops from India and Madras should be dismissed.

Further examination of the Muslim (particularly Sunni) and Hindu population of central and southern India similarly indicates a strong historic passion and tradition for the family of Prophet Muhammad, his son-in-law Ali and the Muharram festival. From various reports it appears that the public and the theatrical aspects of the festival were considered the most popular by much of the population. From a multidisciplinary perspective on the popularity and endurance of the Muharram festival in a comprehensive context to persist, scholars such as Beeman have highlighted the outdoor and theatrical power, aspect, and dogma amongst an eclectic array of peoples. This passion was well embedded and integrated in local Sunni and Hindu culture as their 'own' and travelled with them beyond the borders of India.

Persian and orthodox Shi'a eyewitnesses of central-south Indian historic public displays of the Muharram festival agree that it was

different to what they had been accustomed to in the Middle East or elsewhere but do not seem to object to its displays, participants (Sunni and Hindu) or find it offensive. In 1806 upon reaching the port city of Machilipatnam to the north of Madras (currently in the state of Andhra Pradesh, India) Ahmad Ibn Muhammad Ali Behbahani, an influential Persian Shi'a religious scholar, writes of his great joy in 'Hindus and Muslim friends' (and anyone who loves the family of Prophet Muhammad) partaking in the Muharram festival. In his report Behbahani makes no reference to his Muslim friends being Shi'a or Sunni. Nor does he object to the participation of Hindus in the festival. Morier's report of his visit to the king of Persia is also significant as it highlights that a Persian Shi'a audience, including possibly orthodox clerics and the political elite were not offended by the central and south Indian version of the Muharram festival, as performed by members of the Madras Cavalry. Hence the possibility that in Penang the Muharram festival persisted or was introduced there by Sunni Indians should not be discounted.

On the contrary, there is no prototypical Shi'a or a standard type of observance for the Muharram festival in India and elsewhere. This may explain the confusion by scholars suggesting a transformation of the festival in Penang when in reality they are using certain contemporary parameters of what or how Muharram is performed amongst certain peoples, groups and regions in Persia, the Arab world, Pakistan, or northern India. In fact the dressing up and the cheerful aspects of the festival reported from Penang do not represent a change and can easily be found in central and southern parts of India much earlier than mid-nineteenth century. Consequently the persistence by scholars as well as religious and political entities to dismiss the Muharram festival and *boria* as alien to Malay culture, traditions and Sunni Islam, identifying it solely with Shi'a and Persia, is unjustifiable. Indeed as Musa, Daneshvar, and a number of other scholars (in particular see studies by Baroroh and Wieringa) have argued, historically and textually the events of Karbala were in fact known and widely popular amongst the Sunni Malays in island and mainland Southeast Asia from the early days of Islam in the region. In particular it seems that prior to the nineteenth century the events in Karbala were interpreted amongst the Malays as an Islamic tragedy without identifying it with any particular group or branding it as Shi'a or as a Persian invention. Hence current scholarship and political arguments bent on severing such distant historic links with Sunni

reception of the tragic events of Karbala virtually do not stand up to scrutiny.

Finally, it can be argued that the only transformation of *boria* has been the twentieth century discontinuation of its eulogies, lyrics and songs that are no longer directly connected to Imam Hussein and the events of Karbala. Perhaps in order to answer the contemporary alteration of *boria* songs which distance themselves from the Muharram tragedy, one should study their correlation to British colonialism and policies, the arrival of Islamic orthodoxy, migration patterns (particularly from rural to urban centres), implementation of colonial education, new political and religious realities in the Middle East, the establishment of twentieth century Malay identity and nationalism (see Nagata 1984), as well as postcolonial independence.

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Notes

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