

Cultural Significance of Votive Offering during Muharram and its relationship with Local Culture



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FORMAL DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this is my own work without anyone else help except those mentioned here. This work has not been submitted or published for any degree or examination in any other university in identical or similar shape. All the other sources used in this work have been mentioned as complete references.

Kanwal Batool

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my family, specially my belated father, *Akhtar Hussain*, who had been the source of inspiration and had given me strength and continuously provided me with moral, spiritual, emotional and financial support.

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1) Introduction

Religion as a social institution, with addition to its function of providing meta-physical solutions to the never-ending pursuit of human thoughts pertaining to supernatural, the purpose of one's existence, or inquiries related to cosmogony that deals with the supernatural conceptions of the origins of the universe (Woolfson, 1979) , has always been a consoling and optimistic institute, which provides coping method for those who are in trouble or are aspiring fateful events in their personal lives mostly. People find comfort and hope in religious practices that helps them to deal with adverse circumstances in their private lives (Pargament, 1997). Rather religion plays a dominant role at affecting the behaviours of those who are faithful to this institution. Certain wish-fulfilments, desires and aspirations in life motivates an individual to perform votive offering with a strong faith and belief. These desires potentially range from various material short comings in personal life to the desire for a child after marriage. Anything which troubles religious people or aspires for abundance or are looking for a relief of any sort and moreover they are staunch believer of religious votive, clearly channels this practice to deliver themselves from the misery or to provide them with wish fulfilment.

Votive denotes certain material objects that signifies an association of a human with divine that connotes appreciation or expectation after it is devoted to a deity or multiple deities. Such an object can vary in its size and function, depending on the ontology of the offering (Weinryb, 2016). Weinryb also states votive offering to be materialization of human sentiments. Votive offerings are executed to symbolise through material objects the desires, hopes, dreams and anxieties of a devotee or aspirant within the complex framework of any religion. It acts like a ritualistic contract between the divine deity and the devotee and represents intimacy between these two parties.

The word votive itself originates from late 16th century Latin word '*votivus*' which in its original sense means '*Expressing a desire*'. Later, the word got

associated with the meaning of ‘*an object offered in fulfilment of a vow.*’ Vow hereby means *a solemn promise to do a specified thing.*

Votive practice distinguishes itself from other popular religious rituals in a society, based on the circumstantial conditions of the performer of the votive itself. This practice is not a compulsion or is not to be the part of general religious routine. Rather it is situational and is an attempt by an individual to ask for a personal favour from the supernatural to fulfil certain desire that the performer aspires for. (O'Toole, 2005)

Votive offering involves a peculiar pattern of behaviours that is to be followed by the performer of votive. This pattern is specific for one kind of a votive offering only. Votive associates with itself certain classified characteristics that are exclusive in nature, yet the general purpose or objective of the practice remains the same throughout the cultures and religions, that is of fulfilment of a wish or desire. It is hereby necessary that in order to understand deeply the ontology of the votive, we must dissect the practice itself. For a physical contemplation of votive performance, it is important to understand the elements involved in such a practice.

This thesis has compelled me to understand the components involved in this practice. An in-depth assessment of votive, as a customised practice, and various literature reviews led me to conclude that votive offering comprises of basically *three* components. First and most importantly, the offering involves a sacred **object** that is related to the type of vow a person is going to commit to. Secondly, most of the times, there is this background **story** or historical infamous event that relates to that specific vow. Thirdly, there is this wishful desire to be fulfilled by the party that needs a relief from some kind of a trouble or desires a **wish** fulfilment. These three are the main components around which all the votive offerings revolve.

Although it is not necessary that a background story is involved in all the votive performances, but as far my thesis is concerned, votive offering during Muharram, in Shia sect of Islam, relates with itself a historical occurrence which

indirectly complements the votive offering. Take for example the aspirants of a married couple who are unable to conceive a child. The votive offering relates to the incident of Karbala, where Imam Husain witnessed death of his infant son Ali Asghar. I would be talking about these Muharram specific historical events in detail in the later chapters. But for now, it is important to understand the historical association for the sake of comprehending the conception of votive offering.

Other two components of votive, i.e. Object and Wish fulfilment are mandatory and without which this practice loses its identity. Objects are often found on some ancient archaeological sites such as the Egyptian civilisation. These objects are associated by archaeologists with votive performances. (Dreyer, 1986) Hence, this substantially signifies the importance of a physical object in offering a votive to receive a supernatural favour. Sometimes, religious people only want to please their supernatural deity and do not wish for anything in return. The purpose of such offering is usually to build up a strong bond with the deity. This practice comes under the label of ritual mostly. For instance, practicing animal sacrifice during one of the Muslims' Eid celebrations signifies the adherence and conformity of the faithful followers of Islam towards God. Some literatures have categorised this ritual activity as a votive practice also, but considering the *semantics* of the word *votive* we realise that it involves vow or a promise, and a promise implies condition, i.e. if a person receives something that he/she desires for then they would do something in return. Therefore, one of the misunderstanding in the literature that I have reviewed considered common ritual practices of a religion as votive practices, whereas, my assessment specifies votive to be a transaction in terms of a relief for the votive performer in return of a specific behavioural pattern, that involves an object.

We can state hereby that votive is different from regular rituals that are disciplinary in nature. One can say that a normal prayer is also a way for religious people to get their desires and wishes fulfilled, but votive being an atypical religious practice distinct itself with its main objective or purpose of this ritual type performance to be basically of gaining a favour from the

metaphysical or supernatural realm that involves an object. These offerings to supernatural are made mostly to fulfil certain needs of the faithful party or for healing purposes. The objective of this offering is to please the supernatural entity to gain a personal benefit. Mostly the supernatural entities, gets pleased with animal sacrifice, self-sacrifice of any sort, like not eating or talking for a certain period of time or helping a poor person. (Peter, 1983). In the following section, we would be discussing about the history of the votive practices in detail. This would further crystalize our concepts of Votive performances, in historical context.

1.1) History

In the ancient times, superstitions and animism as a religious type, prevailed across the cultures. People were deeply involved on personal and social level with the supernatural related rituals, offerings, and magic or sorcery. (Eck, 2005) It is also believed by some anthropologists that the idea of sacrifice or pleasing the supernatural originates from the primitive practice of hunting. According to Walter Burket, the ritualistic sacrifice of the livestock, is possibly the remanences of pre-Neolithic communities that are mostly associated with hunting and gathering communities. (Burket, 1983). Therefore, these superstitious beliefs come close in nature with votive offerings of modern times. In Europe, votive deposits are known from as early as the Neolithic, with polished axe hoards, reaching a peak in the late Bronze Age.



Bronze animal statuettes from Olympia, votive offerings, 8th–7th century BC.

A votive offering was considered to be a gift to a god. It was believed that anything dedicated by a mortal became property of a god, which was retained within the god's Temenos (sacred wall established around the perimeter of a sanctuary) and became a votive offering by the admirer of that deity (Whitley, 2001). This type of giving, particularly in ancient Greek society, was not based completely on private devotion, but it was an extremely public act that demanded some form of public recognition. These offerings were not supposed to be always of little objects, rather the bulging archaeological evidence suggests that after winning battles in seas, entire captured fleets of the battle ships belonging to the enemies were subsequently dedicated by the conquerors as an offering of thanks to the god. Since the time of the Archaics, the objects used as votive offering were carved with the dedicator's name.

A saying by Diogenes of Sinope as quoted by Diogenes Laërtius, indicates the high level of votive offering in Ancient Greece: When someone expressed astonishment at the votive offerings in Samothrace, his (Diogenes) comment was, 'There would have been far more, if those who were not saved had set up offerings.' (Laërtius)

With this retrospective scenario, where primitive people dedicated an object to the God or gods for the purpose of pleasing the supernatural deities, the idea of personal votive offering originates. Some of the early modern religions like Buddhism and Jainism also comprise of such practices. Buddhism embraces the practice of votive offering, where the devotees dedicate a tiny clay tablet also known as 'Terracotta tablets' that inculcates images of Buddha and also some sacred text. They are placed at Buddhist sacred sites by the devotees usually during their pilgrimage. These votive offerings are attributed as a token of appreciation or as souvenirs. (Walter, 2020). In retrospective context, these tablets that are votive in their nature, are found in olden Asian lands of Buddhism, like, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Japan and Myanmar.



[Stupa](#) which contains Buddhist votive tablets, 8th-century

Jainism, an ancient religion of India, also projects the idea of votive offering in form of a votive slab known as *Ayagapata*. These slabs are embellished with peculiar designs and objects that are associated fundamentally with Jain worship. These slabs were discovered in an archaeological investigation in Mathura, India at the archaeological site of Kankali Tila.



Ayagapatta, c. 1st Century, excavated from [Kankali Tila](#)

1.2) Votive offerings in Contemporary Monotheistic Religions

Judaism

This practice of votive offering does not only limit itself in the remanences of Pagan cultures, rather it widely projects itself in the mainstream Monotheistic religions as well. The Judaic traditions, with extension to its major dogmas lets its followers to practice a free-will offering. This offering is allowed to be practiced by the individuals of the religion on their own. But this offering varies from what the general offerings that require a specific vow. The terms '*Nadar*' and '*Nadab*' are used to refer to such a practice till date.

Christianity

Christianity varies in its practices from the Eastern ends of the world to the West. Yet Votive offering maintains its relevancy in both the ends. One of the well renowned votive offering of the Orthodox community of Christianity is related to Saint John of Damascus. The story goes, that the then Head of state punished Saint John for being treacherous towards the State and cut off his hands. When he prayed in front of the 'Theotocos' icon, his hands got restored and is considered a miracle. Saint John later on the day of Thanksgiving, produced a copy of his hand from silver and attached it to the icon. For this reason the icon was renamed as "Trojeručica". (Rønning, Sigh, & Vogt, 2017)

Western Christianity has also been deeply projecting the practice of votive offering throughout its history. Votive offerings were made to God in to liberate one from some sort of pain or were made for some kind of gain. Most of the time certain objects are placed in the church in return of some favour. These objects might include lit candles, statues, flowers and money.

Quite a milieu oriented example of votive offering can be affiliated with Christianity. The Church of Saint Leonard in Lavantali located in Austria, is

attributed with Leonard, who was patron saint of prisoners and had a pair of iron shackles most of the time around his hands. Thus, the element of iron got associated with this saint and later, after his demise, the farmers of the region kept on offering a pair of tiny iron oxen and were dedicated at the altar of the church of saint Leonard as an appreciation and thanking for the health of their oxen and wished for their continued well-being. Therefore, the value of oxen in the minds of the farmers was symbolic and lofty, as they had practical correlation with the empirical model of oxen made from iron as a votive object.



Church of saint Leonard Lavanttai (Austria), Votive Iron Oxen, Bayerisches National Museum

Islam

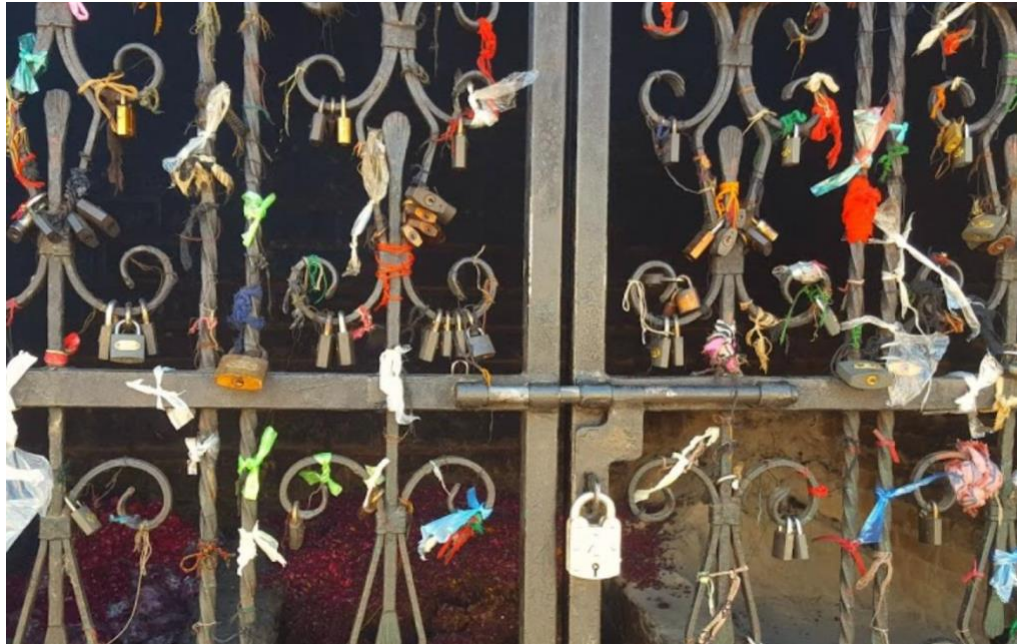
Some of early stories or narrations of Arab origins, provide evidence of practices that can be associated with votive. They depict placement of votive candles in shrines. Along with this, Muharram mourning of contemporary Shia Islam offers variety of votive practices next to processions, musical performances, and votive foods (Christian, 2017). These practices will become the focus of this research in the proceeding chapters. But before that, a general votive conception in Islam is fundamental. Although Islam does not portray any core votive doctrines yet we see across the broad geographical diaspora of Muslims developing variant votive offering practices. Take for example the

contemporary Turkey, where a *dilik agaci* or wishing tree and *adak agaci* or votive tree plays a significant part in devotional life of indigenous people.



Tress encrusted with votive offering, Adatepe, Aegean coast, Turkey, Photograph taken by Christine Gulbert, June 2016

There exist various votive practices present in caves, mountains and natural water springs associated with multiple sects within Islam. (Gruber C. , 2017). However, in Islamic traditions, votive offering is a controversial practice. Some Islamic scholars have condemned such activities and passed out a ‘Fatwa’ a legal pronouncement. Yet people from various sects of Islam continue practicing votive offering with a pure faith and belief in it. Many Arabic resources testifies about certain votive practices in Shrines where people lit candles. Pakistan is filled up with such practices throughout the archives shrines present here. Ribbons, metal locks, money, Flowers and ‘Chaddar’ or Shrine cloth that covers the grave of the saint, all comes under the Umbrella of Votive offerings. Shrines are one of the most visited places in Pakistan. They receive visitors even on Sundays. People with desires and wishes pour from all the corners of the country and fill up the landscape, and get themselves acquainted with the economic hustle and bustle around the shrine. They buy objects and devote it for a return of a favour.



Various Muslim votive performers tie colourful ribbons and locks on the inside doors of Shrines



A votive performer praying in front of threat ridden doors.

Therefore, whether it be past or present, this practice has remained and thrived since the realisation of supernatural by human beings. Even today, the practice of votive offering is present as part of religious superstructures and modifies its nature according to the milieu of the indigenous religiosity. Votive are thus loose religious categorical and customised attribute, isolated from major preaching of any religion (Ittai, 2016). No matter what the mainstream religious doctrines are, people deprived of any sort of material well-being or aspire

something in their private lives, surely practice votive offering in one form or the other. Such offerings are majorly related to people of non-elite social class. This research will also focus on the relation between votive performance and social classes. This is indeed an interesting finding that most of the people who practice votive offering belong from a down-trodden class, that would be elaborated in sub-sequent chapters.

1.3) Development of Interest

Being an anthropologist does not make me separate from my socio-cultural settings. Living in a predominantly religious faith based society, I have been undoubtedly projected towards religious dogmas and has infiltrated my conscience related to my practices, faith, religion etc.

I belong to the Shia sect of Islam and have been throughout my childhood, witnessing practices that may not seem strange to me but from a perspective of an outsider, truly gives them a cultural shock. My observation and understandings about my religion were not up to the mark. It was really a regular and conventional or traditional form of understanding and I dealt it with customary and a regular manner. It was not a big deal for me.

Yet after I had enrolled myself in MSc Anthropology, my interest in my own community was triggered and totally a different perspective my conscience produced about my own people. It was as if I have been born again but adult this time and witness my community's behaviour from entirely a different perspective, which I consider as fresh, novel and most strangely and ironically, exotic.

Anthropology has worked a lot on my conscience and expanded my mind over things like ritual practices and community based behaviours a lot. I have also been a practitioner of this tradition myself. I would love to share that experience of mine on a later note in this thesis, but so far, the significance of mentioning

this here is that, my personal experience with such a practice is also a contributor to the development of my interest in this subject.

Votive offering is one practice that made some supernatural sense to me and truly made an impact on my decision to pursue this topic as my final project thesis. Most of the cases that I have testified till date have miraculously fulfilled the desires of the aspirants of votive offering. How could this be practically possible? This is not the question that I was interested in to find yet it still makes a person ponder about it. Literally there are cases for instance where married couple aspired for a child for a long time, yet after offering and vowing to some specific SOPs, the family soon received good news related to child conception. This does alarmingly surprise the spheres of those who are empiricists and believe in natural causes and dismiss super natural causes for a phenomenon. This was one of the reasons that this topic became part of my final thesis project.

There exist plenty of literature for the idea of votive offering which I would be referring to in the Literature Review section, but very little is available on the topic of Cultural significance of Votive offering during Muharram. Votive offerings are not a common field of study in Anthropology. However, such ritual offerings perform an additional purpose of strengthening the religious system and structure and hence becomes an important element of the general conception of supernatural. The attention this phenomenon has received so far does not justify its relevance and significance in terms of cultural importance and how people dedicate themselves into this practice with pure heart, faith and belief.

Therefore, my immediate milieu potentially became the reason why I chose this topic, and caused me to develop an interest. It is indeed not surprising that Historical Particularism by Franz Boas articulates not mere the course of life of communities, rather it hugely impacts the path and choices made by the individuals. One's surroundings are highly accessible to that person and probability of developing interest within the sphere of provided environment is vast. My childhood testifies Shia community gatherings and observations of

offerings being made. Thus, it is not a surprise that my decision to choose this topic was merely based on my immediate access of religious rituals.

Moreover, being a female member of my society, which is inclined to set up certain limits upon females, pertaining to mobility, I had to be cautious in selecting the location of my field. It had to be favouring my social pre-set parameters and allowing me to manage my workings in the field without any hurdle and without upsetting the social limits pertaining to gender based mobility.

1.4) Accessing the Community and Barriers

It gets very troublesome for certain researchers to get an access to the community they are investigating. Accessing a community's exclusive and personal activities that at certain instances turns confidential and avoids intermingling of outsiders, becomes demanding, difficult and sometimes gets dangerous as well. To perform the field work and extract authentic and reliable information and data, it is important to gain the confidence of the community under study to an extent that the researchers receive positive response from their respondents and share the valuable information necessary for the findings of the research.

Being already a part of the community under my observation made my field work easy and hence faced no major obstacles or barriers. As I have stated earlier that I was born into the Shia Sect of Islam and raised as a Shia Muslim, provided me an edge related to accessing community. I was in a way privileged in this regard and had an easy access to the respondent because of my background. Henceforth, my accessibility into the locale did not create any complication. Rather I was listened to with confidence and my respondents co-operated in a normal manner.

Regardless of this advantage, there did exist certain occasions where I found it difficult to take out data through interviews. I would shortly refer to those, but

it is important here to understand that there are certain limitations towards every topic pertaining to privacy and confidentiality. People feel at certain times quite uncomfortable at sharing their personal desires and thoughts, and most importantly in case of votive offerings, the sharing of information has a potential to affect adversely to the outcome of the offerings.

I am duly thankful to Miss Riffat who helped a lot throughout my research. Whenever I needed an interview from a votive aspirant she managed a protocol and made it quit easy for me. She had known me from my past and my family, because we were frequent visitors of the Imam Bargah. She was a learned woman and knew my requirements for the research very well. Her job at Baab-ul-Ilm, my selected community centre also known as Imam Bargah, was to administer and perform tasks related to management of oblation of food, also known as 'Niaz' and occasionally performed security tasks as well. Miss Riffat's cooperation in building up the Rapport among the Random community members helped me a lot. She talked to those who she thought were a perfect fit for my research on her own behalf and let me take over later. Hence her supervision and guidance provided me with a smooth data gathering process and hence became kind of my door keeper.

Hence, being a member of the community did not raise any major problems and Interviews and observations that were needed for data collection were smooth and free from any hurdles.

1.5) Gaining Rapport

Rapport means, developing a trustful relationship between the person conducting the research and the population or individuals that are subject of the study. It is not a good practice to immediately dive into the data collecting activities the moment one arrives at their locale. It is recommended for a smooth transitional flow of research that researchers must take their time to adjust themselves among the new social settings or develop an understanding with their subjects.

Although it is essential to establish a good rapport with the Key informants, door keepers and your subjects, but for me this process did not take too much of my time. As mentioned earlier my default cultural settings were within the parameters of my field of study, hence there was no chance that anyone would consider me as an outsider, or make me process my presence in the locale through any official channel or acquire or issue any sort of NOC from the concerned authorities.

Moreover, I had to maintain a professional behaviour with my respondents and gate keepers. To let me do my research I was obliged to follow doctrines and protocols of the locale. For instance, I avoided taking pictures where it was not permitted and only with permission performed any of such activities. Such a cautionary activity also helped me to gain a favourable rapport among my respondents and gate keepers. Yet for the purpose that the respondents of the research provide me with data with keenness I would not dive into straight questionings, rather would give some time to tell about myself and ask about their grievances and listen to them patiently. This made them feel comfortable and they trusted my credentials as a researcher quite easily afterwards.

Anyhow, gaining a positive Rapport was not a hard task for me, as I was already known by the gatekeepers and hence they felt comfortable assisting my research.

1.6) Problem Statement and Objectives

It is important to plan one's research before stepping into the field. The goals and objectives of the researcher has to be clear and out front. This is like a journey, and if you do not know about your destination, one would certainly end up wandering and would not be able to achieve the objective of the research. For this purpose, it is necessary for the researcher to figure out the exact line of research and plan accordingly. The researchers must not generalise their

objectives which might make it impossible for them to produce a unique work, rather they must narrow down their research objectives.

My intention was to pursue more than one objectives in this research. Many questions raised in my mind pertaining to the practice of votive offerings. But my main agenda was to analyse the purpose of this practice, how many types of offerings were being practiced in my locale and what were the outcomes of these practices, by which I mean were the objectives of those who performed this offering were being met or not.

Moreover, I also wanted to emphasise the cultural significance of votive during Muharram, which hence becomes partial topic of the research. Shia Islam is an International religion, and finding this as a gap in my literature review, I covered this vast topic significantly. In short how cultures affect the practice of votive and what indigenous social issues lead to the adaptations of certain votive offerings.

Objectives

- To Enlist multiple votive offerings during Muharram
- To Understand the cultural significance of votive offering during Muharram
- To Comprehend relationship between votive offering during Muharram and indigenous culture

2) Data Collection Methods and Tools

2.1) Ethnographic Research

Ethnography is defined as a detail account for a community related to their cultural practices. Although my research was not an in-depth study of the Shia community and their over-all practices, rather it was limited to a peculiar type of practice. Thus, I had to focus on just votive offering practice rather understanding the whole community in a broader context.

2.2) Observation

During my field work, one of my method was to merely observe the aspirants and their behaviour in particular, when they performed this offering practice. My prolonged stays in the field let me observe these aspirants in detail. Simply looking at them and following their actions, let me jot down many important aspects that pointed to the commitment they showed to this practice.

2.3) Participant Observation

Mere observation in the field work is not enough. For the purpose of in depth data extraction and qualitative information gathering, participant observation is the key method to be adopted for this purpose. The method originated in the field research linked to European and American voyages of scientific exploration. During the year 1800, one of precursors of the method as Joseph Marie, baron de Gérando already affirming that: "The first way to get to know the Indians is to become like one of them; and it is by learning their language that we will become their fellow citizens." (Degérando, 2013)

Participant observation comprises of two parts. One is to participate with the community activity that is being under study and second is to observation. These two activities may sound simple but they are quite complex. Being a

participant mean that I had to adopt the lifestyle of the people being studied, living in the same kind of housing, eating similar food, wearing similar clothing and participating in the daily round of activities and in special events. The rationale is that participation over a long period improves the quality of data. But for me this was not a problem because I have been part of this community since my birth and have participated on personal terms in votive offering myself. On a later note I would be be sharing my personal experience with votive offering, but for now it is important to mention here that Participant observation is one of the main methods and most affective in terms of qualitative information extraction. It is the trade mark method of Anthropology. Or one can say that anthropology is recognised by this method and is the fundamental identifier as a methodological tool for Anthropology.

2.4) Interviews

This is data collecting technique based on verbal communication with the respondent. This conversation is guided with the help of some question guidelines or it can also be a random conversation. This conversation may involve two people or more than two people. In case of two people, the researcher is the interviewer and the respondent is the interviewee. Whereas in the case of more than on people acting as interviewee, the method is called as focus group discussion. In this method, more than two people are involved. They are placed in a circle and the interviewer initiates a discussion on a topic. The participants in this group then provides information from different perspectives and the resultant data collected is supreme in quality and authenticity.

My topic was perfectly aligned with the method of interviews. Interviews truly resonated with the nature of my topic of research, as a data collecting method. Although observations and participant observation were also an essential method but interviews outstood in terms of quantitative as well as qualitative

data collection. This research included almost 25 individual interviews yet have included only most revealing ones in this thesis.

2.5) Sampling Technique

Non-Probability sampling

Non-probability sampling is a sampling technique where the samples are gathered in a process that does not give all the individuals in the population equal chances of being selected. Therefore, my respondents were selected based on non-probability sampling because my respondents were random votive performers present at the day in the locale.

Convenience Sampling

This is type of non-probability sampling which I also made use for my interviews, is basically articulated when the samples are close to hand. Whenever in the locale I found someone roaming around the sections of votive offering in the Imam Bargah, I would immediately approach them and ask whether they had performed votive offering or not. If they had then I would tell them about my research and if they agreed they would provide me with the interview. This type of sampling is most useful for pilot testing.

My samples were not very dynamic in nature. But yes, I had to do some classification of the interview samples based on factors that provided with positive and negatives results of the votive offerings. Obviously, the course of discussion with the respondents whose offerings were met differed from those respondents whose offerings were not met.

Unit of Data Collection

Every individual that I conducted my research with is considered as my unit of data collection. My samples included of only individuals from whom I took interviews at different times in the locale who were there to perform votive offerings or had any past experience with such a practice.

2.6) Equipment for Data Collection

Daily Diary

For qualitative data gathering it is most important that the researcher carries a diary with him/her at all the times. Ideas are random and can reveal themselves at any point of time during the research. It is not necessary that the researcher keep a diary with him all the time only while in the field, rather every time during his research work. Anything can pop up in their mind even when they are getting ready for bed. Therefore, the importance of keeping a diary is hugely emphasised in the anthropological traditions of research work. Without this diary, it is highly probable that one may forget interesting and important ideas and clues. They might remember it for a while but without writing it down, a high risk is involved that one may lose this piece of information. This could be any question, any assumption or any important finding that may generate intuitively or through observing any incidental event while in the field. Therefore, it is very significant to carry a diary with oneself in the field. This practice is for the purpose of organisation and improving the quality of the data being retrieved.

Voice Recording

There were times during my interview sessions that it became very hard to keep up with the conversation. This is because writing down their narrations sometimes makes it difficult for the researcher to right everything the respondent is saying. Hence, possessing a smart phone made this task easy for me. Voice recordings were also helpful when I was not allowed to film the

interview. It was not necessary for me to film the interviews but still their facial expressions of my respondents were to be of value if I had been allowed to film the interviews.

Pictures

Pictures provide a detail examination of the locale, and testifies the research work with vivid evidences. Most of my interviews that I conducted was in the presence of this modern equipment and I took various photographs during the interviews as well as random pictures of votive objects present around the Imam Bargah.

3) Locale and Infrastructure

3.1) Locale

A **ḥosayniya** or **hussainiya** (Persian: حسینیه *hoseyniye*), also known as an **ashurkhana**, **imambargah**, or **imambara**, is a congregation hall for Twelver Shia Muslim commemoration ceremonies, especially those associated with the Mourning of Muharram (Campo, 2009). Hussainiya is a multitude hall for the mourning of Muharram and other commemoration rituals of Shia that its name gets from Husayn ibn Ali, the grandson of Muhammad (Marafi, 2012).

I have lived in Islamabad, which is the capital territory of Pakistan, since my childhood. Considering my permanent residency, I have been visiting the Imam Bargah located in the I-8/3 sector of Islamabad. It is a huge place that can adjust thousands of people at a time for the purpose of sermons where the Imam preaches the faithful who come by to attend the occasional Shia Islam events. The institute is sometimes confused with the Shia regular mosque, whereas this is not the case. Although the overall building offers both the purposes, i.e. of the community centre where people participate in ‘Majlis’ or sermon and a separate place for congregational prayers.

Imambargahs and mosques are two different places in Shia Islam. A mosque is used for Namaz, whereas Imambargah is for preaching Islam and its main purpose is to keep the purity of the mosque retained by restricting entry of women and small children. On the other hand, everyone (men or women) can go to Imambargah. (Abbas, 2015)

Moreover, gender based segregation is emphasised inside the Imam Bargah. Women participate in male sermons with a proper secluded area with the purpose of avoiding the intermingling of the sexes. If the sermon is exclusively for the women and by the women, men are not allowed to be present and attend that sermon.



Imam Bargah I-8/3 Sector Islamabad. Photo by Researcher

3.2) Infrastructure

The installation or the facility of Imam Bargah is quite large and can accommodate hundreds of people. It has a parking facility available outside. The premise is secured with barbed wires on the outer walls of the building and at entrance huge blocks of barriers lay to stop any misadventure from happening. A thorough security check is performed on the on comers before they are allowed to enter the facility.

Inside the facility there is a courtyard, where religiously significant objects are displayed. On the other hand, there is this big hall where the sermons and other religious activities are performed. There hall is fully furnished and offers a relaxing environment for the attendees of the sermon. There are also book shelves that are filled with religious scriptures and other books related to the Shia sect of Islam. The facility also offers a congregational prayer hall that is separate from the main sermon hall. The external walls of the buildings are covered with gold colour tiles and at some places calligraphy is also witnessed.

3.3) Votive objects

During the days of Muharram I witnessed various kinds of votive objects inside the Imam Bargah. First and for most there was this cradle type swing which in local terms is called 'Jhula'. This structure is made from wood and is almost ten feet tall and four feet wide. The cradle lies within this wooden structure. It is decorated with fresh flowers and apples are seen under the cradle that represents the offering by the aspirants of childless individuals.

There were also these Mehndi dishes that held lit oil lamps placed in a side. These dishes were also decorated with flowers and grace papers, that were also symbolic to a particular votive offering that I would be discussing in later topics.

There were also coffins displayed covered white and black clothes, with names written on them. These names represented symbolically that basically identified the coffin belonging to an important personality of the 1400 years old past event.

Other objects included clay plates for sweet porridge. Apples hanging from 'alms' or flags. Sweet balls also known as 'Laddu' with rings fixed on top of them and earrings at times.

4) Literature Review

It is a characteristic of cultural anthropology that quite often researchers find a topic for research while they are reviewing literature or merely doing a leisure study. What motivates the anthropologist to generate a research work is basically gaps in pre-existing research or certain questions that arise in the mind of the reader after reading a particular research by other anthropologists. But whether the topic of research is motivated by the pre-existing literature or is based on simple observation, it is considered a scholarly and necessary practice to conduct a literature review of a chosen topic before jumping into the field. This strategy helps the anthropologists to equip themselves with literature that is close enough to their topic. Thus, for researchers who is to be out in the field, it is important for them to do their homework.

My main objective was to enlist all the votive offering practices in my locale and their cultural significance. But even before that it was necessary to understand the conception of votive offerings by previously held studies. In the introduction chapter, the it is extensively mentioned

According to the Merriam Webster dictionary Votive is defined as:

“offered or performed in fulfilment of a vow or in gratitude or devotion”
(Webster)

It was important to understand the history of the votive offering and according to Gina Salapata, these kinds of practices have been present since the times of the Greeks, according to the archaeological evidence.

“Inexpensive terracotta offerings are abundant in votive deposits throughout the Greek world. They have the potential not only to illuminate the type of cult and the nature and character of the recipients, but also to help us ascertain popular preferences and cult practices of the average worshipper.”

(Salapata, Terracotta Votive Offerings in Sets or Groups, 2015).

David Morgan, a professor of Religious Studies at Duke University, nicely expresses votive offering as a technique or ritual process that works as an intervention task to solve a particular problem (Morgan, The practicality of Votive culture, 2017). He further states the performance of the votive to be at a particular locale, be it a shrine, altar, grave or memorial shrine. He elaborately explains the motives behind the votive offerings. He has stated in his article that people who perform votive are mostly those who are facing some sort of problem or troubles in their practical life and want their problems to be solved with a faith in the supernatural. These problems can range from an illness of a close one or the person itself, need for a job or visa, or relieve from persistent guilt or remorse. The practicality of votive offerings that he emphasises upon, basically highlights the social issues and troubles faced by the society at large. He states that some votive performances are cross religious. Various people from different religious backgrounds are found to be performing the same votive. He gives an example of Marian shrine in Indonesia. At this shrine people who are originally Muslims, Hindus, Catholics, protestants, etc. pleads in front of the shrine and asks for the Lady's assistance with various kinds of problems, ranging from help with school exams to financial problems. Considering such multi-religious participation in a single activity, votive offering has potential to act as an agent of social solidarity in the emerging globalised environment, where people happily tolerate each other's beliefs and merge on a single platform of votive. In the significance of this research work, I would be mentioning this unifying attribute of votive offering and how can it be structured to provide a solution for peace, tolerance and coexistence among the modern multi religious societies.

Moreover, Gina has defined the purpose of votive offering in another of her catalogue of writing in the following manner:

“Votive offerings are physical manifestations of personal piety, motivated by the need of the dedicant to establish contact with the divine. Like performing a sacrifice or saying a prayer, making a gift to a supernatural power meant

entering into areciprocal relationship, even if the return from it was uncertain. Thus, the beliefs and motives of the worshipper must have played an important role in the selection of the dedication.” (Salapata, The more the better? Votive offerings in sets)

Jessica Hughes has placed a lot of importance on the objects of votive offerings from the past. In my research I have also emphasised on this idea of objects involved in this practice, but they relate with the historical events of Karbala.

“Many of the votive offerings which survive from antiquity were purpose-made for dedication. These include things like anatomical votives, figurines, temple models, and sculpted reliefs bearing scenes of sacrifice or healing. Other types of votive offer-ing were not purpose-made for dedication but had served other functions before being brought to the sanctuary, such as jewellery, tools, mirrors, cups, clothes and children’s toys. Such ‘recycled’ (or, perhaps more accurately, ‘non-purpose-made’) votives arguably give us our most direct glimpses of individual agency in a religious context, since they not only bypass the intermediary figure of the craftsman but also relate closely to the worshipper’s own body and biography.” (Hughes, 2017)

At first, I was doubtful that are there any votive offering practices available in other religions like Judaism and Christianity? I was surprised to know this that it is not only Islam that has evolved into performing such practices but is also performed by other Abrahamic traditions.

Like many other pilgrimage manuals of the period, and surely much to Ibn Taymiyya’s dismay, al-Harawi’s handbook provides ample evidence for the offering of votive gifts and the use of aromatic substances at sites considered particularly sacred to Muslims and, at times, to Jews and Christians as well. The overlap in devotional practices among members of the three Abrahamic faiths is not particularly surprising, considering their cohabitation and interaction over the centuries. (Gruber C. , 2016)

As mentioned before, at one point in my thesis I tried to discuss votive offering as tool of making a piece between different sects. The background of this uneasiness between the two main groups of Islam is as follows:

The Shia-Sunni conflict is at once a struggle for the soul of Islam—a great war of competing theologies and conceptions of sacred history—and a manifestation of the kind of tribal wars of ethnicities and identities, so seemingly archaic at times, yet so surprisingly vital, with which humanity has become wearily familiar. Faith and identity converge in this conflict, and their combined power goes a long way toward explaining why, despite the periods of coexistence, the struggle has lasted so long and retains such urgency and significance. It is not just a hoary religious dispute, a fossilized set piece from the early years of Islam’s unfolding, but a contemporary clash of identities. Theological and historical disagreements fuel it, but so do today’s concerns with power, subjugation, freedom, and equality, not to mention regional conflicts and foreign intrigues. It is, paradoxically, a very old, very modern conflict. (Nasr, 2006)

Therefore, bearing in mind the above-mentioned narration by Nasr, I would emphasise over possibilities and potential intervention techniques to dilute the hard sentiments that sometimes afloat among Muslim brotherhood on basis of certain religious doctrines.

Once I had done the literature review to justify the contemplation of Votive offering, it was necessary to conduct a review that shed light upon my original topic which was narrowed down to the Votive performances among Shia Muslims during Muharram. My objective was to enlist Votive performances during the Muharram among the Shia Muslims of Pakistan and discuss its cultural significance. Since objects are highly regarded in the practice of votive offering, *Zuljanah*, the name of a horse owned by Imam Hussain (a.s), in a historical event of Karbala, is highly talked about and has an important role in constituting the sentiments of Shia Muslims in historical context. *Zuljanah* related votive will also be elaborately discussed in the proceeding topics. Before

that it was necessary to review pre-existing literature that explains the importance of *Zuljanah* in Shia Islam.

The outstanding horse of imam Hussain (as), zuljanah, defending Hussain (as) who lay on the ground injured, attacked the enemies and threw the riders from the back of their horses. The horse cursed the enemies through its hoofs, while circulating around the body of moula al Hussain (as) until it had killed forty maloeen. Zuljanah then smeared his hair and forehead in the blood of his rider and rushed towards the khaimahgah and started neighing aloud and truck his hooves upon the ground, in a way which no one saw earlier. Ahin summa ahin! When the daughters of Rasool Allah (S) saw the horse without its rider, they knew that Moula al Hussain (as) had been martyred and the children and the women raised the cries of “wa Hussain wa Muhammad” (Borhany).

Zuljanah literally means horse ridden by Imam Hussain (a.s) in the battle of Karbala. In Shi'ite annual commemorations, zuljanah constitutes the symbolic representation of returning of rider less steed of Imam Hussain (a.s) from the battle ground to the kheemgah/tents, after the latter's martyrdom. The rider less horse thus signifies a scared symbol of the martyrdom of Imam Hussain (a.s) in the battle of Karbala, because women waiting inside kheemgah/tents realized his death when the horse returned without his rider.

In Kashmir, the horse used as shabih-e- zuljanah/ replica of Hussein's horse for the symbolic ritual is costumed in a very elaborate was carrying; a special zeen/saddle, a well ornamental blood stained kaan chadar/arrow riddled blanket on his back, coloured duppatas tied around his neck, forehead and saddle, and an umbrella to shade their rider Hussain (a.s) who is believed to be sitting on rudderless steed. The sacredness of the symbolic moment is heightened by the burning of incense sticks. (Bhat).

Abu mokhnaf, mazandarany, behbahany and ghandoozy have narrated the returning of zuljanah to tents in this way that when imam Hussain (a.s) fell down from the saddle after the poisonous three-pranged arrow hit his heart and he martyred, his horse came neighing near the body of imam a.s and kissed his body by its lip and smelled his body while this animal was crying and its tear was pouring from its eyes like a mother who is grieving. Zuljanah colored its mane with imam's a.s blood and came back to the tents while its saddle was upside down and neighing and was hitting it's against the earth and came around tents (Ansarian A. P., 2015).

By hearing the neigh of horse, sainthood Bibi zainab s.a told to sakina ' I think your father comes back and he has brought water, go and welcome him;' but when sakina s.a came out and saw the horse, she shouted 'O father! Hussein. It has been come in ziyarat-e-nahiya which ascribes to imam Mehdi a.s. ' when the women and daughters saw the horse, with the condition that its saddle has been upside down, all of them dishevelled their hairs under the veil of chastity and hit their faces and after those amount of honor, now they had to be captured by the enemies after the martyrdom of imam Hussein a.s, so they wailed and toward ghatlegah a place where someone is killed (Ansarian A. p., 2017).

With such an extensive literature review, of *zuljanah*, I wanted to understand the cultural importance of horse as an animal, in Pakistani society. But could not find any associated material. But my analysis of the importance of a horse emphasises the trans national characteristic of Shia Islam. As Pakistani society does not offer horses in their cultural environment, yet the rituals associated with horse particularly *Zuljanah*, signifies the importance of this animal in Shia Islam. I was unable find any such literature that contemplated this idea of trans National adaptations of cultural traits. Thus, providing me with opportunity to fill up this gap. I would further shed some light on this topic in one my proceeding chapters. Similarly, I could not find literature that justified cultural significance of other enlisted votive offerings, leaving a gap for this aspect to be highlighted.

5) Various Votive practices during Muharram and their Cultural Relations

5.1) Historical Foundation for Votive Offering during Muharram

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, votive offering comprises of three basic concepts. One of these components is the historical background pertaining to a specific votive offering. These stories or historical events are not necessarily have to be related to the offerings in every case. We do not find any evidence for the historical events for the offerings that were made during the times of Greeks. Yet it is important to understand that majority of the contemporary offerings are based on a past sacrifice of some sort by the historical personalities. History directly connects the present votive practice energetically and thus provides a sacred ambiance to this whole practice of votive. Connecting with supernatural realms and asking their favour, is the whole point of votive offering. Past deceased religious personalities plays a significant role and hence are the key characters involved to justify the practice of votive. With such historical characters at disposal and their life history or certain events that they witnessed, relates fundamentally with what kind of votive offerings are the present faithful followers of the religion are practicing.

The votives that I will be elaborating in the following headings are basically related to past historical event known as the Battle of Karbala which was fought between the grandson of Prophet Muhammad and the second Ummayid Khalifa or Governor Yazeed. Husain never gave allegiance to Yazid. With a retinue of about 70 men, Imam Hussain (a.s) was stopped by 1000 men. Negotiations failed after the Umayyad governor Ubayd Allah ibn Ziyad refused Husayn safe passage without submitting to his authority, a condition declined by Husayn. The Battle of Karbala ensued on 10 October during which Husayn was killed

along with most of his relatives and companions, while his surviving family members were taken prisoner.

This is the general historical background. The sacrifices made by the grandson of Prophet Muhammad are highly regarded in context of Shia Islam to an extent that the individual incidents have become the foundations of modern votive offerings.

Not only in the traditions of Shia Islam do we find the relevance of history related to votive offering but other Abrahamic religions have also shown potential relevance to the historical events. Their historical reference is a different one in their offerings but the important point to grasp here is that an historical event which carries a huge spiritual or religious significance becomes the foundation for the votive offering. These events are the reference point from which the faithful followers relate their sacred beliefs and associate their votive practice and believe in it as an agent to solve their personal problems. Without such an event in history, votive offering may sound lame and will indeed have very little attention as compared to those offerings that portrays a historical event in addition. This event basically acts like a certification of the votive offering. By this I mean that the case of the votive aspirant becomes strong and legit and gives them a strong reason to believe in it.

Therefore, the following votive offering discussion relates to a peculiar historical event that occurred during the month of Muharram with the family members of Imam Husain.

5.2) Marital Votive

Before I dive into the observations and depiction of this marital votive offering it is important to understand its historical background, as it is related to the sacrificial event of the past history of the family of Imam Husain.

On the 7th of Muharram, while I was on the locale, I witnessed a group of women in black clothes, merely depicting a mourning picture. They were sitting with other women and were listening to the sermon of that day. The woman who was preaching the sermon was elaborating in detail about Shehzada Qasim and his role in the battle of Karbala. She told that on 10th of Muharram Shehzada Qasim was also martyred along with Imam Hussain (a.s). It was narrated by her that Shehzada Qasim was about to be married off as he was engaged with the daughter of Imam Husain.

It is very important to note here that the dynamics of the past event truly resonates with the present type of votive offering. In this case, the marriage of Shehzada Qasim is the key historical event which is acting as the foundation for the marital votive offering.

As the preacher continued, she elaborated that the wife of Shehzada Qasim mourned over every piece of her husband's body that was cut apart brutally. Imam Husain prayed to God after looking at her daughter that may not anybody's life gets ruined like my daughter. Imam Husain cried and stated that whoever would perform votive offering in the Shehzada Qasim's name, their offerings will definitely be fulfilled.

I asked one of the ladies that were present there that why has she come here? She stated that there are few hurdles their family is facing regarding the marriage of their daughter. I have asked for the arranged marriage in various families but there are many continued hurdles or unfortunate events that are not letting their daughter to be married off to someone. I asked her that who has told you about this votive offering here in this place? She responded that "Our neighbours belong to Shia sect so they recommended us to offer a votive here, they told us that after trying too hard for our daughter to get married off and failing everytime, they advised that we should come to this Imam Bargah and take out some 'Mehndi' present in the dishes and put it on the hands of our daughter, and make her wear bangles as well and next year with God's will your daughter will get married to someone" I asked her that how can she be so sure that this performance of votive can deliver to her desire? She responded that she

has heard this from lot of other people and this is a fact indeed. Later I asked another woman who was performing a votive offering herself. She stated that she herself is a Shia Muslim and her daughter was not being married. Families would visit her but they would not show any positive remarks for my daughter's future. So, I decided to do this ritual here, and now that my daughter is married off I'm here to complete this offering. That women told me that Votives only work when the person who has a staunch belief over that this desire will be hundred percent fulfilled, the person is not supposed to create any doubt that will this offering produce fruitful results. I later asked her that can she elaborate me on the historical events that are considered to be relevant to this offering today. Her narration was as follows:

“Mola Qasim a.s Imam Hassan a.s Or Bibi Umme Farwa s.a Ky Bety Thy. mola Qasim Ky Father Mola Hassan Hazrat Ali a.s Or Syeda BiBi pak fatima Zehra S.a Ky Bety Or nabi s.a.w.w Ky nawasy Thy. 7 Muharram Ki Mehendi Mola Qasim A.s Ky Naaam Sy Famous Hai. mola Qasim Jab 2 Saal Ky Thy To Hazrat Imam Hassan Ibne Ali KO Zeher Dekar Shaheed Krdia Thaa. Father Ki Shahdat Ky Baad Mola Qasim KO Imam Hussain (a.s) Palaa. Mola Hussain A.s NY Apni Beti Bibi Fatima Kubra S.a Ka Rishta Apny Bhayi Imam Hassan a.s Ky Bety Mola Qasim a.s sy Kiya. Jab Mola Hussain A.s KO Yazeed Ki Taraf Sy Khat Likh Kr Khalid Bin Waleed KO Bheja Or waleed NY Imam Hussain Ko Yazeed Ka Khat Parhya Ky yazid Chahta Hai Ya Hussain Ibne Ali Yazeed Ki Bayat Kry Yaa Madina Chorhy. 28 Rajab KO Mola Hussain NY Madina Chora. Jahan Musلمان Hajj Krny Madine Arhy Thy Wahan Rasool Ka Nawasa Karbala rawana Ho Raaah Thaa. 7 Muharram KO yazidi Lashkar NY Saadat Ka Paani Band Kiya Riwayaten Likhti Hain Ky Is din Mola Qasim Ki Mehendi Ka Din din Thaaa Jab Ye Khbr Saadat KO Mili Ky Paaani Band Hogaya mehendi Ky Liye paani Nhi Sadat Ki Syedzaadiyn NY dua Ki Khudara Jessy Qasim Ki Mehendi Ujri Hai Essay Kisi Behn ya Bhayi Ki Mehendi Na Ujry. Mola Hussain Jaaanty thy 10 Muharram KO Ham Sub Shaaheed Krdiye jaaaengy Or 10 Muharram KO Mola Qasim Bhi Shaheed Krdiye gaaae. 1 Muharram KO Imam Qafila Hussain Karbala PoCha Yazidi Lashkar ko Bhi Mola Hussain Ka pataa Chala Ky Mola Hussain A.s Karbala Ponchy Hain To yazeed NY ibne Ziyad KO Karbala Ky Liye 9 lakha kaa Lashkar Bhejny KO Kaha. Is Liye Ye

Mehendi Mola Qasim a.s Ky Naam Sy 7 Muharram KO Nikaali Jaati Hai Or maaan Behen Apny Bhayi Behen Betiyn Or Beton Ky Liye Manat Maaangti Hain Ky Hamary Beton Betiyn Ki Shaadi Ho Hmbhi Qasim a.s Ky Liye Mehendi Dengy. ”

“Qasim was the son of Imam Hassan and Umme Farwa. His father was the son of Hazrat Ali and a grandson of Prophet Muhammad. The mehndi offering is renowned because of Shezada Qasim. When Shaezada Qasim was only two years his father, Imam Hassan was murdered. After his father was deceased, Shaezada Qasim was raised by his Uncle Imam Husain. Imam Husain had arranged a marriage between his daughter Fatima Qubra and his nephew Shezada Qasim. When Imam Husain received a letter from Yazid which was brought by Khalid bin Waleed, and Khalid bin waleed narrated this letter to Imam Husain that Yazid wants you're his allegiance or leave the city Madinah. On 28th of Rajab Imam Husain left the city. All Muslims were approaching for hajj and the grandson of prophet was leaving for Karbala. On 7th of Muharram Yazid deprived the members of the Imam Husain group from water and the traditions say that the women prayed to God that may none's marriage life gets destroyed like Qasim's got destroyed. Imam Husain knew that on 10th of Muharram they all will be martyred. And on 10th of Muharram Qasim was also martyred. This is why this votive is offered in the name of Qasim in aspiration of getting their children to marry off.”

Objects related to Marital Votive

This performance of votive ritual comprises of Hinna or also locally known as Mehndi. It is basically a colour dye that women mostly put on their hands before marriage. Inside the hall this dye is loaded on portable dishes along with oil lamps. These dishes are wrapped in grace paper sheets making them look fancy. These objects are symbolic only. In the subcontinent culture, Mehndi is considered as the vital element of marriage as it portrays a blissful aura and symbolises good luck and cherish happiness. Bangles, rings and other related

cultural specific marital objects for adornment purposes, are utilised during a sub-continental marital occasions, are also present.



Decorated dishes and paper plates containing Mehndi or Hina. Photo by researcher



Mehndi processions depicting cultural marital procedures. Photo by researcher



The above pictures display votive objects dedicated to offering related to marriage

5.3) Cradle votive or ‘Jhulla Mannat’

There do exist various kinds of votive offerings that may not have any connection with history or whatsoever as such, as there are no limits to the desires, wishes and whims of the modern populous. But with regards to the Muharram, there are few of these specialised votive offerings that are properly pampered and prepared for before the advent of Muharram. One of these offerings is of Mehndi that I have discussed in detail in the previous section. Another similar kind of offering is related to those aspirant families who wish for a child and for any reason they remain deprived of children.

The object that signifies the historical relevance in this offering is the cradle. This object has been defined physically in section 3.2. What remains is the historical connection of this votive performance. This yet again is related to the event of Karbala which is the centre of all the activity during Muharram. The sermon preachers narrate these past stories of Karbala during these days.

The historical aligning of this votive goes back to the son of Imam Husain during the battle of Karbala. His son was in the battle field with him who was less than a year old. After every member of the group had martyred Imam Husain cried out loud that *“Is there anyone who can help me?”* At that time Imam Husain’s son was just an infant and was laying in this swing styled cradle. Every time Imam Husain would cry out for help, his son would fall from the cradle. Umme Rubab, his mother came to her husband Imam Husain and said that *“Every time you call out for help, Shehzada Ali Asgher makes himself fall from the cradle.”* Imam Husain asked his wife to get his son ready and he will take him along and fetch water for him. She whispered into his son’s ear that, *“Dear son, I wish you were a grown up man and would have fought with your father like others. Now protect your father from hitting with an arrow.”* Imam Husain took his son Ali Asgher towards the battle field. He requested the enemies to have mercy and provide water for his son. In response, the army general replied that, *“you are asking for water for yourself in actually not for your son”* Imam Husain replied that, *“No Im asking for water for this child of*

mine” The general replied that, “*We will only believe you if you would place your son on this scorching ground.*” Imam Husain obeyed to the decree of the general and still the enemy battalion refused to provide for water. Instead they shot an arrow at the child. This arrow that was shot was one that was used to hunt down camels and hence it also slightly injured Imam Husain. The blood that came out from this attack from his body he intended for it to be thrown in the sky, but the sky replied that it will not make rainfalls ever again if he threw his blood in the air. He intended to throw this blood on the ground and the ground warned that it will never be fertile again and it will never grow any fruits. when all these options were disposed, Imam Husain swiped this blood on his forehead, and said that, “*Dear Ali Asghar, from now on, with the grace of your cradle, all the childless mothers will conceive children.*”

From then, people wishing/wanting to have children ask for a *mannat* or votive offering through waseela of Hazrat Imam Ali Asghar. When everyone got martyred in the battle and no-one was left, Hazrat Imam Hussain (a.s) asked if there is anyone who's with him to fight in the jihad, then his son, Hazrat Imam Ali Asghar was making himself fall from the jhoola again and again every time He heard the voice of His father asking for help. Her mother Janab e Umme Rubab told Hazrat Imam Hussain that his son wants to be with him in the jihad, that's the reason he's making himself fall from the jhoola. Then Hazrat Imam Hussain (a.s) took his 6months old son Shehzada Ali Asghar with him and sacrificed him in the way of Allah. One of my respondent told she has full faith on *mannat* and it worked for her when she asked for a *mannat* for having a child after seven years of marriage. One should have full trust when in asking for *mannat*. Importance of *mannat* has been also mentioned in Quran. Mothers of many Prophets has also asked for *mannat* for them. There can be different ways for asking for a *mannat* for different wants and needs. *Mannat* can be asked for any positive purpose or want like for having a good job, better health, for getting a good spouse, getting married etc. *Mannat* taken from jhoola are specifically associated for the need of a child. *Mannat* should be completed when it is fulfilled otherwise one can face consequences of not completing the *mannat* properly and can get punished in anyway by the All mighty. Thus also highlighting the cultural significance of votive offering in our society.

This incident truly shakes the listener to the core and highlights the event of being inhumane and brutal. The object hence carries importance and relates obviously with the event as the narrators of the sermons elaborates this incident the way it had occurred. Cultural relevancy about the object is not clear as the idea of cradles are not particular to a specific culture because cradles are utilised in every civic societies now and in past as well.

The 'Mannat' is basically for those aspirant couples who are childless as the historical event elaborated within the dialogue of Imam Husain. At the Imam Bargah, where I was conducting my research, I witnessed this cradle which was decorated with flowers and other decorative objects. In that cradle were numerous apples. One of these apples is to be picked up by the aspirant individual and taken home. After praying a particular prayer that apple is eaten up by the aspirant and seeds are carefully placed in the soil. Next year if the mother has conceived a child, the aspirant is required to put back 12 apples that symbolises that the wish has come true. This generates a kind of a chain reaction, as the aspirant that picks up one apple has actually been placed by an aspirant who had performed this votive offering in the previous year. The apples that are already in place generally motivates the aspirants more as they see that somebody has been gifted with child.

Case Study

I'm Abida. I'm 40 years old and my education is matric. My caste is Ahle tashi. We use this name because it is our identity. That cradle is the Shabih of the youngest son's cradle of Hazrat Imam Hussain. Shehzada Ali Asghar who was martyred in Karbala, we take out Shabih. We take mannat from where this Shabih is raised. We take apple and kurta from that cradle for the sake of kids. We don't eat that apple and when our mannat is completed we have to fulfill that. If your mannat is not completed than you are not supposed to fulfill that. We came to know about this mannat from our forefathers and we have seen many people whose mannat are completed and it is our belief as well. Alam is specially associated with Ghazi Abbas's because in the battle of Karbala the

Alam was in the hand of Ghazi Abbas. The thirsty kids were very hopeful that their uncle will bring water for them and it is a sign that Alam will be in his hand but neither he could come back nor Alam. There are many colors of Alam like black red and green but mostly it is found in black colour. Mostly the name of Ghazi Abbas is written over it the names and sign of Panjtan Pak is also mentioned. The sign of hand is associated with Panjtan Pak. I also take Mannat and with the grace of Allah Almighty my special two mannat are completed. One mannat I took for the sake of my house from Alam by apple picking. I didn't eat that apple till mannat is completed and kept this thing in mind that I will arrange more and more Majlis in my house if my mannat is completed. My mannat is completed and then I ate that apple and it is necessary that apple should be eaten from the same person who took mannat. I took many mannat for the sake of my kids like apple picking and of cradle and if I have kid I won't dress up him from house than my relatives used to give clothes for him and some people believe that even till the time the child himself doesn't demand for dress but I didn't take that one I just took it for one year. I took mannat from Imam Bari and from that you have to knot it and after the completion of mannat you are supposed to open that knot. Other people can also seek mannat except Ahle tashi. I heard from our forefathers about mannat, its part of our belief and I personally experienced this. Our any wish can be true by using the Waseela of these specific personalities. There are different mannat for different wishes like to go for Ziarat and put lock over there for the freedom of any prisoner. The patients are chained there and are loosed when they are healthy.

And many people get well in this way. The Zaree of Imam Raza is specially used to tie the patients. I myself went to Iran for ziyarat and saw with my that people are tied with the Zaree of Hazrat Imam Raza. There is a special place for the patients. Some people themselves tie them there and seek Maula I will not leave this place till my mannat is completed. They have solid belief. Even the cancer and blind patient remain sit there for many days. The concept of mannat is found in almost every religion. For the sake of marriage, we take the mannat of Mehndi from Hazrat Qasim that is found on 7th Muharram. There is mehndi that is applied on hands and wearing bangles in this regard. When mannat is completed they give money and sweets. If the mannat is completed and you

don't fulfill here will be a great punishment. If you found anything from mannat that will suffer from some disasters.



Symbolic representations of Cradle, containing apples. Photo by Researcher

5.4) Zuljinnah Mannat

In Shia traditions, horses are considered to be the most valuable animals. More specifically the Arab horses breed. They are known for their power, beauty and endurance. In retrospective context, Zuljinnah was basically the name of a horse that was raised by Prophet Muhammad himself and is given a status of sacredness. Zuljinnah, O Zuljinnah, come to our home', is a slogan children raise while waiting outside their houses and processional routes of Ashura processions of the replica of sacred horse of Hazrat Imam Hussein (RA) gifted to him by his maternal grandfather Hazrat Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him). (A glimpse into historical journey of Zuljinnah, 2013)

People feel blessed if a symbolical representation of a replica horse visits a neighbourhood, rather they await for Zuljinnah to show up in form of a procession outside their homes during the days of Muharram. Mere touching this replica horse is given a spiritual importance and people feel blessed for a glimpse of this animal which is symbolic of the Zuljinnah, the original animal character of Karbala. The real name of Zuljinnah as mentioned in the traditions is, 'Mutajiz'. This was an important character that had played a role in the battle of Karbala. According to the traditions, Zuljinnah is appointed with heroic position which has saved the Imam Husain's life on some occasions and protected him from various attacks. It is also believed that Zuljinnah was the character that brought the news of Imam Husain's death to the tents of his family.

The stories goes by that when all other companions had been martyred in the battle of Karbala, only Imam Hussain (a.s) and his horse Zuljinnah remained, with few women of the family. Imam Husain made these women ride this horse to take them to the battle field for martyrdom. Bibi Sakina daughter of Imam Husain, fell into the limbs of Zuljinnah, and appealed the horse to not take his father. Hence Zuljinnah did not commence. Imam Husain got surprised by this situation and retaliated and said, "*Will you also leave me like this?*" When he

looked down and saw his daughter in the feet of Zuljinnah crying out to horse to not to take his father. Then Imam Husain put her daughter to sleep and he went on in with Zuljinnah into the battle field. After everyone had died, Zuljinnah brought Imam Husain back to the tents and was injured severely itself.

This historical character holds a spiritual importance and is throughout the year treated in a royal manner. When it is being prepared for the processions in the Muharram events, it is covered in a cloak, on a side holds apples. Mostly people wish for a house, and when the replica Zuljinnah appears, they pick up these apples. There is also this myth that if any person walks from the underneath of this replica Zuljinnah they remain safe from ailments and other general illnesses. Another myth related to Zuljinnah states that if the leftover food of the horse, that composes of pulses, if is eaten by someone sick is believed to be recovered from their illness. I can testify this myth with a personal experience. My father was diagnosed with a heart problem. His heart's valves were blocked and was in severe condition. After eating this left over pulse food of Zuljinnah my father got comparatively much better and is recovering fast from his illness.



Symbolic representation of Zuljannah, the horse of Imam Hussain (a.s). Photo by researcher

5.5) Other Votive Offerings

One of the stories that comes into my mind is about a woman who lived in our neighbourhood. She got married to the husband of her sister. This was because her sister had passed away and she even had two nieces from her deceased sister. This marriage was arranged after the tragic departure of her sister. The daughters from her sisters had also been married off to other families. One of the daughters after getting married to some stranger family, started facing atrocities from her in-laws. Not just that the husband used to beat his wife but also sisters and mother in law also showed disrespect and at times beat her up as well. Her sister-in-law were disable personals and were pretty much spoiled and used to torture her mentally. Within our neighbourhood one the members of the Shia community advised the step-mother of this girl that why does not she try offering a votive for this situation. What she did was that during the month of Muharram she took up a sweet in a clay plate and took it home and performed a prayer and later ate that sweet. The offering was that she would replace 12 plates of sweets if her wish that her daughter would return from her husband's house forever. Next year before the Muharram had begun, the mother came to the house of the woman who had advised her to perform the votive offering and complained that it is almost a year now since she had offered a votive and so far nothing has happened in her favour. She told her to be patient and have faith. Later just before the commencement of Muharram events her daughter got divorced and returned to her mother's house. It was considered as a miracle for that family.

5.6) Alam Votive Offering

Alam is basically associated with Hazrat Muhammad (saw), which He used to give in battles to his Sipasalar. Mostly it was given to Mola Ali (as) in the battles which He fought with Mola Ali (as). Afterwards from then it was given in every battle by Mola (a.s) to his Sipasalar. In the battle of Karbala, on the day of Ashura, several times Hazrat Abbas (a.s.) asked Imam Hussain (a.s.) for permission to go and fight. Each time Imam Hussain (a.s.) would reply "Abbas, you are the captain of my army, you are my 'alamdaar - the standard

bearer". Hazrat Abbas (a.s.) never argued with Imam Hussain (a.s.). Imam Hussain (a.s.) knew that if he let Abbas (a.s.) go and fight, there would be a massacre in the enemy rank. Imam Hussain's (a.s.) object was to re-awaken Islam and not to score a victory on the battle field. Just then Bibi Sakina (a.s.) came out holding a dried up mashk. She walked up to Hazrat Abbas (a.s.) and asked her uncle to fetch water. He then went to Imam Hussain (a.s.) and requested for permission to go and get water for Sakina (a.s.). Imam Hussain (a.s.) gave his permission. Abbas (a.s.) put Sakina's (a.s.) mashk on the 'alam, mounted his horse and rode up for bringing water. Hazrat Abbas (a.s.) reached the river Furaat. He filled the mashk with water. He himself was very thirsty. In fact everyone in Karbala was thirsty for 3 days but Hazrat Abbas (a.s.) was thirsty since the 2nd of Muharram for 9 days. He took the water, placed the mashk on his 'alam and started to ride back. When Hazrat Abbas (a.s.) left to go to fetch water, Imam (a.s.) stood at the gate of the camp watching the 'alam. Bibi Sakina (a.s.) was standing next to Imam Hussain (a.s.), also with her eyes fixed on the 'alam. When Abbas (a.s.) reached the river bank and bent down to fill the mashk, the 'alam disappeared from sight. When Hazrat Abbas (a.s.) lost both arms, the 'alam fell onto the ground. Sakina (a.s.) could see it any longer. Imam Hussain (a.s.) reached where Hazrat Abbas (a.s.) was lying. It was a tragic sight. Hazrat Abbas (a.s.) was lying on the ground. Both arms were severed. There was an arrow in the right eye and blood blocked the left eye. Imam Hussain (a.s.) took Hazrat Abbas (a.s.) in his arms, and kissed his forehead. Just then Maula Abbas ibne Ali (a.s.) breathed his last. Imam Hussain (a.s.) placed Sakina's mashk on the 'alam and carried the 'alam to the camp. After the tragic events of Karbala the Alam has been linked to Hazrat Abbas (as) as he was the standard bearer. It is considered a sacred symbol for Shia Muslims because it is associated with Imam Hussain's (AS) brother Hazrat Abbas (AS) the flag bearer of Banu Hashem. Alam Pak is taken out during majlis and processions. This is mostly observed in the sub-continent. Alam Pak are hoisted at homes, and Aza Khanas are adorned while majlis are organized to honor the sacrifice.



Symbolic representation of Alam or Flags, Photo by researcher

5.7) Confidentiality of the Votive Offerings

Every ritual practice has some protocols and discipline around it. Without these standards, the practice of rituals remains unqualified. This is rather fundamental and essential as the rules of the traffic are. You break a rule, you get vulnerable to accident. All the votive offerings in the same context carries similar premises around which the ritual must be performed. One of these premises that I found was during my interviews with those who had come to perform Mehndi votive offering. Some of my respondents for this reason, refused to attend to my interviews as the protocols were quit strict for not sharing the vows with anyone who is awaiting for his/her votive offering. Only when the offering is successfully executed and the results are achieved, a person can share the information.

Some votive offerings are not fulfilled at all, yet such results do not shake away the faith of the believers. They resist the idea of votive offerings as being fraud

or phoney, and states that it is they themselves from whom the supernatural is not satisfied and hence they are facing this punishment. Such cases do raise the question of such practices' authenticity and their effectiveness yet people never blame the supernatural for that. One of such respondents of mine stated that there could be a reasoning behind the nonfulfillment of their offering. It could either be their shortcomings that did not please the supernatural or it could be better this way as God never punishes somebody undue.

There were also some people whose offerings were fulfilled yet the overall situation became worse after the fulfilment. People who testified such results in their personal life were again not blaming the God for not fulfilling their desires, rather they proposed that it was the inaccuracy of their votive offering that had led to this condition, otherwise God did fulfil the promise. One my respondents told me that their wish did come true but their daughter faces troubles at her in laws. I asked about what they think about such an offering, and they provided with a very smart reply. They said, "we simply wished for our daughter to get married and we did not wish for a blessed life after marriage; so we accept this situation as we consider our offering to be not thoughtful."

Faith is indeed a strong emotion. It can make you accept every possible outcome of the offering. It is not surprising that why the votive performers are advised to stay positive in terms of the outcomes, and never to become pessimistic. This is because belief and faith are the main features of every religion and also applied when it comes to votive offering. The faith that votive offerings stand true to their nature, does its job at creating positive or optimistic vibe around the aspirant and do make them feel better, be it psychologically yet things around them do make them feel to be creating positive turns or in their favour. The power of faith and belief thus hugely impacts the cognition of an aspirant. Similarly, if nullified cases are looked upon, people keep on practicing these rituals by dismissing one nonfulfillment of desire as their own fault and would never blame the authenticity of this practice.

5.8) Personal experience with votive offering

One of my main motivation for choosing votive offering as my topic for final year thesis was of a personal experience with votive ritual. Although being an anthropologist, I was obliged to turn my direction towards rationality in my life yet my background and personal belief system never felt threatened. One of my professors stated during my initial anthropological career that anthropology does not make its students atheist, and I would certainly second to this thought of his and would here by would like to share my personal experience with this ritual.

I was in my third year of college that I was facing certain family issues and meanwhile was also attending my final exams. I had appeared in two of my exams but because of my personal situation back at home had made me ill and I was suffering from a high temperature. Even those two exams I managed them in a pretty strenuous manner. I had prepared but was unable to write. In my second exam I caught skin allergy and with frequent itches I was unable to perform the exam. When the result came I out I found that I have failed these two exams. I was worried a lot about this as people kept on saying that once you fail a subject there is no chance that you can clear that exam no matter how good you have prepared. This put me in a state of misery, stress and anxiety to an unprecedented level. I had lost hope and planned to leave the college without completing my course work. My family advised and consoled me that this would make my two years of academy go to waste. They further said that nobody has any idea about the future so I must reattempt my failed courses whatsoever. On one hand people were demotivating yet on the other hand my family supported me. Moreover, my father even said to this extent that if you failed next year as well then you can leave these studies and get yourself enrolled somewhere else. I kept on loosing hope and cried in front of my parents quite often describing my situation and projected my insecurities related to me failing again. After analysing this situation of mine, my mother advised me to perform a votive offering during Muharram. During Muharram I picked up a sweet ball, “laddu”, with ring on top of it, and prayed a short prayer. That was

a kind of an SOP that I was needed to perform while practicing out my votive. I had to eat that sweet and wear that ring for the next whole year in order for my offering to produce fruitful results. I prayed that if I will pass my exams then I would donate fourteen of such sweet balls at the same place with rings on top of them. After I had given my exams I was doubtful a little but I was also of the view that I would succeed in these exams, and this was my intuitive faith resonating within me. I had not prepared for those exams and may be that was why I was riding two ships at the same time. Whatsoever the case was, yet I had stronger faith that I will pass the exams. And when the result came out I had successfully passed all my courses.

Hence, I had to complete my vow by donating fourteen 'laddu' or sweet balls with rings on top of them at the same place. So, such a personal experience did make my faith stronger.



Hanging votive apples. Photo by researcher

6) Cultural influence over votive objects

Culture is a derived word from cultivation. Whatever is being cultivated in a particular area for utility purposes, becomes the culture of that particular area. Marriage on the other hand is more of a universal cultural trait. People in different regions of the world celebrate marriage events with particular cultural settings. Hina or Mehndi is quite a dominant cultural object of the sub-continent. It is used for dying hands not only on marriage occasions but Muslims of the subcontinent wear it on the Eid celebration as well. Although there is no solid foundation for the evidence that Shazada Qasim's wife put on Mehndi on her hand or followed the customs and traditions prevailed in subcontinental culture at her engagement, but still the stories that the preacher was telling included this cultural dye as relative to another culture. There is a high probability that this dye is a cultural trait and because pre-marital celebrations of the regions of Sub-continent involves utilisation of Mehndi as dye, makes this a cultural specific item. Arab marriages items could be different, but if not then anyhow the concept of Mehndi as a procedural event of subcontinental marriage has its own specifications and hence it reflects the local marriage patterns in this votive performance. The decorated plastic trays and plates with candles signify the local and contemporary marital cultural patterns and not Arabic. This demonstrates a soft fusion of culture and religious elements in context of votive offering. Even people from different religions residing in Pakistan, perform pre-marital events in the same way like all other Muslim families perform. Culture plays an important role in deciding how certain universal activities are to be commenced. Other items like bangles and rings are also present at votive place. These items hold no significance in historical context of Imam Husain's time whatsoever. Yet we see these objects being valued over the third component of votive offering that is the kind of desire the aspirant is wishing for.

Another aspect which is contradictory or paradoxical to the idea of cultural specific votive offering is the processions or activities during Muharram around *Zuljanah*. Horse is not a common animal or cultural specific entity in context of Pakistani society. But the importance of this animal is religious purely, and

religions are mostly trans-national in nature. *Zuljanah* carries sentimental value for the Shia people and has an important role to play in historical context for Shia Muslims. Therefore, the processions of Muharram in Pakistan and all over the diaspora of Shia Islam includes this cultural specific animal of Arabian context.

So far, I have elaborated on the historical element which a simple votive offering comprises of. Objects play another elementary role to this in terms of composition of this practice, but the third and last feature of votive performance is generally the desire to be fulfilled for the performer. This concept of cultural relativity that I have elaborated in preceding paragraph overlaps with the idea of particular desire in a way that it pictures the cultural importance and highlights the relevancy of local culture and the historic background of the votive offering.

Moreover, Pakistani society is extremely value oriented. The concept of caring for the aged, a strong value in Pakistani families is an example. Once, several nuclear families lived together, with the (grand) parents in authority. This was the extended family system. Strong family ties characterised this system, providing identity to its members (Dawn, 2011). Keep in mind this character of Pakistani society, people focus more on making good marital ties and worry for their daughters mostly to be married off to families that can keep their daughters with care, honour and maintain their integrity. This is where the cultural significance of Votive offering plays its role. Besides a society that is failing to provide its population with adequate number of jobs, gives a legitimate excuse to the adherents of certain religion to perform related votive offering so they may receive satisfying job opportunities. There is this metaphor that necessity is the mother of invention, thus, it becomes a necessity for people to articulate or practice certain votive offerings according because of their cultural or social shortcomings.

Every component of the votive ritual has its own importance. Yet this must not be confused that the objects used in votive performance are meant to resonate in the historical events as well. We have no evidence that Mehndi was a

common culture item in the Arab world back in the days of Imam Husain. The local culture has dominantly impacted the idea of historical event as well. People of the subcontinent particularly those who offer marital votive at Imam Bargha, do strongly believe that the daughter of Imam Husain's family did put on Mehndi on the occasion of Battle of Karbala. This does not nullify the historic event itself but produces an innocent belief that is influenced by the overwhelming impact of cultural items in the conscience of the public residing in the locale. Women in subcontinent decorate dishes filled with Mehndi, wear bangles, sweets and lit candles, therefore they repeat these sorts of items in votive offering as well. These all objects are cultural specific and hence becomes very much significant in the votive performances.

7) Inter-Sect votive performers

As discussed in the introductory chapters, the practice of votive offering has some utility in terms of social cohesion, tolerance and solidarity among people of multi-faith societies. In this section I intend to glorify this aspect of religious nature that potentially provides a harmonised platform for social co-existence. In times of emerging religious frictions and in some cases extreme hostility, phenomena like votive appear to be precious and as luck would have it, one must cash on such opportunity in terms of catalysing the society's adverse religious elements. It has become an utter requirement to somehow assist the process of social co-existence. Multiple NGOs practically try to articulate practices, conduct seminars, and act as social pressure groups to highlight the issues of tolerance among multi-religious communities. Their radical solutions have so far not bore any fruitful and substantial results. Their approach to produce harmony is not in synchronisation with the collective religious psyche of the general populous. As far my general observations are concerned NGOs like SAFMA in Pakistan are significantly active in providing solutions for intolerance. But their recommendations are based on secularisation or moving from hard core religious beliefs towards passive and individualistic religion. Whereas, the dilemma here is that religion in its essence performs the function of social solidarity according to Durkheim. Rather their approach for triggering tolerance in the society, enrages the religious communities and the effect becomes opposite of what they are trying to achieve.

Votive offering on the other hand, can become that stepping stone which can neutralise the hostile elements in multi-religious societies by utilising religious conceptions itself, rather providing for radical solutions. This would in turn keep the society's religious trends in mind and can potentially perform the function of social cohesion among multiple religions and sects.

Not even religious societies are commonly known to practice votive rather non-religious modern societies of west also have such a supernatural temperament of performing votive. For example, according to David Morgan, people from

religious and non-religious backgrounds offer prayers and perform votive offering at the National September 11 Memorial in Manhattan, New York (Morgan, *The practicality of Votive Culture*, 2017). Just as most people would accept aid from anyone, irrespective of their religion, so many pilgrims welcome the aid of spiritual helpers without the presumption that religious expectations are in place. The coin of devotion can be non-sectarian if the commodity to be purchased is a universal good.

Another example is from the Kalash indigenous community of Pakistan. According to Hamza Khan, the women of Kalash, albeit persisting within their own exotic religion, prefer consulting Muslim clerics for sacred amulets to push away bad spirits for the well-being of their children (Hamza, 2020). This again shows the unifying attributes that certain religious beliefs provide across religious communities.



National September 11 Memorial. Photo by David Morgan

In the same manner, I observed various people from different sectarian Muslim backgrounds, including Sunnis, participating in votive offering. For me this was a shocking discovery that not only the Shia sects perform such votive offerings but people from other sects also perform these offerings. There were

many of my respondents who were not Shia Muslims yet they were equally motivated by the votive offerings in the Imam Bargah of I-8/3 sector Islamabad.

This is majorly because both the sects share a common history. Sunni Muslims also cherished the lineage of Prophet Muhammad through the fourth caliph of Islam Hazrat Ali. This common history makes votive offering equally applicable to both the sects of Islam. Although there exist certain religious authorities that do not acknowledge this practice as legit and refutes its rationale based on Quranic verses. Yet people persists on practicing these rituals from both the sects. As mentioned earlier such practices are not limited to Islam, yet prevails in Hindu myths, Buddhism and also all other Abrahamic religions.

Votive offerings do not care about the religious background of the individual aspirant. In days of sectarian conflicts, these little traits can be highlighted to promote harmony and peace among the sects. The historical stress between the two mainstream religions of Islam i.e. Shia and Sunni Islam, has seen adverse scenarios and conflicts. These votive practices let both the sects intermingle peacefully and has the potential to uplift the possible cohesion among the Muslim Brotherhood, elevating the sectarian differences to a certain extent. If highlighted properly, votive offerings can become catalyst agent in neutralising the potential stress between these two sects. What is needed basically is a platform from where such narrations can be propagated through media and other tools. Religion is trans-cultural. It has potential to infiltrate isolated cutlers and performs a function of cohesion in societies and binds them together. Votive offerings become yet another cohesive attribute of religion that can potentially create a relative bond between the members of different sects of a Religion. This can be only possible if ideas are flourished pertaining to the articulation of votive offerings in a manner that the wider audience realise its importance at uniting the sects of Islam.

8) Belief, perceptions and Understanding the importance of Votive in cultural context

The following case study reflects on cultural trends and acceptance of votive offering generally in a modern community. People today tend to disassociate from such kind of superstitious beliefs like votive and believe in rationality more. Thus, this mind-set in our society, elaborated in the following case study presents itself in terms of cultural significance that highlights one of my objectives quite vividly. It would also shed some light upon the importance of votive if not followed through with requires sequential standards.

Case study

My respondent told me they did not have any belief on these things. She told that she did not have any child for many years and wished to have one. They tried many treatments from every possible place. Her mother-in-law had belief in “*mannat*” or votive offering to some extent and someone told her to ask for a votive that can make her daughter-in-law have a child. Her mother-in-law told his son but he did not believe in all this and got angry saying this is all in hands of Allah the Almighty and we won't practice anything like this. But my mother-in-law used to get worried and upset for her *bahu* or daughter-in-law not having a child and everyone in family and society blaming and taunting her for it. After waiting for much time when treatments from doctors were not working, the mother-in-law went and asked for a votive which was to eat an apple after offering two *rakats* or form of a prayer, praying to have a child and keeping the seeds of apple in a safe place. My respondent told that she did not believed that eating an apple can give her a child but just because her mother-in-law asked her to she did it but did not keep the seeds safely. After some time, she got pregnant and then gave birth to a child which died after two three days. When mother-in-law went to the same place where she asked for the *mannat* they came to know it did not work because the seeds were not kept safely and grew into a

tree having many apples in just a year. She said that she repented and again asked for the same *mannat* performing every step carefully and now she's again pregnant this year with full belief that the *mannat* will work positively this time.

My respondent told me that she had 3 daughters and after the fourth daughter, her family told her that they don't need another one and pressurized her they need a son or otherwise they will end the marriage. She used to teach in a school and there one of her colleagues told her that if she goes into a *majlis* of Shia(s) and ask for a *mannat* then Allah will bless her with a boy. When she went there, she asked for a *mannat* by praying through *waseela* or channel of Shehzada Ali Asghar the martyred son of Hazrat Imam Hussain. There she found a *jhoola* and someone there told her that if she wants a daughter, she should pick up the *baliyaan* or ear-tops from the *jhoola* cradle and if you want a son, you can pick up the *kurta* from the *_jhoola_*. The people there believed that when picking up the *_kurta_*, they shall say and ask to have a son and will return the same number of *_kurtas_* next year. She took a kurta and offered *Namaz* or prayer and 2 *rakats nafal* or special prayer and prayed there with intentions of having a son. Her family use to taunt her for having only daughters and criticized her that she cannot bless them with a son. This continued for years and she tolerated all of this and didn't tell anyone about it because even her own family was very strict and they didn't believe in *mannat* etc. But when her colleague told her about this, she thought about trying this too. They used to live in a village and whenever people there saw her, they all used to say that she'll have a daughter again. The trend there was that the people used to predict whether it's a boy or a girl just by looking at someone. She used to stay really worried about this but was also satisfied about the *mannat* she asked for. After a whole year before Muharram, she was blessed with a son then. She told everyone about the *mannat* and then everyone believed her. Afterwards a lot of people from her family also asked for *mannat*. A family in her relatives, who wished for a daughter, also asked for the *mannat* like her. She kept 14 *kurta* or shirt back in the *jhoola* to complete her *mannat* and from the same *jhoola* took *baliyaan* as a *mannat* with the intentions of having a daughter for her sister and now they are positively hoping to get blessed with a girl child again. My respondent also told there are different types of *mannat* according to the desire of the person. All the *mannat*

are associated with the same *jhoola* of Shehzada Ali Asghar. The *jhoola* is kept with much *adab/ ahtaram* or respect. Apples, kurta and *baliyaan* are kept in the *jhoola*. If someone just prays to have a child whether son or a daughter, he/she should take the *mannat* of Apple. *Baliyaan* is kept for the *mannat* of getting blessed with a daughter and this is through (waseela) of Janab-e-Sakina the sister of Shehzada Ali Asghar. Same way, if someone wants a son then they have to take kurta from *jhoola* as a *mannat*.

9) Summary and Conclusion

9.1) Summary

Votive offering is a historic religious practice and encompasses every polytheistic and monotheistic religions. Not even disciplined religions allow this practice but even religions that are not fully developed or are not in the mainstream does have this feature of votive offering as an important dogma. Various archaeological evidences claim for this practice of votive to be present as far as Greek civilisation and even further in history.

It is basically an attempt by a faithful follower of a religion to favour for their desires to be fulfilled. These wishes and whims although has no limit for an individual in the modern world, yet there exist certain votive practices that are specific and are well prepared for because of their historical importance. Such a votive offering constitutes of three fundamental features. First is the desire or the wish of the aspirant who is looking for a relief of some kind. Second is the objects that get involved in-between this ritual. For example, in case of childless families, the symbolic cradle of Shezada Qasim in Muharram processions, performs a role. This role is of spiritual significance and impacts the conscience of the onlookers or the aspirants. Third feature that is involved in the Muharram peculiar votive offerings is the historical connection between the objects and the desire of the aspirant. The historical event which is highly regarded in Shia Islam is the event of the martyrdom of Prophet Muhammad's early decedents Imam Husain. His and his family's heroic martyrdom at the battle field of Karbala is considered the emergence point of the Shia Islam and community regard this event as the hallmark feature of Shia Islam.

Although there are various votive offerings but these three features are necessary to understand for the main and highlighted votive offerings of the Muharram. Marital votive offering, Cradle votive offering, Zuljinnah votive offerings are the main streamlining votive offerings of the Muharram days that involve all these three features of a votive offering. On the other hand there are

various offerings that do not have any related historical connection yet secondary objects and desire makes these offerings more personal and not in limelight.

The main objectives of this research were to enlist various Votive practices during Muharram in Shia Islam. The discussed votive performances included Marital votive, that were associated with those aspirants who faced difficulty at arranging a spouse for themselves or who have some troubles with their in-laws. Secondly the most discussed votive offering in historical context in this thesis were of cradle votive, that signified the martyrdom of Shezada Qasim, and couples who are unable to conceive a child for themselves usually participate in this votive offering. *Zuljanah* votive has also been discussed in detail that provides remedy for ailments. Other votive offering includes like my personal experience where I tried to cope with my exams by performing a votive offering. Another objective that my research focused on was to highlight the cultural significance of votive offering during Muharram. Hinna or a local dye known as *Mehndi* is basically a cultural trait of subcontinental society and the way it is represented is very much cultural in context. This practice has been infiltrated into the religious practice of Shia Islam.

The data collection methods for this research included participant observation, ethnographic research to certain extent, and in-depth interviews with the votive performers from different sects of Islam. The tools at my disposal were to record the interviews was my smart phone which I used for photography as well to provide the reader with visual data as well for better contemplation of the votive objects.

The locale of my fieldwork was the Shia community centre or ImamBargah of sector I-8/3 Islamabad. Although I also visited other Imambarghas as well for variety of data and interviewing, helping my sample size to be more random. The gaps that I found during my literature review consisted of cultural significance of votive offering during Muharram. I was unable to come across any material that tried to elucidate the relation between the Pakistani culture and votive performances.

There are certain set of protocols that are believed to be essential for the purpose of making votive offering effective. These include a particular prayer, object like rings to be worn throughout the year, or the apple seeds to be placed carefully in the soil after eating the apple, and returning the offering as vowed last year back to the place where the aspirant has vowed. Moreover, it is also majorly advised not to share ones desire or purpose of offering a votive openly in public as it might refuse to execute positively.

Last but not the least, I discovered votive offering to be cross sectarian and cross religious as well at times. This practice absorbs the devotional people from multiple religious or sectarian backgrounds and can potentially play its part in providing a sound and peaceful practice that can annex the endeavours of communities to nullify the hostile elements that persists in our societies on the basis of religion itself.

9.1) Conclusion

To comprehend the contextual definition of votive i.e. during Muharram, one must decipher in-depth the ontological nature of Votive practiced by Shia Islam during Muharram. Objects involved for instance in the votive practices play an important and key role in order to constitute the votive practice as a whole. There has been very little research over the topic of cultural significance of Votive offering and its relationship with the local culture in context of Pakistan. This research has approximately elaborated on this idea or conception keeping in mind the culture of Pakistan or the subcontinent. It is important to make a distinction here that religion, mostly monotheistic religions, is potentially a trans-cultural social institute. It can spread through multiple cultures yet would attempt to maintain its core doctrines and keep it pure from cultural influences that gets in its way. On the other hand, culture is a complex whole that includes infrastructure, practices and language that keeps on changing as the geography or locations where humans reside changes. The adaptation or

infusion of a trans-national religion in local culture somehow or the other influences the practices of religion to a certain extent. Moreover, this research also concludes that cultural patterns that are more rational disassociate with this practice yet the cultural importance of votive offerings in religious people is huge and potentially results in failure of completion of votive offering if standard procedures are not followed strictly. Moreover, votive offerings that are shaped to some extent according to the cultural specific. Thus, we can state that votive offerings during Muharram has an important relationship with local culture. Votive offering also carries some cultural significance. The local culture of hospitality reflects itself in votive offering, where people from multiple religious backgrounds unite on a single platform and practice votive. This research also claims for Votive to act as a unifying agent in the multi-religious society, and hence can become an important passive religious doctrine to bring about harmony among the various religious or sectarian communities. My respondents were mostly females. This was because most of the problems that offerors had were related to the women. For instance, the episode of divorces and atrocities encountered by the women were mostly because of the subordinate status of the women in our patriarchal society. Although there were men also offering their votive but number of women surpassed highly the number of men performing. Every class, gender and people with all educational backgrounds had affiliation with this practice. Everyone from every possible category of our society was present their showing the in-depth association with the belief of supernatural. This belief has surely exhibited its force and potency to influence minds across the board of social organisation. It affirmative that majority belonged to the less affluent class and female gender but in some instances upper class and highly educated individuals also perform votive.

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Glossary

Alms: Flags

Chaddar: Shrine cloth that covers the grave of the saint

Fatwa: Islamic Legal pronouncement

Jhula: a form of swing cradle for infants

Laddu: Sweet balls, a local desert

Majlis: sermon

Mehndi: A reddish brown dye usually used to make designs on hands and feet

Niaz: Edible oblation items distributed among people