

Local Expressions, Global Arenas: Pakistani Shia Pilgrims in the *Arba'een* pilgrimage

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Globalization has often been equated with secularizing trends across the world (Bruce 2002; Inglehart and Norris 2004). However, inadequate attention has been given to the ways in which religious people utilize global institutions, such as international tourism. More than 600 million tourists make religiously motivated journeys annually (Moufahim and Lichrou 2019; World Tourism Organization 2018). One of the biggest annual pilgrimages in the world is the *Arba'een* pilgrimage to Iraq for Shia Muslims, with a pre-pandemic attendance peak of 18 million¹. It is neither strictly observed like the Hajj in Mecca nor an individual experience like the El Camino in Western Europe. Contrary to expectations formed by sociological literature around pilgrimages, *Arba'een* exhibits intra-communal religious pluralism within the site without devolving into a secular tourist experience. *Arba'een* pilgrims are also likely to make repeat visits (Mujtaba Husein 2018). While Shias hold pilgrimage central to their identity since the 8th century (Haider 2011), 21st century pilgrimages have transformed from a one-in-a-lifetime event to a regular annual occurrence. This causes pilgrims to tweak local religious practice in a way that makes its global performance easier.

The challenge is that everyday performance of local religion may differ from the religion pilgrims witness at the global pilgrimage site, such as the use of drums during mourning rituals which mean different things to different Shia communities. This may create 'religion versus culture' dichotomy in the minds of pilgrims, where religion is seen as universal truth, whereas culture is seen as relative deviations (Roy 2010). For instance, Pakistani pilgrims prefer practices seen on Hajj over local practices once they return (Clingsmith, Khwaja, and Kremer 2009). In contrast, Shia mourning rituals have long, local histories in the subcontinent (Cole 1988; Jones 2011) making this religion-culture connection stronger. Pakistani Shia Muslims are numerically the second largest population of Shia Muslims in the world after Iran and yet operate as a minority at home (Rieck 2015). How do Pakistani Shias perform local religious rituals successfully in a sacred global space that contains pluralist expressions? I use two sites to investigate this central research question: the site of the ritual and the site of the pilgrimage space in Iraq.

This project has two methodological approaches to data collection: pilgrim interviews and ethnographic observation. As a Shia Muslim residing in Islamabad, I have the opportunity to observe an annual Shia mourning period with local communities in Islamabad, lasting 50 – 70 days from July to September 2022, where I will observe mourning rituals and perform them myself. Additionally, I will recruit a cohort of approximately 30 Shia Muslims who will potentially perform the 2022 *Arba'een* pilgrimage. I will conduct semi-structured in-depth interviews before and after the pilgrimage, eliciting the structures of meaning around the pilgrimage experience (Pugh 2013). Pilgrims will also be asked to document their experiences throughout the pilgrimage and present that data to me upon their return from the pilgrimage, mainly through pictures and videos which evoke feelings around experiences (Harper 2002). Given resources and favorable travel conditions, I intend to perform the pilgrimage myself in September 2022 to add ethnographic observation of the pilgrimage site and its impact on religious practices.

My research has two major implications for research on sociology of religion. On a theoretical level, the project investigates the nature of religious practice in a globalized world, and the ways in which people include global ideas and space in their regular, local practice. While most literature focuses on globalization as a vehicle for secularization or religious reconstruction (Beyer 2006; Inglehart 2018), this project focuses on religious people who utilize global institutions to observe religiosity. On an empirical level, it will show the ways in which Pakistani Shia Muslims assert or accommodate their local religious expression vis-à-vis a global religious community. In my initial research, pilgrims were aware of other religious practices, accepted them as valid but never desired to replicate or adapt them as practices. This project will show how Pakistan Shia Muslims negotiate their place and rituals on a national and transnational level.

¹ <https://en.irna.ir/news/83522737/Arbaeen-pilgrims-count-hits-18-million>

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