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Pilgrimage and its Dual Functions in Iranian Shiism

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Salvation is the main concern not only for theistic religions but also for atheistic ones, therefore, all of them try to offer doctrines for achieving both salvation and redemption in this world or in another world. Followers of the Twelver Shiism strongly believe in salvation through the *Imam*. *Imamat* and *Imam*, do not just refer to a special person, more than that, they involve a spiritual / worldly doctrine toward a complete and multilateral salvation, and also socio-political leadership. One of the important parts of this doctrine that involves spiritual / worldly salvation is intercession via religious rituals like praying, pilgrimage, mourning and so on.

This article considers the impacts of these dual functions of Shiite *Imams* on the Shiites' viewpoint about pilgrimage in the framework of social constructionism as a suitable case study in the sociology of religion. According to the Shiite's belief system, *Imams* and some of their offspring are divinely chosen people who endured many sufferings in the path of Allah. Moreover, they own the divine knowledge which allows them to lead society in a correct way. They are, therefore, worthy of leadership; they also have spiritual intercession in their power. This meaning system has constructed a strong belief and behaviour with a double face: Shiites expect to fulfil, (through their *Imams* and pilgrimage), their immaterial and material wishes simultaneously - Spiritual prayer, demand for intercession in the hereafter, vows (as deals), and prayers for absolute material wishes all come together inseparably in pilgrimage.

Key Words: pilgrimage, Shiite, intercession, worldly / spiritual salvation, social constructionism

Introduction

According to Peter Berger's viewpoint regarding social constructionism, one of the most important aspects of sociological studies, is to consider social reality and the process of meaning construction. Reality has a societal dimension which is constantly being constructed within a meaning context. Actually, the human needs this meaning and context. One of the most important contexts in social life is religion, which gives meaning to behaviour, identity, language, and customs (Berger, 1976), but religion is not merely a social reality, it is also a meaning context in which many human activities are constructed according its aspects.

Shiism (as an Islamic cult) can not be regarded merely as a religion or a worship ritual but it is a context in which micro and macro interactions, identity, behaviour, rituals and so on are constructed within its meaning context.

The vital concept in this system is the key notion of *Imamat* and *Velayat*. Without these concepts, *Shiism* has neither existence nor basic distinction from other Islamic cults. This concept creates a vast meaning

system in which all of Shiite actions (thoughts, identity, socio-political behaviours, language, rituals etc.) are constructed via this vital main source.

Given this concept, the author (with a focus on the concept of pilgrimage, as an important ritual in *Shiism*) seeks to answer the following questions:

- According to the core meaning context in Shiism, what are the Iranian Shiites' main motivations for pilgrimage (*ziarat*)?
- How can the concept of *Imamat* construct pilgrimage as a religious ritual)?
- On the basis of *Imamat*, how is pilgrimage regarded as having dual functions?
- How and on the basis of what actions, is pilgrimage carried out as a ritual?

Thus, the author examines this pivotal assumption that the dual inseparable material-spiritual functions of *Imamat* as the main identifying concept in Shiism, have turned the meaning of pilgrimage from a merely religious ritual to a rational-spiritual goal-oriented action among the Shiites.

The author tries to examine pilgrimage as a social action and reality by using social constructivism as an analytical framework, and tries to trace how pilgrimage is constructed in the Shiite signification system and what motivations have formed it.

Social Constructionism

Social constructionism is part of the sociology of knowledge, whose main question is knowledge of reality, and, in fact, analysis of the social construction of reality. Sociology of knowledge consists of studying the relations between knowledge and society, and research into the relations of ideas (as intellectual examples, used for explanation and interpretation of the world) and the groups and communities, which includes those who have those ideas (Ashtiani, 2005).

Based on this view, reality is produced by society, and the aim of sociology of knowledge is to study the process through which this happens; knowing reality without judging its environment, and studying the way reality is constructed in society. In other words, sociology of knowledge is aimed at investigating and knowing the relationship between thought and its social context, and also the objective determination of this thought, or in Scheler's words: 'discovering the relation between thought and the structural reality of thought' (Berger, 1997:30).

Constructionism, with its serious emphasis on the problem of meaning, is a phenomenological, pragmatic, and relativistic, albeit critical attempt to look at social and political phenomena and events and analyse them. Based on this view, we must have a critical approach to the ways we understand ourselves and our environment; in fact, it is necessary to have an unprejudiced regard toward the environment and the world. Constructionism invites us to doubt the *a priori* assumptions we have with respect to the world and (social) phenomena (Burr, 1995: 12).

Perhaps, the first point about constructionism is that it asks us to doubt and give up all of our definite assumptions in looking at social phenomena; in other words, to doubt the methods by which the world makes itself manifest to us. This means that the classifications we have made to understand the world might not necessarily correspond to real classifications. For instance, just because we think music is either classical music or pop music, does not mean that we should assume that music, in its essence, must be divided into this dichotomy. (ibid, 16).

Hence, one of the main assumptions of social constructionism is that, since the ways of understanding have been historically and culturally constructed in a relative way, and since this fact has, for centuries, caused humans to believe they are closer to the source of truth than those who do not own these ways (and this very fact is the basis for defining 'us' and 'others'), social phenomena should be regarded in a different and critical manner, and should not be accepted as merely natural and obvious facts which occur in societies. Based on this viewpoint, there are no obvious social matters, and all understanding and truth is relative and unevaluable. (Lock, 2000:87)

Constructionism totally rejects the idea that our knowledge is a direct understanding of reality. Instead, it believes in the principle that we ourselves construct reality (as society or culture). Therefore, we have to accept the historical and cultural relativity of all forms of knowledge. There are no objective facts in this view; all forms of knowledge are the result of our perspective toward the world. Thus, constructionism also rejects the subjectivist viewpoint which is based on the pure regard of the subject to phenomena and to social reality (Williams, 2009: 79)

In fact, the constructionist attempts at emphasising an important constructionist principle: the constructs (definitions, ideas, values, beliefs) and meanings are inevitably inseparable from social conditions (categories, facts, forms, social structures) (Vander, 2002:8). There is another important principle which should also be remembered: that understanding the entanglement of meanings and their relations to collective acts is more important than identifying meanings.

In this paper, the main concept which is studied is the concept of pilgrimage, as a collective act, which constructs an important part of the collective and objective life and reality of the Shiites. As a social reality and action in Shiism, pilgrimage is part of everyday life that its main motives lie in the signification system fed directly by religion. For understanding it, we should deal with investigating the concepts that have caused the formation and continuation of this identity context and its consequent actions. The main concept is *Imamat* which is the constructing keyword of Shiite identity and action. but what does *Imamat* mean?

Imamat in Shiism

The concept of *Imamat* is the main foundation of constructing identity, action and speech in Shiism. Without *Imamat*, Shiism has no identity or distinctive dimension from other Islamic cults (Motahari, 2000). *Imamat* is not merely a keyword but a signification system and the constructing context of action which is combined of two apparently contradicting dimensions, namely, world and eternity. In fact, we cannot consider merely a spiritual and mystic meaning for Shiite *Imam* because political, economic and social dimensions of *Imamat* are of importance. These two dimensions have merged in a way that the concept of *Imamat* will lose its meaning without one of them. (MakaremShirazi, 1995)

An *Imam* is a spiritual and divine leader; a perfect sample of a chosen human being, a symbol of faith, an innocent man and an incarnation of divine knowledge. Their presence is a sign for proving the existence of God because they are created before every creature and they are created of light (Koleini, 1996). The survival of the universe is dependent on their existence on the earth. Even the creation of the entire universe is for them (Majlesi, 1991) The Almighty has created them from his light thus they are the sign and proof of God on earth and his guiding light (ibid). They are threads connecting earth and heaven and mediating the divine blessings to come down. Thus, without one of them on earth, the earth will swallow all of its inhabitants. At the same time as being a perfect example of spirituality and mysticism, this person is the political leader of Islamic society (Ayub, 1978). He organises the economic affairs of Muslims and is their just arbitrator.

The starting point of Shiism as a distinct sect from Sunni was a political dispute. From the Shiite viewpoint, the Prophet Muhammad's successor and governor of Islamic society is a person chosen by God and the prophet. *Ali Ibn-Talib* and his sons are the prophet's successors because Muhammad introduced them explicitly. The leader of Islamic society should be innocent like Muhammad and they are the successors. From the Sunni viewpoint, although the prophet had emphasized his deep friendship with Ali, he never designated him as successor. In fact, the prophet was silent about his succession and assigned it to Muslims' council and their choice. Thus, even though the ruler of Islamic society should act according to Islamic teachings and he should be a good Muslim, his innocence is not a prerequisite. This basic dispute

between Sunnis and Shias has remained unsolved so far.

Thus the concept of *Imamat* is so important for the Shiites that they believe without *Imamat*, the faith of Muslims is not complete. Even if someone is Muslim and professes the prophecy of Muhammad, if s/he does not accept *Imamat*, s/he will never achieve salvation, and their faith is imperfect. The eighth *Imam* of Shiites, Imam Reza, said:

God is worshiped and understood correctly through us; without us God will never be worshiped and understood (Ameli, 1985:254).

Therefore, realization of salvation in this and that world is only possible through recourse to *Imams* and using their light and intercession. In Shiism, this is the reason for recourse - in order to achieve salvation . Pilgrimage is one of the most important actions that the Shiites carry out for recourse and this is closely linked to enjoying *Imams'* intercession.

Intercession and recourse (Shaf'atvaTawasol)

Belief in intercession is one of principles for Shiite attitude and identity. It is a binding part of belief about which *Imam* Sadegh says:

Whoever denies these three things is not one of us: ascension of Prophet Muhammad, questions of grave and intercession (Sobhani, 2014:39).

Intercession, is a shortcut safe way for obtaining divine blessing and the *Imam* is the guarantee of this process. As *Imam* is the divine rope for reaching heaven and Allah, Shiites recourse to this rope in order to get salvation. But, we should pay attention to this point that the concept of salvation like the very concept of *Imamat* has two apparently paradoxical dimensions: On the one hand, it is an attempt for salvation in the other world and on the other; it has a quite material function for satisfying needs and material demands. These demands are usually some needs whose satisfaction is impossible on the basis of existing rational systems, or they are too unexpected; such as curing difficult diseases, finding a missing person, interception, and other needs, that their realisation is only possible by a supernatural power. The *Imam* has such a power.

The problem is that these two paradoxical dimensions can never been imagined separately. *Imam* is the last hope and way of salvation. In the recourse prayer of

pilgrimage letter, in a prayer whose audiences are the Prophet Muhammad and his offspring, it is said:

We have recourse to you as the prestigious person before God, and we want you to do intercession and you satisfy our demands. Please do intercession for us before God. Due to my sincere love for you, I hope God save me through you. Thus be my hope before God (Ghomi, 1900).

Given the important position of *Imamat* and *Velayat* (devotion and belief in the *Imamat*) in Shiism, we can examine different aspects of pilgrimage as a solution for connecting to the divine sources of blessing and the actions carried out in this ceremony by raising this question: Why and how do Shiites do pilgrimage?

Savab (spiritual reward) and Pilgrimage

One of the most important motivations of Shiites for pilgrimage is enjoying its *Savab* (reward). *Savab* is a spiritual reward that belongs to the pilgrim, a reward that is considered as a supply for the hard moments of doomsday and the other world.

About the reward of pilgrimage, *Imam* Reza says:

The reward of pilgrimage of my tomb in Mashhad (Iran) is equal to one thousand hajes (Majlesi, 1991:209).

Imam Sadeq says:

The person who pilgrims Hussein's tomb in Karbala is like a person who visits God in his heaven (Ebngholooyeh, 2002:151).

The most famous reward is the promise of forgiving all sins of the pilgrim.

Whoever pilgrims Hussein by knowing his velayat, the least reward will be the forgiveness of all sins in past and future (Ameli, 1985:319).

The promised rewards for pilgrimage of Shiite *Imams* include:

- sin forgiveness,
- needs satisfaction,
- the reward of one thousand haj,
- entering paradise before others,
- the reward of one thousand martyrs,
- the reward of one thousand handouts to the poor,
- reward of jihad and martyrdom for God, and
- reward of emancipating one thousand slaves.

Behind the concept of *Savab* is a rational exchange. It is rational because it is based on a kind of calculating means and aims, and it is an attempt for choosing the best solution in order to secure the best result.

In Shiite hadiths, the *Imam* encourages Shiites to visit his tomb on pilgrimage and remember him. This is a way for reproducing the signification system based on legitimacy, innocence and oppression of the *Imam*. Meanwhile the practitioner is promised by not only in metaphysical ways but also worldly ones with increased blessings and earning. On the other hand, the practitioner is indebted, an important part of his identity and signification system, to these concepts; the lack of these concepts causes serious identity crisis for him. Besides, belief in the *Imam* and his supernatural powers creates a kind of psychological security which results from metaphysical functions through *Imam* and his guarantee, that acts as a kind of spiritual assurance. The *Imam* and his sons are regarded as a facilitating solution, and the lack of such a security can challenge one's identity and even creates a psychological crisis.

In addition to the concept of *Savab*, another concept is raised which is pilgrimage virtue (*Fazilate Ziarat*). In fact, pilgrimage virtue is a concept beyond reward and *Savab*. Pilgrimage virtue is based on superiority of an individual to others who have been deprived of pilgrimage. Thus, we can say that the virtuous actions of pilgrimage not only provides *Savab*, but also gives the practitioner a spiritual superiority. For example, praying provides *Savab* and abandoning it contains punishment but praying in first minutes gives priority to the practitioner and upgrades his spiritual level. The virtue of night prayer compared to day prayer is higher. Also according to a hadith cited from the Prophet Muhammad, everyone who dies in the route towards Hussein's tomb has the virtue of martyrs.

Pilgrimage Trip for Mourning

Mourning is one of the main religious rituals of Shiism which results from a paradoxical syntagmatic of two pivotal concepts in the Shia signification system, namely *Imamat* and being oppressed. On the one hand, the *Imam* is the son of the Prophet Muhammad, an innocent person chosen by God for worldly and spiritual leadership of society, enjoying metaphysical powers for undertaking supernatural affairs and miracles, but at the same time, they are an oppressed person.

One of the most obvious examples is Ali Ibn-Abilib who is the symbol of physical power, chastity, piousness, wisdom, tact and knowledge. But no one can imagine him without another feature. He was oppressed. Thus, not only his right for leadership was taken over but he also had a life full of suffering. He saw the tragic death of his wife, and finally he was killed while praying in a mosque without being known as a high spiritual personality. Several other personalities are known as symbols of oppression: Ali Ibn-Talib, Hussein Ibn-Ali, Abbas Ibn-Ali (who was not *Imam* but had a sacred position like *Imam*) and Fatima Bint-Muhammad. These are the most mourned for individuals in Shiism. The most serious pilgrimage trip is done to Karbala where people mourn for *Imam* Hussein, his family and comrades.

Shiites' special attention to *Ashura* and mourning is due to their respect for the sacred and the sublime (*Gisele*) which is manifest in Hussein, his family and comrades. Mourning is one of the ways of expressing their love for them and a way of reproducing a recognition for their sacredness. This is one of the main channels for spiritual intercession and recourse to Allah when one is seeking to satisfy their needs (Tabatabae, 2010, 256). Thus, we can say that the pilgrimage of Hussein and mourning for him is the main factor for creating the greatest gathering of Shiites in the world; a social reality which is a value-oriented habit due to social learning processes and religious socialization in the Shiite signification system. This repetitious and sacred action is one of the most serious Shiite religious rituals, that plays a crucial role in reproduction and reinforcement of social identity, collective awareness, internal coherence and collective memory for Shiites.

Mourning, is in fact a kind of commemoration for the sufferings of Prophet Muhammad's family and it is regarded as a form of social reform for preserving Islam. It involves Shiites' acknowledgement for the actions of these people and is an attempt to preserve their memory. This remembrance that has many spiritual rewards, purifies the spirit. It is accompanied by the undertaking of tasks and hitting ones' body. Beside that, attendance at *Ashura* in Karbala is regarded as declaring a preparedness for continuing the *Imam's* path to combat the enemies of Islam and the *Imamat*. It also reproduces the principle of custodianship which will be discussed later.

Pilgrimage and Luck

For Shiites, a pilgrimage journey is not always accompanied by mourning and crying, but in many cases, it is done for luck and blessing. These trips which are mainly done in Iran are not for mourning but for happiness and luck.

On the basis of Iranian religious tradition, many young couples who have started their life, visit religious places on their honeymoon; places like Mashhad for pilgrimage of *Imam* Reza's tomb or Mecca for pilgrimage of Muhammad's tomb, or other *Imams* in *Baghi'* cemetery. For Shiites, this trip blesses their life and prevents disasters. From this perspective, metaphysics has a determined function which is guaranteed by the *Imam's* will. Beginning a new part of life with a pilgrimage trip means refreshing ones' deal with the *Imam* and demands a blessing from him for a new life. It is a repeated practice that has become an Iranian tradition, a function based on two aspects of pilgrimage: its institutional aspect results from its repetition that has turned it into an established tradition, which is justified by its spiritual reward and virtue.

Language of Pilgrimage

From a constructivist perspective, language is not only an important instrument for communication but also a way for constructing human inner experiences which previously existed (Lock, 2011). In fact, language is the very viewpoint from which we view the world, therefore, recognizing and understanding viewpoints and actions depends on recognizing language, given its context and historicity, because language and meaning are identified only in a relational process. From a social constructivist approach, the best method for understanding religion is to examine discursive-linguistic exchanges and religious meaning interactions in the social network that people and different communities are connected through (Turner, 1991).

Thus, for investigating the concept of pilgrimage as a social action in Shiism, we should deal with the key concepts and the beliefs yielded by them. For this purpose, one of the best solutions for understanding key concepts containing Shiite meaning and identity is to examine the concept of pilgrimage-letters (*Ziaratnameh*) of *Imams* and their offspring (*Imamazadehs*).

Pilgrimage-letters are important because they contain the main concepts that represent the borders of Shiite identity within the framework of the faith's key concepts. By studying the text of many pilgrimage-letters, we can find out their conceptual similarities which is an emphasis on reproducing and reviving Shiite distinction lines. Thus, we can claim that the main basis of pilgrimage-letters is their explicit identity-knowledge distinction which is expressed in key concepts and words.

By distinction lines or distinctiveness, I mean an emphasis on serious differences expressed by specific concepts; concepts that enjoy a strong meaning. Specifically these differences are the distinction between supernatural people and normal ones that does not necessarily culminate in constructing the other in terms of identity.

There is an *Imam* on the one side of this distinction line who has supernatural features. Thus, a pilgrimage-letter always begins by saluting and respecting him and expressing his various sublime characteristics. For example, in the pilgrimage-letter '*Jame'ekabireh*', representation of this kind of superiority is done by using specific concepts. It says:

Salute to you the family of prophecy, the place of angels' descent and divine oracle, the store of divine blessing and knowledge, the chief of God's worshippers, the superior example of God's invitation to the right path.

*Salute to you the paths of guidance and salvation, the bright lights at the heart of darkness, the God's reasons for people of world and eternity (Ghomi, *Jame'ekabireh*).*

There is no doubt for a Shiite that the *Imam* is a person with these features, and this causes the construction of a distinction line based on a vertical relationship of disciple-mentor between an *Imam* and Shiites. The *Imam*, as the superior person before God and a Shiite (as a person proud of following the *Imam's* path), complete each other, and the Shiite approaches divine blessing through the *Imam*. Therefore, the main solution for receiving divine oracle and blessing and salvation in the world and thus, eternity, are confirming the legitimacy of *Imams* and their leadership. It is said that:

I acknowledge that God is one (monotheism), Muhammad is the chosen prophet sent by God for overcoming other religions. I acknowledge that you are guiding Imams, innocent guided,

*pious aide of God, honest and chosen saved by God. God chose you for him and approved you by his soul and gave you his power. He designated you as his successor and proof and a clear sign of his existence on earth... and he purified you (Ghomi, *Zeyara Ashura*).*

I testify that whatever you regard as truth, I will regard it as truth too, and whatever you regard as false, I will regard it as false too. I am your follower and I acknowledge your divine right. I seek asylum and I am waiting for your command and I will act according to it (ibid)

Another part of this distinction-making on which Shiite identity construction is formed is the distinction between self and other. In fact, in this distinction, the *Imam* and his followers are placed on one side and his enemies are placed on the other. An important part of Shiite linguistic concepts is the reproduction of this distinction, which has two aspects: love for the chosen one and hate against his enemies; in other words, love for Muhammad and his family and hate against their enemies. This Shiite key concept is called '*Tavala and Tabara*'. *Tavala* and *Tabara* is not only one of the key concepts in Shiite religious and social literature but also one of the religious sub-principles (*Foru'-e-din*), and thus, an important instrument for the realisation of real faith which is based on the paradox of love and hate in the one concept.

In one Shiite interpretation, it is said:

*I sacrifice my father, mother, family, wealth and relatives for you. God witnesses that I believe in what you believe and your enemy is my enemy. I love your lovers. I agree with those in peace with you and I fight against those who are against you (Ghomi, *Ja'mekabireh*)*

We can say that the relational reproduction of language and meaning is the most important event that happens during pilgrimage, whether closely or remotely. This is evident in studying pilgrimage-letters, because the main approach in them is based on explaining Shiite identity lines and reproducing the signification system in which love and hate are not separable. Every day of the week belongs to specific *Imams*. For example, Monday belongs to *Imam Hasan* and *Imam Hussein* and, thus, the special pilgrimage-letter of those *Imams* should be read on these days; a pilgrimage-letter is full of key concepts representing the Shiite signification context that prevents followers from forgetting or undermining their faith. Emphasizing this distinction always contains a kind of dramatic affection for the *Imams* which is an inseparable part of the Shiites'

motivation for pilgrimage and seeking blessing from the *Imam* or his sons. Particularly among Iranian Shiites, this affection is very obvious; they use the term '*Pabus*' (kissing *Imam's* foot) for pilgrimage; a term which is beyond '*Dastbus*' (kissing *Imam's* hand) indicating a kind of flattery. This language contains affection, courtesy and confession in relation to the divine position of *Imam*.

But what do the Shiites do during pilgrimage in order to realise the dual internalised functions of pilgrimage?

Prayer (*Do'ava Sana*)

As we point out in the language of pilgrimage, the first action in pilgrimage is to pray. This prayer which begins by reading pilgrimage-letters and paying respect for the *Imam* or *Imamzadeh* should be carried out with clean clothes and spiritual concentration. Usually, a prayer of pilgrimage is then read and its reward is dedicated to the *Imam*. Reading the Quran is also done. After these rituals, a demand or wish is raised and the pilgrim expects the *Imam* to satisfy it through his divine power.

Spiritual Petition (*'arizeh*)

Petition writing is a serious actions by the Shiites during pilgrimage. A petition is a demand written to a senior person who will deal with it (Dehkhoda, 1998). We can consider petition-writing as a specific way of recourse during which the wishful person writes their demand on a piece of paper and throws it in the *Imam's Zarih* (the metal structure over the *Imam's* tomb). This is done with the expectation that the *Imam* will satisfy the wish. One of the most common ways of petition-writing is carried out in Jamkaran Mosque near Qom. Jamkaran Mosque is one of the important places that Shiites visit in order to refresh their deal with the twelfth *Imam* (Mahdi). The twelfth *Imam* (Mahdi) is regarded as the last living *Imam* who will emancipate humanity. Because he does not have a tomb, the Shiites go to Jamkaran Mosque to raise their demands. One of the most prevalent ways for expressing demands to the Absent *Imam* is petition-writing and throwing these in a well in the mosque. Shiites believe that the inner stream of water will take the petition to the *Imam* who will consider them.

Dakhil (knot)

Beside petition-writing, another way for recourse is to fasten knots (*dakhil*). A *Dakhil* is a green piece of cloth or a metal lock which is fastened by the wisher to the

Imam or *Imamzadeh's Zarih*. A *Dakhil* is a symbol of a great knot or trouble in the wisher's life which should be solved by the *Imam's* special attention. The most important place to which the Iranian, Pakistani and Afghani Shiites fasten *Dakhil* is a place called '*Panjare Fulad*' (steel window), near *Imam Reza's* tomb in Mashhad, Iran. The wisher fastens a piece of cloth to the window for a while (usually several days) and begs the *Imam* with prayer and cries to satisfy his / her demand. This function is mainly undertaken for petitions to cure serious diseases.

Dakhil can be regarded as a kind of symbol or a construct of an existing belief system; a symbol that plays an important role in constructing religious functions, even social ones. Thus, religious symbols are social constructs that interact with social construction processes. In fact, they are understandable only when considered in the context of the existing social system (Durkheim, 2010).

Visiting Tombs (*Bastneshini*)

Another common way of recourse to *Imams* or their offspring is carried out through pilgrimage and attendance at their tombs (*Bastneshini*). Like other ways of recourse, what motivates the wisher for *Bastneshini* is his / her despair regarding the ordinary ways for solving their material or spiritual troubles. The wisher sits in the tomb with hope and trust in the innocent *Imam* so that their divine blessing will include him / her. Sometimes *Bastneshini* is carried out by mystics in specific pilgrimage places but they are rare compared to the common pilgrims.

Conclusion

Imamat, as the most important concept in the Shiite belief system, has both material and spiritual dimensions and all of Shiite political, societal and religious actions, directly derive from this meaning system. Pilgrimage as one of the most important rituals in Shiite and may be considered as a self-evident spiritual issue from a Shiite viewpoint, but from the viewpoint of social constructionism it is a social reality that has a special contextual meaning, having been constructed by society. So, from this point of view, pilgrimage is the divinely linked action which directly originates from belief in the importance of the *Imamat* as a holy path toward salvation; the *Imam*, is an extraordinary person with paradoxical traits. He is a mystic and pious person, who sits on (or should sit on) the throne.

We should note that the foundation of this meaning system on the one hand, is based on believing in the natural weakness of humans, and on the other hand is related to believing in the holy and noble position of the *Imam*, not only in society but also in the universe.

The religious actioner, in accessing the blessings of the supernatural world, should resort to the *Imam* as a guaranteed connection between earth and heaven, but this is not the whole of story. Actually, pilgrimage has two sides: through the *Ziyara* (pilgrimage) the mutual desires both of the *Imam* and the pilgrims have been answered. On the one hand, the survival of the *Imamat*, (both political and spiritual), and the related meaning system needs to continuously be reproduced via rituals like mourning for the *Imam* or pilgrimage and recourse.

For pilgrims, they (in an undoubtable manner) believe in the functions of the *Imam*, therefore, they try to achieve salvation and redemption in both the physical and spiritual world via the *Imam*. This is in fact the most important aspect of pilgrimage in Shiite - the construction of a personal and plural identity and hope.

But, the main question remains: how has the dual function of pilgrimage been constructed? The meaning system of Shiites has a vertical sense. In this system, Allah locates above all creation (as the creator); *Imams* are true intercessors (between the creator and creatures). The functions of the *Imam*, are not limited to the spiritual dimensions, they also include material and worldly aspects. This means that from the Shiite viewpoint, *Imam* is defined as a path toward salvation (in both worlds) and intercession to him is one of the most reliable ways towards salvation. Pilgrimage, therefore, is a manner of recourse, not only for spiritual salvation, but also for fulfilling mundane demands. Because the *Imam* has dual functions (spiritual and secular), this is a reality into which has been internalised the individual and common life of Shiites and all activities are constructed according to this dominant meaning system.

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