Aims and Scope

The *Journal of Shi'ā Islamic Studies* (*JSIS*) is a refereed academic journal published by ICAS Press for the Islamic College, London, UK. The journal conscientiously aims to provide a scholarly platform for critical and informed articles in all fields of Shi'ā studies, including but not limited to theology, philosophy, mysticism, law, jurisprudence, politics, history, and Qur'ān and Hadith studies. Such articles will cover the most debate-worthy issues in the aforementioned fields in the hope of ultimately contributing to the resolution of various theoretical, methodological, and practical dilemmas encountered in Shi'ā Islamic Studies. Furthermore, *JSIS* endeavours to cover modern and current issues relevant to Shi'ism and its overall study.

*JSIS* also aims to facilitate an academic ground for non-English experts and professionals to contribute, enhance, and augment the available literature in the English language concerning Shi'ā studies. This will be achieved by carefully translating their professional articles and thereby affording non-English speakers the opportunity to express their thoughts and ideas among Western scholars. Similarly, *JSIS* strives to present a variety of Shi'ā literature that is either entirely unavailable in English, or of which there is limited availability or access. Moreover, *JSIS* also introduces and presents a variety of classical Shi'ā works that may be academically valuable to researchers in this field but have remained largely unknown to them. *JSIS* dedicates a section of its publication to the critical assessment and vigorous review of books and publications, both old and new, concerning Shi'ā studies. It is hoped that through such efforts *JSIS* will remain a valuable reference and resource for those researching and undertaking Shi'ā studies.

Notes for Contributors

Contributors are invited to submit their manuscripts for consideration, preferably by e-mail, to the Editor. The full name and postal address of the author should be included with the submission but should not be apparent on the manuscript. This is in order to allow blind review. All manuscripts will be reviewed by academic referees. Manuscripts should not exceed 8000 words for articles or 2500 for book reviews, and must adhere to the *JSIS* style policy. All pages must be numbered. Manuscripts should not be under consideration for publication elsewhere. Papers accepted become copyright of ICAS Press unless otherwise specifically agreed. Authors are themselves responsible for obtaining permission to reproduce copyrighted material from other sources.
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Conversion to Shi‘ism in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT: Amidst Indonesia’s overwhelming Sunni majority, the Shi‘i minority group has been growing. Although local adherents to Shi‘ism are few in number, Shi‘ism’s increasing presence has generated great concern, with the threat of Sunnis converting to Shi‘ism being seen as particularly severe by anti-Shi‘i activists. This study aims to explain the factors that contribute to conversion to Shi‘ism seen from macro, meso, and micro levels. Based on prolonged fieldwork among Shi‘is, communication with Shi‘i teachers, and library study, this study finds that the individual factor is decisive in conversion to Shi‘ism, but always in combination with social and institutional factors, and macro contexts. Active, intellectually-motivated religious seekership to discover the authentic form of Islam is the determining factor in the decision to convert to Shi‘ism in Indonesia.

KEYWORDS: Indonesia, conversion, Sunnism, Shi‘ism, religious seekership.

Introduction

Indonesia is home to the largest Muslim population in the world. Since the 1980s, it has witnessed Sunnis converting to Shi‘i Islam. The growing Shi‘i minority exists amidst the overwhelming Sunni majority in Indonesia. Until now, the number of Shi‘i adherents remains small and the exact size of the Shi‘i population is difficult to obtain. The most probable count is one million, though some claim three million or even more. Despite their small number, Shi‘is’ presence has caused concern.

The issue of Sunnis converting to Shi‘ism has become widespread and a reason for concern for Sunni leaders, particularly those with Wahhabi leanings. While the actual number of conversions is difficult
to determine, these leaders consider conversions a serious threat and intend to formulate strategies to prevent them. Conversion to Shi‘ism has turned into the topic of passionate debates.

The Shi‘i ascent in the Middle East has also become a topic of discussion and increased controversy, particularly after the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and Hezbollah’s victory over Israel in Lebanon in 2006. With the Shi‘i upsurge in the region, the Sunni-Shi‘i controversy and the issue of conversion to Shi‘ism has turned into a heated debate and the object of study. A large number of people in Syria, not only from an Alawi background but also Sunnis, have converted to Shi‘ism. The same holds true for Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, Sudan, Algeria and countries in Central Asia and Russia, even though the tendency in these regions is not as strong as in Syria. In short, ‘Shi‘itization’ is a growing phenomenon throughout Sunni majority countries around the world. So, what factors account for this conversion to Shi‘ism?

This article deals with conversion to Shi‘ism in Indonesia. It specifically aims at elucidating the contributing factors to this phenomenon seen from the macro, meso, and micro levels. The main part of this essay consists of the macro context, institutional and social factors, religious seeker, and the search for authentic Islam. However, I will first briefly discuss the conceptual framework I use in this essay and the backgrounds of Shi‘i converts.

**Conceptual Framework**

Religious conversion is a complex phenomenon that has personal, social, cultural, and religious dimensions. It may be defined as ‘a process of religious change that takes place in a dynamic force field of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations, and orientations’ (Rambo 1993: 5). Rambo (1993) provides a process-oriented, seven-stage model of religious conversion: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequence. But his holistic model has been accorded little empirical validation. To a certain extent, this study is an attempt not only to verify Rambo’s model with empirical evidence, but also to refine it from the sociological perspective of macro, meso, and micro levels of analysis.

Sociological studies of religious conversion generally deal with
conversion from one religion to another, such as from Christianity to Islam and from mainstream Christianity to New Religious Movements. But in the case under scrutiny here, conversion from Sunnism to Shi‘ism is an internal Islamic phenomenon from one Islamic denomination to the other. Shi‘is themselves frequently use the term tashayyu‘ (converting to Shi‘ism). A more precise and appropriate term would seem to be internal conversion or denominational conversion. To a certain degree, it may be classified as institutional transition or denominational switching, namely ‘the change of an individual or a group from one community to another within a major tradition’ (Rambo 1993: 13). The internal conversion meant here involves the change of an individual or a group from the Sunni community to the Shi‘i community within Muslim society. In other words, Shi‘i converts accept another interpretation of Islam.

It should be noted, however, that there is no formal rite of conversion from Sunnism to Shi‘ism, unlike conversion from other religions to Islam, during which one has to formally utter before witnesses the confession of the faith: ‘I bear witness that there is no god but God and I bear witness that Muhammad is the apostle of God.’ It is true that Shi‘i converts should confess that Ali is the friend of God, but this does need not to be done formally. Conversion to Shi‘ism means accepting belief in the imamate and divine justice as the unique fundamentals of the Shi‘i denomination, and practicing the ritual exercises and adhering to the codes of conduct outlined in Ja‘fari jurisprudence. Yet one is allowed to perform rites of worship along with Sunnis in Sunni mosques even after converting to Shi‘ism.

This article upholds the prominence of the individual factor in the sociological theories of religious conversion (Strauss 1979). But, in order to avoid the use of too individualistic model, the micro level factor of individual seekership will be combined with social and institutional factors at the macro level of broader contexts. The macro context provides a space for the conversion process in which individual, social, and institutional factors are interrelated. This study differs fundamentally from Yang’s study of conversion to Christianity in urban China in which he concludes that contextual factors are more important than institutional and individual ones (Yang 2005). Many studies on the growth and decline of denominations emphasize the importance of the theory of the religious market that relates to institutional factors (Stark
and Finke 2000). Focusing on institutional services and strategies, Jaffer’s study of the conversion to Shi’ism in East Africa took the institutionalist approach, although he did not state it explicitly. Lisnyanski’s (2009) and Sindawi’s (2009) studies on conversion to Shi’ism in Central Asia/Russia and Syria respectively also took the institutionalist approach. Using the individual factor in explaining denominational conversion to Shi’ism, this essay examines the process of how one becomes a religious seeker and what elements in Shi’ism attract converts. However, the individual factor is combined with social and institutional factors and at macro contexts. Before going into detail, a brief background of Shi’i converts will be presented first.

**Background of Shi’i Converts**

Shi’i converts are found all over Indonesia from Aceh to West Papua, but most notably among the urban population of big cities like Jakarta, Bandung (West Java), Semarang (Central Java), Surabaya (East Java), Palembang (South Sumatera), and Makassar (South Sulawesi). To a large extent, in Indonesia, conversion to Shi’ism is an urban phenomenon.

Most converts are well educated. Many are graduates from Indonesia’s high-ranking universities such as the University of Indonesia in Jakarta, Bandung Institute of Technology in Bandung, and Hasanuddin University in Makassar, South Sulawesi. Some of them have earned postgraduate degrees from universities abroad. Others went to a *hawza ilmiyya* (‘college of Islamic learning’) in Qum, Iran, to pursue their studies, while others finished their doctorates at the State Islamic University of Jakarta.

The majority of people who are sympathetic to Shi’ism came from university. Most of them were also attracted to Shi’ism as it is an alternative for existing Islamic thought. During that time, when many people were interested in, for instance, critical theory, in Neo-Marxist groups, some Muslims found a similar thing in Shi’i thought, such as that of Ali Shari’ati. ‘Leftist’ concepts such as the plight of the oppressed, pedagogy of the oppressed, or corrupt structures, are similar to those in Islam that uses the term *mustad’afin* [the Oppressed] and to the
mission of the prophets to fight against tyrants. And those who clearly present this matters are Shi‘i thinkers.... However, it was later, from Ali Shari‘ati that they entered into deeper thought (Rakhmat 1997: 443).

In terms of social and economic status, Shi‘i converts come from a variety of backgrounds. However, in Indonesia, it seems that their social and economic status is nota determining factor in their decision to convert to Shi‘ism. In other words, those who convert to Shi‘ism may come from economically low or upper class society. One should bear in mind that most of these converts earn their living in the private sector as business people, traders and private teachers, while only some work for the government as civil servants.

Shi‘i converts also include members of nearly every ethnic group in Indonesia, but most are Sundanese, Javanese, and Makassarese. Members from other ethnic groups such as Malay and Acehnese have also converted to Shi‘ism, however. A note should be made here that Arab descendants constitute an important element of the Shi‘i community in Indonesia both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitatively, this group forms a large proportion of that community. Qualitatively, the most prominent Shi‘i teachers in Indonesia have been of Arab origin, particularly those of Sayyid line claiming descent from the prophet’ (Zulkifli 2013: 15-16). All this being so, clearly conversion to Shi‘ism cannot be associated with ethnicity.

Most converts come from a Sunni religious background. Most Indonesian Muslims are Sunnis. Indonesian Sunni Islam is known as moderate and generally follows Ash‘ari theology, Shafi‘i jurisprudence, and al-Ghazali’s Sufism. Sunnis believe that before he passed away the Prophet Muhammad had neither appointed his successor nor established a system for his replacement. Shi‘is, however, believe that the Prophet Muhammad designated his cousin and son-in-law, Ali, to succeed him. Originally, the question of the succession was the main political difference between Sunnis and Shi‘is but, later, differences in theological, jurisprudential, and devotional aspects developed. In Indonesia, the Sunnis themselves differ in religious orientation. There are traditionalist Muslims associated with the traditional Muslim mass organization Nahdatul Ulama (NU) and modernist Muslims associated with the Muhammadiyah organization. Shi‘i converts come from both
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traditionalist and modernist religious-oriented backgrounds, but it seems that modernists tend to be more easily influenced by the teachings of Shi‘ism than traditionalists.

The Macro Context

Rambo is correct when he states that ‘conversion takes place within a dynamic context’ (1993: 20). It is true that conversion to Shi‘ism in Indonesia takes place within macro-contextual circumstances, particularly Indonesia’s state ideology, political development, and religious plurality.

Indonesia is founded based on the five ideological principles of the Pancasila (Five Principles) which are inseparable and interrelated, namely: 1. Belief in the One and Only God; 2. Just and civilized humanity; 3. Unity of Indonesia; 4. Democracy guided by inner wisdom, and arising out of deliberations by elected representatives; and 5. Social justice for all the people of Indonesia. The first principle, Belief in One God, is the basis for the state’s recognition of six official religions: Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. This has made Indonesia a unique country because it allows religious pluralism. Although Muslims constitute the vast majority of the population (about 87 per cent), Indonesia is not an Islamic state. This has also provided room for the conversion of Sunnis to Shi‘ism.

Based on the Pancasila ideology, Indonesia has attempted to implement a democratic system in social, political, and economic life. However, the interpretation and implementation of the Pancasila has never been monolithic. During the New Order period under President Suharto (1966-1998) the regime implemented a policy of so-called de-politicization of Islam and enforced the Pancasila as the sole foundation of the state. Conversion to Shi‘ism, particularly among intellectuals and university students, is to a certain extent a response to and a rejection of this de-politicization of Islam by the state. They see the Shi‘i teaching of the imamate (leadership) as an alternative to the de-politicization of Islam and, understandably, most Shi‘i converts reject the implementation of the Pancasila as the sole basis of the state.

There is another historical context relevant to the discussion. The victory of the Iranian revolution of 1979 followed by the establishment of
the Islamic Republic of Iran confirmed the politico-religious zeal of Muslim leaders worldwide. In Indonesia, many Muslim intellectuals, among them Muhammad Amien Rais (b. 1944), who was a professor at Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta, founder of National Mandate Party, and speaker of People’s Consultative Assembly (1999-2014), were fascinated by the Iranian revolution. Also the prominent Muslim modernist, Hamka (d.1981), then chairman of the MUI (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, Council of Indonesian Ulama), expressed his high regard and admiration for Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (d.1989) who gained the victory. The fascination with Ayatollah Khomeini did not automatically lead to a sharp increase in conversions to Shi‘ism; rather the Iranian revolution’s victory and the emergence of many new Shi‘i converts in the 1980s was in part a response to the revolution, not to the person of Khomeini. For them, it was Shi‘ism’s revolutionary spirit that was attractive. This also agreed with their rejection of the New Order’s depoliticization of Islam.

The emergence of the 1998 reform movement (reformasi) that emphasized the democratic life of the state and society provided room for freedom of expression. Indonesia saw an increase in the number and intensity of socio-religious movements, civil societies, and political parties. In this regard, the Shi‘i community took advantage of this new socio-political development and saw it as an opportunity to openly express its Shi‘i identity which, before the reformasi, it had taken care to hide. A notable example is the establishment of the national Shi‘i organization IJABI (Ikatan Jamaah Ahlul Bait Indonesia, All-Indonesian Assembly of Ahl al-Bayt Associations) on 1 July 2000 during Abdurrahman Wahid’s presidency (1999-2001). The late Abdurrahman Wahid was known for his moderate attitude and tolerant stance towards all minority groups, including the Shi‘is. Thus, the major socio-political context of the reform era provided the opportunity for Shi‘i individuals, institutes, and organizations to increase their missionary activities and to strengthen their position. But it was also a good opportunity for anti-Shi‘i activists to step up their activities to attempt to damp the influence of Shi‘i teachings in Indonesia. Some even went as far as resorting to sectarian violence. According to Formichi, during the 2000s in Indonesia, Shi‘is became ‘the new representatives of the threat to social order’ (2014: 27). Furthermore, some radical Muslim groups (local, national and transnational), such as jihadists and terrorist organizations, benefitted
from the progress of democratic life in Indonesia. We should bear in mind, however, that Indonesian Muslim society's modern elements continued to exert influence on Indonesian society's religio-political life, particularly with regards to interreligious, intra-Muslim, and state-religion relations.

Furthermore, in Muslim society, the religious authority's plurality was another macro contextual factor that contributed to conversion to Shi‘ism. Traditionalist Muslims referred to their own traditionalist ulama, particularly as represented by the NU, whilst reformist Muslims had theirs in the Muhammadiyah and other organizations. There were also radicalist groups and jihadists who were few in number but had loud voices. With the rapid rise in the use of modern technology and the widespread circulation of Islamic literature, religious authority became even more fragmented. Because of this lack of a uniform religious authority, the religious stance towards Shi‘ism started to range from very negative to moderate. Compared with Malaysia, where the state and religious authorities strictly controlled Shi‘i activities (Daneshgar 2014) and where Shi‘is were oppressed and their rights denied (Musa 2013), the existence of Shi‘ism in Indonesia benefitted from the macro context of the Indonesian state and Muslim society.

These macro contextual factors did not directly influence conversion to Shi‘ism, but they may have created a religious market in which a large number of religious groups emerged and competed in their missionary activities. Indeed, Indonesia had turned into a religious market where Islamic institutes and organizations competed. Thus, it is closely connected to the institutional factors of conversion to Shi‘ism as will be explained below.

**Institutional Factors**

Although the individual factor is the most significant determinant, institutional factors are certainly central for the growth of Shi‘ism in Indonesia. Since the late 1980s more than two hundred Shi‘i foundations have been established throughout Indonesia, from Aceh in the far West to West Papua in the far East. Most of them are small with only very few large ones. These institutes have a number of functions. The first is religious, namely as a place to perform religious rituals and ceremonies.
The second is educational, namely a place for religious instruction, guidance, and education; they offer a variety of educational programs. The third is *da'wa*, to spread Shi'i teachings among society, and, finally, they have a cultural function and publish books and periodicals (Zulkifli 2013: 117-118).

Shi'i institutes in Indonesia have undertaken varied missionary activities to meet the religious needs of the Shi'i community and to propagate Shi'i teachings in order to attract new followers and sympathizers. These interconnected activities include *tabligh* (preaching), *ta'lim* (teaching, training), and social *da'wa* directed not only towards internal Shi'i members but also to Sunni Muslims, who often see these missionary activities as a threat to the existence of the Sunni majority and the source of Sunni-Shi'i conflicts.

If the Shi'is recognize Sunnism as an Islamic denomination, they should respect Indonesia as a Sunni Muslim country. Let Indonesia become Sunni. The wish to Shi'itize Indonesia may have bad consequences for the future of this Muslim country. There are still many fields of *da'wa* in this earth—that will be Shi'itized. That is the peaceful way for both Sunni and Shi'i groups. Except, if the Shi'is see Sunnism as a heretical sect that is obliged to be Shi'itized (Husaini 2013: 74).

In Indonesia, anti-Shi'i activists are deeply concerned by Sunnis converting to Shi'ism. They have been executing many activities ranging from religious preaching, instruction, and discussion to appealing to government authorities. One of the recent developments was the establishment in Bandung of the National Anti-Shi'i Alliance on 20 April 2014 to take steps against Shi'ism in Indonesia and to protect Sunnis from the influence of Shi'i teachings. One of its commitments is that ‘the alliance will demand that the government immediately ban Shi'ism and revoke all licenses for the foundation, organizations, and institutions owned by Shi'is’ (Zulkifli 2014: 45). Similar appeals are frequently directed to the government.

Recently, anti-Shi'i activities have increased significantly. The most notable is the bloody sectarian violence that took place in Sampang, Madura, East Java on 26 August 2012 and its related consequences, which the government still has not resolved. Although there are no formal
restrictive regulations, the state authorities did not issue licenses for the ‘Ashura commemorations (to mark the martyrdom in Karbala of Imam Husayn, the third Imam) on the tenth day of the first month of the Muslim calendar and its related rituals in Jakarta, Bandung and other cities because of threats from anti-Shi‘i activists and organizations. Many other cases also reflect the high tensions and conflicts between Sunnis and Shi‘is in Indonesia but they cannot be mentioned here.

From the religious market perspective (Roof 1999; Stark and Finke 2000), both Sunni and Shi‘i institutes display their competitive strengths as suppliers in the religious market and as agents of missionary activities. Since membership growth is a very important criterion of success in the religious market, Sunni conversion to Shi‘ism is indicative of the failure of Sunni institutes and organizations. Therefore, in the eyes of anti-Shi‘i organizations, Sunnism should be protected and Shi‘ism banned.

Competition has occurred not only between Sunnis and Shi‘is but also between Shi‘i institutes and organizations themselves. A notable example is the competition between the two national Shi‘i organizations, IJABI and ABI (Ahlul Bait Indonesia, Ahl al-Bayt of Indonesia). The former was founded in Bandung on 1 July 2000 by Dr Jalaluddin Rakhmat who has been the chairman of its advisory council until now, while the latter was established in Jakarta in 2011, mostly by religious teachers who graduated from Qum led by Dr Umar Shahab who has been the chairman of its advisory council ever since. They are competing in order to attract new members and to keep the ones they already have.

The Iran factor always plays a direct or indirect role in the institutional relations. Because many of its leaders and members are Qum graduates, ABI is closer to Iran than IJABI. The connection with Iran is maintained through the Iranian Embassy or the Islamic Cultural Centre in Jakarta. This Iran-sponsored non-profit centre aims to coordinate Shi‘i institutes and to organize Shi‘i rituals and commemorations at the national level. Apart from that, it is also involved in education, missionary activities, and publications. Mention should be made that the London branch of the Islamic College of Jakarta organizes graduate programmes in Islamic philosophy and Mysticism in cooperation with Paramadina University in Jakarta.

The above situations show the dynamic of institutional competition in the religious market as well as institutional constraints in the conversion process of Sunnis to Shi‘ism. Another constraint is that so far there has
been no Shi‘i mosque in Indonesia in the sense of a mosque exclusively established and attended by Shi‘is. Nor is there an exclusive mosque where Shi‘is compulsory and recommended rituals are performed. To meet the needs of the Shi‘i community, some large Shi‘i institutes have established so-called husayniyya (places where Shi‘is congregate to commemorate the birth and death of Imams and for festivals) in which ‘the Shi‘is gather to observe prayers, to perform religious rituals and ceremonies, to study religion or to engage in social activities’ (Zulkifli 2013: 127). Many Shi‘i institutes do not have the facilities that enable them to cater for the needs of the Shi‘i community.

Unlike Jaffer’s findings in East Africa that ‘the converts are heavily influenced by the efforts of this organization [Bilal Muslim Mission]’ (2009:150), the Shi‘i institutes’ missionary role in Indonesia has not been very successful in attracting converts. They only seem to offer structural provisions for converts who seek religious guidance, instruction, and consultation and who want to attend religious preaching sessions, engage in discussions, participate in religious rituals and ceremonies, and even get or borrow Shi‘i literature. They have also become the institutional bases where people can go for contacts and to practise Shi‘i Islam. Since Shi‘i teachers are usually affiliated with a Shi‘i institute they are always available to guide people in the process of becoming true Shi‘is. Thus, in the process of conversion to Shi‘ism, the Shi‘i institutes’ provision of these structural facilities is certainly urgent.

**Social Factors**

In Indonesia, there is no social pressure in the conversion process from Sunnism to Shi‘ism. However, social factors are involved in the process. Here we see that conversion to Shi‘ism frequently takes place through blood relations and as the result of marriages and friendship ties. Usually, Shi‘i parents try to inculcate their children and when possible other relatives and friends with Shi‘i teachings. As I have described elsewhere (Zulkifli 2004; 2013), the descendants of Indonesian Arabs guard the continuity of their adherence to Shi‘ism. Several family members of the late Husein Al-Habsyi (1921-1994) have also become prominent Shi‘i teachers in Indonesia. Similarly, the children of Shi‘i teachers, intellectuals, and activists are all Shi‘is.
It is recommended that Shi‘i young men seek Sunni women to marry rather than Shi‘i girls, to increase the number of Shi‘is. In fact, many women embrace Shi‘ism after they get married to Shi‘i men. Although ‘their husbands never forced them to convert to Shi‘ism, it is likely that their intense communication with their husbands triggered these women’s interest in converting to Shi‘ism...’ (Halimatusa’diyah 2013: 140). As Stark and Finke (2000) suggest, marriage, in addition to migration, is a major contributing factor to conversion.

In the conversion process, encounters and interactions are important social factors (Rambo 1993) in which one attempts to establish contact with adherents to Shi‘ism, particularly Shi‘i teachers, to seek guidance and to learn about certain aspects of Shi‘ism. In this regard, the religious seekership of Shi‘i converts meets with the Shi‘i figures and teachers’ missionary zeal to attract new followers. Recently, adherents to Shi‘ism in cities and towns throughout the country have established contacts and relations with prominent Shi‘i figures such as Dr Jalaluddin Rakhmat because of his popularity and his prominent position within the Shi‘i community. As a matter of fact, he usually pays much attention to new converts. Abdi Soeherman describes his experience:

I converted to Shi‘ism after the Iranian Islamic revolution. My conversion was more an individual choice as I wanted to learn more about who and what this great revolution entailed. Between 1983-1984, I made my conversion in Indonesia with the help of my Islamic mentor, Dr Jalaluddin Rakhmat who was a Sunnīhimself and seeking to learn more about Shi‘ism. He has been holding tablīgh sessions, educating Shia Islam Muslims since the Islamic revolution of Iran in 1979. Lots of people, especially youths, then became Shias.

Because of their perceived superiority in religious knowledge, commitment, missionary zeal, and preaching abilities, Shi‘i figures play important roles in conversion to Shi‘ism as ‘significant others’. The term ‘significant others’ denotes people whose judgements are most important to our self-concepts. They are usually relatives, marriage partners or friends but they are only effective factors in conversion to Shi‘ism in their roles as significant others. Thus, Gooren’s conclusion that ‘The conversion process is primarily influenced by significant others (relatives,
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Unlike those who advocate taking the passive approach, I contend that taking the active approach (Strauss 1979; Lofland and Stark 1965) is very useful in explaining conversion to Shi‘ism in Indonesia. In this regard, the individual factor in combination with social and institutional factors within the macro context is the most determinant in the conversion process. Shi‘i converts are active agents who have become religious seekers in their quest for a personally fulfilling life. But the question is ‘how the person comes to be a seeker and then how the seeker goes about finding a more adequate world of everyday life’ (Strauss 1979: 161). Many conversion theories emphasize the importance of crisis and tension in the conversion process (Lofland and Stark 1965; Snow and Machalek 1984; Rambo 1993), but this is not the case in conversion to Shi‘ism. I found no evidence that converts to Shi‘ism did so because they were stressed or in crisis.

There are three contributing factors in the religious quest: response style, structural availability, and motivational structure (Rambo 1993: 56). In Indonesia, people paradoxically want to become Shi‘is in response to anti-Shi‘i provocation. Most Shi‘i converts have read books about Shi‘ism’s spuriousness but then continued with an investigation of the authoritative Shi‘i sources themselves (Muchtar 2015). This points to Shi‘i converts’ active response style. They claim that their conversion was impeded by criticism from anti-Shi‘i activists who see Shi‘ism as religiously unacceptable, innovative, superstitious, deviant, idolatrous and heretical. Indonesian anti-Shi‘i authors share these accusations with Middle Eastern polemical writers. The first accusation concerns the Quran. They accuse Shi‘is of having their own Quran. The second questions the authenticity and the Shi‘is’ views on hadith (Prophetic Tradition). Third, Shi‘is’ belief in Ali’s divine status violates one of the most fundamental tenets of Islam, namely the uniqueness of Allah. The fourth concerns the Shi‘is’ negative view of and attitude towards the Prophet’s Companions. The fifth is about the Shi‘i concept of the
imamate and the infallibility of the Imam. The sixth concerns the fact the Shi‘is allow *mut’a* (pleasure) marriages for pre-determined periods though the Prophet disallowed this kind of marriage. The last is the Shi‘is’ practice of *taqiyya* (dissimulation), because of which they are untrustworthy.

A similar trend is evident in the conversion process to Shi‘ism in America. The Wahhabi denouncement of Shi‘ism has encouraged African Americans to see Shi‘i Islam as an alternative form of Islam. The anti-Shi‘i literature has also played an important role in conversion to Shi‘ism among prisoners in America.

Significantly, many Shi‘i inmates indicate that some of them accepted Shi‘ism due to the proliferation of Sunni literature that vilified and denigrated the Shi‘is. Derogatory remarks against Shi‘i beliefs made them more curious and led them to investigate Shi‘i beliefs and practices. Ironically, by their pernicious attacks against and their denigration of Shi‘ism, the Wahhabis aroused the curiosity of many converts who had not previously heard of this branch of Islam. After further exploration, some of these converts embraced Shi‘ism (Takim 2009: 209).

It is true that anti-Shi‘i groups undertake many activities to prevent and or reduce the spread of Shi‘i teachings in Indonesia, including preaching, holding seminars and discussions, and launching appeals to government and religious authorities. They are chiefly carried out by the reformist movement and Wahhabi and Wahhabi-related institutions. The proliferation of anti-Shi‘i publications and writings is also of major importance (Zulkifli 2013: 244).

The converts’ motivation is mainly intellectual. Indonesian conversion to Shi‘ism can be seen as intellectual conversion as it is the result of the converts’ intellectual curiosity and their individual exploration of Shi‘i books and other kinds of literature. ‘Shi‘ism being based on rationality, logic, and, ultimately, ‘aql (intellect) ... can only be understood through dedicated study and cannot be forced upon another’ (Formichi 2015: 283). This intellectual conversion is not prompted by crisis or stress. ‘The intellectual mode of conversion commences with an individual, private investigation of possible new grounds of being
alternate theodicies, personal fulfillment, etc., by reading books, watching television, attending lectures, and other impersonal or disembodied ways in which it is increasingly possible sans social involvement to become acquainted with alternate ideologies and ways of life’ (Lofland and Skonovd 1981: 376). Shi’i converts in Senegal demonstrate the same type of conversion (Leichtman 2008; 2009) and the same holds true for American and Canadian female conversion to Shi’ism. ‘All but one of the respondents emphasized their intellectual acceptance of Shi’ism; they cited books that they had read and said they had chosen Shi’ism because it made sense’ (Inloes and Takim 2014: 6). As active religious seekers, Indonesian Shi’i converts learn to manage their conversion by resorting to the strategies they explored through social networks, chance encounters, and the media, when looking for alternative lifestyles and groups in society (Strauss 1979). Because of their intellectual curiosity and eagerness to study and refute the anti-Shi’i criticisms, Shi’i converts turn to scriptural texts Shi’i teachers or Shi’i institutions provide or that friends give them. The structural availability of Shi’i texts, teachers and institutes is therefore a crucial factor in this particular religious seekership. Thus, conversion is based on the intellectual investigation of what converts consider as the absolute textual truth as contained in the Shi’i texts available to them.

Shi’i scholars such as Dr Jalaluddin Rakhmat, the most prominent Shi’i intellectual in Indonesia today, experienced the evident importance of the textual study of Shi’i literature in the conversion process. Born on 29 August 1949 in a district in Bandung, West Java, Rakhmat is the co-founder and chairman of the advisory council of the IJABI and the current member of the national House of Representatives for the Indonesian Democratic Party for Struggle (PDI-P, period 2014-2019).

But Jalaluddin Rakhmat admitted that he started his conversion with intensive self-study of Shi’ism in 1984, the year that turned out to be the turning point in his religious, intellectual, and spiritual quest. Even though we cannot ascertain the exact time of his conversion, it is safe to assume that it would have followed this period of intensive study, discussions, and reflections. A brief account of his interest in Shi’ism goes like this: in 1984, Rakhmat, Haidar Bagir and Endang Saefuddin Anshary attended an Islamic conference in
Conversion to Shi’ism in Indonesia clearly refutes Stark and Finke’s claim that ‘converts very seldom are religious seekers, and conversion is seldom the culmination of conscious search’ (2000: 122). Shi’i converts are truly active religious seekers. Again, the textual study of Shi’i literature either through books bought in bookstores or borrowed from others eventually contributes to their conviction that the Shi’i interpretation of Islam is the absolute truth. Hegasi’s study on denominational conversion to Shi’ism in the UK also highlights the intellectual motif: ‘Reading, study, and the search for facts seemed to occupy a greater place in the conversion narratives’ (Hegasi 2009: 33) of the Shi’i converts. The quest for Shi’i teachings is generally the result of converts’ own efforts and initiatives rather than of Shi’i institutes’ missionary activities. However, as explained above, as significant others, Shi’i teachers do contribute to the conversion process. This indicates the
inapplicability of Greil’s view that downplays the influence of significant others in the case of active religious seekers (1977). Nonetheless, unless the converts were active in this process, the conversion would not occur.

Greil’s view (1977) that religious socialization influences religious seekership is, to a certain extent, also evident in the conversion process to Shi‘ism in Indonesia. While some went through strong religious socialization in their childhood, most Shi‘i converts in Indonesia did not. It is true that Shi‘i figures like Dr Jalaluddin Rakhmat received strong religious socialization when he was a boy, most converts got only a limited stock of Islamic knowledge when they were young and their internalization of the Islamic tradition is weak. Because they have a solid foundation in Islamic knowledge, graduates of madrasah (Islamic school) and pesantren (traditional Islamic boarding school) and students of Islamic institutions of higher learning are not easily taken by the Shi‘i teachings although Shi‘i works are widely read among them. It is for this reason that very few graduates and lecturers at Islamic institutions of higher learning turn into Shi‘i converts, even though they might adopt some Shi‘i intellectual and philosophical aspects.

Many converts were initially attracted to Shi‘ism through the philosophical and theological aspects in Shi‘i literature. But in the course of time they are labelled by anti-Shi‘i activists as Shi‘is despite their ignorance of Shi‘ism’s proper teachings. In the gradual process of conversion they learn to adopt the codes of conduct as outlined in Ja‘fari jurisprudence in order to become true Shi‘i followers. But before the confession stage, converts are usually engaged in the large variety of devotional rituals Shi‘i institutes provide. As the rituals are based on the Muslim calendar, they can be organized daily, weekly, monthly, and annually. The most important is ‘Ashura (the commemoration of Imam Husayn’s martyrdom) followed by Arba‘in (the fortieth day after ‘Ashura) while the most widely practised weekly ritual is the Kumayl prayer. These rituals and commemorations are only some of the apparent aspects of Shi‘i piety Shi‘is in Indonesia observe. In fact, Shi‘is’ religious life in Indonesia is replete with rituals and commemorations; nearly all of them are expressions of their loving devotion to the fourteen infallibles, namely the Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatima, and the twelve Imams. The participation of the converts in these rituals is instrumental in the process of the construction of their new Shi‘i identity as members of the Shi‘i community.
To be identified as a committed Shi‘i, one needs to abide by the code of conduct as outlined in Ja‘fari jurisprudence. Here the role of Shi‘i teachers as significant others in the new members’ training and guidance is required, particularly for the compulsory acts of worship like ablutions and praying. This is crucial because in Jafari jurisprudence, Shi‘is must abide to a living marja’ al-taqlid (‘source of emulation’), who is at present the Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in Iran (b. 1936), Grand Ayatollah Ali Hussayn Sistani in Iraq (b. 1930), or somebody else. The Shi‘i teacher’s elucidations and his guidance in the various aspects of Ja‘fari jurisprudence as formulated by a specific marja’ al-taqlid are essential. Gradually, Shi‘i converts replace their way of practicing the obligatory and recommended rituals with those that follow the new kind of Islamic jurisprudence. This must be a new experience for converts who experience their new identity within their new denomination. It is also their identity as members of global Shi‘i community.

Thus, religious seekership is anecessary condition while significant others turn into a sufficient condition in the process of conversion from Sunnism to Shi‘ism. Religious seekership originates in the converts’ response to the anti-Shi‘i propagation contained in the pervasive circulation of anti-Shi‘i literature, the validity of which is investigated and examined through the study of Shi‘i sources. It is a gradual process in which new comers experience encounters and interactions until they alter their lives and become full members of the Shi‘i community and they arrive at Rambo’s stage of commitment and consequence (1993).

In Search of Authentic Islam

In Indonesia, conversion to Shi‘ism is a search for authentic Islam because the converts are convinced that since the death of Prophet Muhammad and ever after, Sunni Islam has been corrupted. ‘Shi‘is in Indonesia argue that they maintain the true teachings of Islam, as taught and practised by the Prophet Muhammad and his ahl al-bayt [household]... they emphasize their role in maintaining the continuity, purity and eternity of his teachings’ (Zulkifli 2013: 82-83). Among Sunnism’s corrupted teachings is its rejection of the Prophet Muhammad’s assignation of his cousin and son-in-law, Ali, as his successor. The imamate is the source of the schism between Sunni and Shi‘i Islam and coloured the entire
Shi'i teaching. For Shi'i converts, the total of Shi'i Islamic teachings is more authentic and reasonable than that of Sunni Islam. In other words, in the conversion to Shi'i Islam, authenticity and reasonability are key concepts.

In Shi'i converts’ search for authentic Islam, some aspects of Shi'i teaching are appealing and become decisive in their decision-making process. The most essential doctrine is the Shi'i conception of the imamate and this more than anything else attracts converts to choose to embrace Shi'i Islam. As is generally understood, the leadership issue in Sunni Islam is not as vital as the imamate is in Shi'ism. While leadership in Sunnism is considered only in political and worldly affairs rather than in religious ones, the imamate in Shi'ism is both religious and political, and thus became its central doctrine, which is included in its fundamental tenets of denomination. All Shi'i converts admit that the Shi'i doctrine of the imamate was the main reason for their conversion. They see it as a part of the authentic teaching based on both Sunni and Shi'i textual sources. Abdi Soherman’s response to the question of what made him become a Shi'i states:

The concept of the imamate. Shia Islam rests on the principle that for every generation there should consequently and logically be a leader to guide the community. This is missing in Sunni Islam as it does not really talk about a spiritual leader designated by Allah (swt) to act as His representative per se. Before I knew about Shia Islam, I often wondered: “the Prophet is very important in Islam, so logically then, his family must be important as well.” Initially, I could not find many references to the Prophet Muhammad (saw)’s family in Sunni books or in hadith. To me, Sunni Islam lacked a crucial, fundamental link.

Textual sources state that Shi'i Islam uses reason (‘aql) to support its superiority. The essential condition of the imamate for human beings is supported by logical reasoning. ‘For Shi’is, the existence of the Imam is a necessary condition for human existence. Human society needs constant guidance. The presence of a leader or ruler is very significant for the continuation of a society. Without a leader, individual rights and duties cannot be realised and order will vanish from society. Thus, every man
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requires a leader or an Imam’ (Zulkifli 2013: 86). This means that, to converts, the teaching of the imamate is very reasonable. Most converts admit that reason’s stronger position in Shi’ism than in Sunnism also attracted them to embrace Shi’i Islam. They see that Shi’i Islam may offer its followers more opportunities and motivation to use reason to develop their knowledge (Zainuddin et al. 2000: 97-103). Therefore, the progressive development of knowledge, thought and philosophy has continued in the Shi‘i world until the present.

Another more progressive Shi‘i teaching is its view on the necessity of ijtihad (serious efforts to formulate religious law) in Ja‘fari jurisprudence. Mujtahid must exist in all ages to give guidance to Shi‘is in jurisprudential matters. Therefore, Shi‘i jurisprudence is considered much more progressive than that of the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi‘i, and Hanbali schools). Shi‘i converts also prove the superiority of this teaching by pointing to socio-historical realities in the Shi‘i world. In order to become a mujtahid, for instance, strict requirements must be met. Among others, one must have completed the traditional system of religious learning and have passed with distinction. The marja al-taqlid is selected based on a certain way of natural selection on the basis of the perception of prestige, moral conduct, and religious knowledgeability. This is the opposite of the perceived reality in Indonesian society where unqualified ulama and religious teachers surface who have insufficient knowledge, limited abilities, and inadequate educational accomplishments.

The emphasis on divine justice in the Shi‘i doctrine is another important attractive element for people to convert to Shi‘ism in Indonesia. Many find it can be used in the struggle to establish a just government and to replace an authoritarian regime like the New Order government. For them it is a notion exemplified by the Iranian revolution led by Khomeini, who they see as an Imam who managed to overthrow an oppressive regime. Imam Husayn’s martyrdom in his struggle against an oppressive regime is deeply rooted in the Shi‘i views on justice implementation. The Shi‘i model of resistance and opposition to tyranny and injustice is seen as more appealing than Sunni Islam, which accommodates tyrannical rulers. Conversion to Shi‘ism is thus an expression of protest against the political regime and the religious establishment. Converts embrace Shi‘ism because they find ‘the anti-government aspects of Shi‘ism and its struggle against oppression and
tyranny appealing’ (Nakash 1994: 45). In other words, Shi‘ism is seen as the religion of protest while Sunnism tends to legitimize oppressive political regimes.

This form of Islam as a unified system of Islamic belief and practice which the converts perceive as authentic and reasonable has manifested itself in the socio-historical reality of the Shi‘i world. In their eyes, this form of Islam should be examined and compared with the religious reality and the sociopolitical context of present-day Indonesian society. With its limited appreciation of reason and the emergence of unqualified Sunni religious authority, they do not see Sunnism as the ideal interpretation of Islam. For them, Shi‘ism provides the solution to sociopolitical problems and to the incompetence of Indonesia’s religious establishment. Shi‘ism also meets the spiritual and intellectual quest of these religious seekers.

Furthermore, Shi‘is see themselves as the chosen, in contrast to the Sunni majority. Although they acknowledge that Sunnis are Muslims, only Shi‘is are true believers. Their minority status and their claim as the chosen accords with their rejection of majority-opinion-based truth (Enayat 2005: 19) because they argue that only a number of people uphold the truth. In daily conversation related to conversion to Shi‘ism, Shi‘is in Indonesia frequently say: ‘Praise be to God, we are already Shi‘i’ by which they mean to express their high religious status, as they have embraced the authentic and reasonable form of Islam.

Conclusion

Conversion to Shi‘ism continues, albeit at a slow rate. The explanation above shows that fear for Indonesian Shi‘i teachers, intellectuals, and activists’ ‘Shi‘itization’ efforts is not based on any reliable fact. Unlike Jaffer’s study that demonstrated Shi‘i organizations’ strong impact on conversion to Shi‘ism in East Africa (2013), conversion to Shi‘ism in Indonesia is not the result of Shi‘i teachers, institutes and organizations’ missionary efforts but rather of the intellectual investigative endeavours of the religious seekers themselves.

This essay concludes that in conversion to Shi‘ism the individual factor is decisive, but always in combination with social and institutional factors and macro contexts. As an active response to anti-Shi‘i provocations and the widespread circulation of anti-Shi‘i reading
materials, religious seekers conduct a textual study of the Shi‘i sources available to them. Under the assistance, guidance, and influence of Shi‘i teachers as ‘significant others’, they finally discover Shi‘i Islam as an authentic and reasonable form of Islam. This micro level factor is supported by the meso level of the institutional factor that offers structural availability. The spread of Shi‘i literature and Shi‘i institutes and organizations, that compete not only with each other but also with the large number of Sunni institutes and organizations, offer accessible Shi‘i teachers to provide religious instruction and guidance. The interaction between religious seekers and significant others and the competition and cooperation between religious institutes and organizations is supported by the macro contextual factors of political development, the religious plurality of Indonesian society, and the plurality of religious authority in Muslim society. To sum up, active religious seekership with intellectual motivation is the determining factor in the conversion to Shi‘ism in Indonesia.

Bibliography


**Note**

1 Parts of this article have been written during my position as senior research fellow at the Centre for Civilisational Dialogue, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur (May-November 2012) to which I am grateful. Data have been taken from my PhD thesis which was published at the ANU E Press (2013) and from my research report in 2014.

2 The term ‘Wahhabi’ refers to a reformist Islamic movement founded by its Saudi founder, Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792) but members of the group seldom use the term. Sometimes it is called Salafism which has puritanical and legalistic characteristics.

3 For an account of the conversion to Shi’ism in Syria, see Khalid Sindawi (2009). ‘Shiite Turn in Syria’ in *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, 8, 82-107.


6 Some scholars view it as mere family dispute rather than sectarian violence. Jalaluddin Rakhmat, for instance, at first mentioned it as family dispute between Tajul
Muluk (Shi’i religious teacher) and his younger brother Rois (Sunni, ex-Shi’i follower) but later he admitted that it was a Sunni-Shi’i conflict. Many interrelated factors (ideological, economic, social, political) have contributed to the conflict and its consequence is so terrible that the Shi’i individuals and families are still forbidden to return to their village.

7 For anti-Shi’i activities in Indonesia, see Zulkifli (2013; 2014) and Formichi (2014).
10 Haidar Bagir is a Shi’i intellectual and the founder of Mizan Publishing House in Bandung, West Java and Endang Saifuddin Anshari (1938-1996) was a Muslim activist of da’wah movement at universities in Bandung and closely associated with DDII (Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia, Indonesian Islamic Missionary Council) and Persatuan Islam (Islamic Association), a strict reformist Muslim organization in Indonesia founded in 1923.
11 DDII was established in 1967 and closely associated with the reformist Muslim movement known for its very negative response to the development of Shi’ism.
12 Interview with Jalaluddin Rakhmat, 2 January 2003.
13 The prayer is called kumayl because it is believed to be transmitted by Imam Ali’s faithful companion, Kumayl bin Ziyad. It contains praise to God and the supplication of forgiveness, lamentations, remorse, and the admission of sins. Its message is so deep and intense that all those who recite it can hardly remain dry-eyed. During the recitation, all participants of the kumayl gathering collectively shed tears.
14 Marja al-taqlid means ‘source of emulation’ referring to the Grand Ayatollah with the highest authority to formulate legal decisions in Shi’i Islamic law. In the Ja’fari jurisprudence the Shi’is are divided into followers (muqallid) and independent legist (mujtahid). All Indonesian Shi’is are muqallid.
15 This can be found in the works of Indonesian Shi’i ustadhs and intellectuals. In Ali Umar Al-Habsyi’s book entitled Dua Pusaka Nabi SAW: Al-Qur’an dan Ablulhait, Kajian Islam Otentik Pasca Kenabian (Two Prophetic Heritages; The Quran and Ahl al-Bayt, A Study of Post-Prophetic Authentic Islam) he suggests that the widespread hadith on the Quran and Sunnah is not based on authoritative sources. He goes on to say: ‘What can be believed is that it was falsified for certain purposes’ (Al-Habsyi 2002: 348).
16 The basic tenets of Shi’ism include the Unity of God, Prophethood, Resurrection, imamate, and Divine Justice. The Shi’is share with Sunnis the first three tenets which are considered the fundamentals of religion while the other two tenets, imamate and Divine Justice, are fundamentals of denomination which set them apart from Sunnis.
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