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Research Article

The Evolution of the ʻAlam: A Historical and Cultural Analysis of Its Role in Shi'a Rituals and Indian Traditions

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About Article

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ABSTRACT

This research study examines the historical development of the ʻAlam flag symbol of Shia ritual in the context of Indian ritualistic traditions. This study focuses on the Qutb Shāhī dynasty of Deccan and the Nawabi dynasty of Awadh, tracing the introduction and transformation of the ʻAlam flag from a military standard to a sacred element in the Shi'a ritual practices. This study challenges prevailing assumptions regarding ʻAlam as an army symbol, demonstrating instead its transformation and evolution into a sacred ritual symbol embedded in the devotional context. This study covers a range of the medieval period to trace the emergence of Shiite culture in India, including the Delhi Sultanate, Mughal empire, Awadh kingdom in the north, and Qutb Shāhī dynasty in the south, thereby situating ʻAlam with broader cultural, political, and aesthetic developments. By employing a historical-analytical methodology, the research studies fieldwork, epigraphic analysis, and archival research. It studies material evidence such as inscriptions, metal, and iconography of ʻAlams, and incorporates oral traditions to contextualise its ritual significance.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The ʿAlam, as a ritual flag with important religious and cultural implications, is important in Islamic ritual practices, particularly in Shi'a communities (Calmard & Allan, 2014). It has been perceived historically as a copy of the flag of the Prophet Muhammad and his family, and, in the Shi'a context, the ʿAlam exemplifies memorialization for the battle of Karbala, specifically as a remembrance of the martyrdom of Husayn ibn ʿAlī and his half-brother Abbas ibn ʿAlī. With an ʿAlam as typically a finial attached to a pole or spear, it is carried as a religious object in religious processions. The ʿAlam originates in early Islamic military banners in the 7th and 8th centuries CE, but centuries later has been transformed into a religious object that has become supplemental to religious devotion in Shi'a as practised in South Asia. Most studies have reduced the ʿAlam to a universal signifier of Shi'a lamentation or as an unchanging military standard, without regard for the implications of its history. This study challenges those presuppositions by reconstructing the emergence of the ʿAlam from a martial emblem and insignia attributed to Shi'a sovereignty to an object that has become ritualized as the central object in the Shi'a religious life in India. To accomplish its goals, this study focuses on two important dynastic contexts: the Qutb Shāhī dynasty of the Deccan and the Nawabi dynasty of Awadh, between the 16th and 19th centuries. This research intends to answer the following central question: How did the ʿAlam shift from a military standard to a sacred symbol of Shi'a religious identity in the political, cultural, and ritual contexts of India, specifically in the Deccan and Awadh? This study presents new original contributions through historical analysis, documentation and fieldwork, epigraphic analysis, and archival research. This research connects multiple frameworks of ritual symbolism, material culture, and the aesthetics of sectarianism; thus, providing new understandings of the visual and material world of Indian Shi'ism, which is largely absent from other studies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The paper examines a corpus of scholarly literature that considers the history, symbolism, and materiality of the ʿAlam, relating to Shiʿa practices, particularly in South Asia. The literature review identifies how the ʿAlam operates as a religious symbol and as a marker of a collective identity through different times and spaces. It takes into consideration the multifaceted nature of this symbol through the lenses of ritual symbolism, material cultures, and sectarian aesthetics. It takes into consideration the multifaceted nature of this symbol through the lenses of ritual symbolism, material cultures, and sectarian aesthetics.

The ethnographic study conducted by Ghoolam Vahed that engaged with Indian Shiʿa communities in South Africa describes how Muharram rituals, focusing on the ʿAlam, strengthened group coherence and communal identity. Vahed's analysis draws on Victor Turner in his assessment of "communitas" in rituals normative of similar, locally contextualized ʿAlam. Vahed's ethnography is to some extent grounded in a singular context, and while informative, the study does not fully account for regional variation within India, an element absent from Vahed's research on communal practices and material expressions of the ʿAlam, which may require comparative work.

Old historical sources such as Tabqat-i-Akbar Shāhī (1594), Khafi Khan's writings, and the European travel accounts of Tavernier (1648, 1652), Thevenot (1665-66), and Bernier (1667) give early depictions of Muharram activities and celebrations in Golconda and Hyderabad. While descriptively rich, they are often orientalist or court visions and do not engage critically with indigenous ritual symbolisms and sectarian aesthetics. M.H.A. Baqari's studies of Ashūrkhānahs in Hyderabad form the cornerstone of understanding the embedding of the ʿAlam within architectural and ritual geographies, meaning they capture the material culture facet. However, his work remains predominantly regional and lacks even comparative possibilities across dynasties and sects. A. Ghauri's political histories of the Qutb Shāhs provide timely Persianate contexts for understanding various categories of actors at the courts, yet these studies are not devoted to the specific ritual objects or the ways in which such objects shift in symbolic meanings.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research has employed a two-pronged approach for exploring how the study of ʿAlam has developed and changed over time. The first part of the approach looked at ʿAlams as physical objects in and from museums, private collections, and Shia ritual spaces. Fieldwork was done in relevant Shia cultural sites, where key historic materials, manuscripts, and oral histories were collected to come to know how ʿAlam plays a role in religious usage and ceremony. This would include documenting variations and differences in several features of individual Alams over time, including materials of construction, colours of cloth and inscriptions, ornamentation, and shape. A portion of the fieldwork was also conducted in various cities in India, including Hyderabad, Lucknow, and parts of Awadh and the Deccan region, to navigate where/how ʿAlams were first introduced and evolved in South Asia. The second methodology of this research involved studying manuscripts, paintings, and visual records to explore how ʿAlam has been depicted in historical, cultural, and religious contexts. Research was conducted in European archives and museum collections, and especially those that were focused on Persian and Islamic art, which was useful in developing both the comparative material for this research as well as for thinking about the design and signification of ʿAlam. Resources such as documents and manuscripts were accessed in several libraries and other institutions.

3.1. Historical background of the ʿalam in the indian subcontinent

The growth and development of the ʿAlam in the Indian subcontinent can be viewed considering the wider historical processes that accounted for the growth of Shi'ism in India. Starting with the 7th and 8th centuries CE, Shi'a people and small groups came to the Indian subcontinent mostly because of political persecution or as part of elite factional migration; they set into motion processes of distinct religious-related traditions and material traditions (Safaei, 2019). Hollister also points out that Shi'a migrants had moved to the subcontinent not in huge waves but in movements that were gradual, continuous, and drew from regional religion.

In the 10th century, with the emergence of transregional

movements such as the Fatimid movement, Shi'a cultural remnants became more visible in parts of the Indian subcontinent. During the establishment of the early Delhi Sultanate of the Slave and Khilji dynasties and the Tughlaq dynasty in the 14th century, there were numerous indications of military and ceremonial banners and standards. In this period, indications of banners, which were both termed tugh or ʿAlam, have been encountered, although it is unclear whether these banners had an explicitly religious function. By 1206 CE, during the Gwalior campaign led by Iltutmish, reports exist of tazkirs or sermons that might take place each evening in the military camp during Muharram. The banners were dark in colour and rectangular, which matched stylistically the Ghaznavid accounts of military banners because they typically resembled Ghaznavid prototypes (Siraj, 1864).

The earliest documented links of ʿAlam and Muharram ceremonies in India are represented in the example of the Sufi saint Miran Sayyid Husayn Khingsawar Mashhadi (d. 1206 CE) from Taragarh, Ajmer, which dates to 1195 CE (Hussain, 2013). According to Professor Azeezuddin (2009), ʿAlams associated with Imām Husayn were present as religious ʿAlams at the shrine of Qutb-ud-Din Bakhtiyar Kaki, who died around 1235 CE. These examples demonstrate that Sufi institutions were among the first to convey Shi'a ritual objects and imageries into the Indian cultural environment. The early incorporation of the ʿAlam into Sufi modes of devotion is important because it represented how this symbol had already surpassed sectarian boundaries to become a common element of Islamic devotional culture in India. Sufi orders engaged in Shi'a ritual practices, which, in some way, if not part of its immediate goal, enabled these forms of Ahlulbayt-specific devotion to be accepted into local ritual systems and helped with their establishment in a syncretic setting where the ʿAlam could acquire new meanings and relationships beyond that of war memorials.

During the Tughluq period, there is also additional evidence for the use of banners in both religious and legal settings. In his travel account regarding his journey to Delhi in 1324 CE, Ibn Battuta indicates that certain Syed families, who stemmed from the Hijaz and Iraq and migrated under the reign of Muhammad ibn Tughluq, lived in Delhi. These families may have fled to this region due to persecution; nevertheless, they seem to have enjoyed a relatively secure legal and social status. This period's documentation mentions Twelver Shi'a rituals that employed both emblems and minbars; whether this text shows the institutionalization of Shi'a ritual culture is yet to be determined. The Khilji and later Sayyid and Lodi dynasties retained the practices of ceremonial banners, which were typically green and depicted iconographic forms such as lions, crescents, and emblems of the sun. Thus, these banners likely represented political power and sectarian affiliation. The rule of Ghiyas al-Din Tughluq (1320-1325 CE) provides a different perspective on symbolic meaning. The name Tughluq was sometimes etymologically related to the word tugh, which means 'standard-bearer,' although the relationship is not definitively established by any available documents. In his account, Curtis (1839) mentioned the practice of serving food on 'Ashura (Simnani, 1965) and refers to smaller circular ʿAlams that are represented in limited text and material sources with single shafts (Dehkhoda, 1965).

In the 14th and 15th centuries, the religious significance of the ʿAlam became more firmly established in connection with Sufi ritual practice. Sayyid Muhammad Ashraf Jahangir Simnani (d. 1436-37), a prominent Sufi figure, is credited with introducing the ʿAlam into public devotional settings. His text, the Lata'if-i-Ashrafi, explains this practice in terms of continuity. He provided a framework for this activity in his Lata'if-i-Ashrafi, treating it as an act of continuity with aspects of early Islamic traditions, including a symbolic transfer of banners to ʿAlī ibn Abi Talib. The way Simnani explains this, the Prophet gave the ʿAlam to ʿAlī at the campaign of Khaybar, creating a precedent for later Sufi ritual observance.

The transmission of ʿAlams through Sufi networks continued in Kashmir, where the Hamdani Syeds, particularly Mir Sayyid ʿAlī Hamdani (1312-1385 CE), brought ritual objects that are still preserved in his shrine. These ʿAlams are believed by some traditions to have belonged to the Prophet, although their stylistic features suggest Iranian origin (Bhat *et al.*, 2020). Around the same time, the Sufi Bū ʿAlī Qalandar was observed performing circumambulation under a sacred ʿAlam, further affirming the early devotional role of such symbols (Dehlavi, 1963). This shows a transformation of ʿAlam from a military marker primarily to one of politics to a ritual symbol as a sacred object. This progression followed complicated interactions between Sufi orders, communities in migration, and local traditions, all leading up to the more involved developments to follow from Shi'a dynasty patronage in the Deccan and northern India. The transformation of ʿAlam from battlefield to shrine illustrates the larger religious transformation and cultural amalgamation, important for defining the development of Islam in India.

The transformation of ʿAlams from the 14th to the 18th century exemplifies their increasing salience in the religious and cultural formulations of the Indian subcontinent. Initially used in the context of Sufi commemorative functions, these objects became basic to Shi'a commemorative functions and served as a basis of entry into various imperial and regional political constructs (Hermansen, 2012). Just as the Safavids had, the Mughal Empire exhibited similar uses for the ʿAlams, evolving their design and use over time. The Mughals were also developers of ʿAlams, as the Timurid tradition established their appearances in the Mughal courtly milieu, with references in Tuzūk-i-Taimurī describing ʿAlams as indicators of piety and military power (Khan, 1970). Babur (r. 1526-1530) was a developer of this tradition as well, giving ʿAlams to his followers, as noted in the Baburnamā, as indications of legitimacy and divine sanction (Verma, 2016).

Although its royal provenance was retained, the ʿAlam took on an explicitly religious significance within the Mughal universe. Humayun (r. 1530–1540) received a pair of ʿAlams with invocations of ʿAlī (Nād-i-ʿAlī) when a courtier returned from Karbala, thus reinforcing their sacredness. Ain-i-Akbarī records five ʿAlams with Akbar (r. 1556–1605), carried in scarlet cloth bags during the emperor's processions (Hussain, 2013). ʿAlams were sent to the shrine of Imām ʿAlī ar-Ridhā in Mashhad, Iran. During this period, mourning spaces like Imāmbāra Chand Suraj in Amroha (Naqvi, 2018) and the Sheikhan Muhalla of

Fatehpur Sikri were utilising them in their ritual spaces.

The Persian artistic influence on Mughal ʿAlams continued to grow during Jahāngīr's reign (r. 1605–1627), instigated by Nur Jahān and the court's fascination with Shāh ʿAbbās I (Rogers, 2018). Persian metalworkers contributed to the sophistication of ʿAlam production by engineering calligraphic inscriptions and advanced decorative features. Edward Terry and other European visitors recorded the royal Mughal standard and the Nād-i-ʿAlī symbols, as well as representations of Persian and indigenous aspects. This cultural exchange was still alive under Shāh Jahan (r. 1628–1658), as he commissioned elaborate ʿAlams with Nishān-i-lashkar (Terry, 1777), embracing the significance of the goods. Despite the diminishing authority of the Mughals, the ʿAlams maintained their position. Shāh Ālam II (r. 1712–1748), sympathetic to the Shi'a tradition (Rocco, 1920), ordered designs that are archived in museums in Europe and India. The patronage ensured ʿAlams remained important in Shi'a religious culture while adapting to dynamic socio-political and artistic contexts.

3.2. ʿAlams of qutb shāhī dynasty

The research on ʿAlams from the Qutb Shāhī period has been informed by field studies carried out at several ʿĀshūrkhānahs in and around Hyderabad and in the larger Deccan. The research was informed by visual analysis of the artefacts, material studies, oral accounts, as well as architectural surveys (Table 1). The research was also informed by archival data and oral accounts obtained from local custodians and historians. Most of the ʿAlams still available today are from the Qutb Shāhī, Adil Shāhī, and Nizam Shāhī, and early Asaf Jahī periods; however, detailed archival evidence was lacking; thus, the present analysis relied on epigraphic details and oral accounts. The lack of excellent archival documentation has only made the role of direct fieldwork and community knowledge even more relevant for understanding these ritual material objects. The attached table demonstrates selected ʿĀshūrkhānahs studied during the fieldwork, with the estimated age of the ʿAlams and their location.

Table 1. ʿĀshūrkhānah studied during the study

ʿĀshūrkhānah Name	Location	Estimated Age
ʿĀshūrkhānah Alawa Yatima	Tiflaan-e-Muslim, Dabirpura	~800 years
ʿĀshūrkhānah Qadam Rasool	Near Gulzar Bazar	700–800 years
ʿĀshūrkhānah Abul Fazlil Abbās	Badi Dargah, Diwan Diwdi	600–700 years
ʿĀshūrkhānah Yakutpura	Yakutpura	~650 years
ʿĀshūrkhānah Golconda	Golconda	~440 years
ʿĀshūrkhānah Alawa-Sartauq	Darulshifa	~442 years
ʿĀshūrkhānah ʿʿAlī Pahad	Wadiaram	~400 years
Masjid-e-Tahmasp	Khanpura	~400 years
ʿĀshūrkhānah Chandulal Dela Feel Khan	Gaolipura	~400 years
ʿĀshūrkhānah Bibi ka Alawa	Keesra	~400 years
ʿĀshūrkhānah Shāhīzada Qasim	Koh-e-Imām ʿʿAlī	~400 years
ʿĀshūrkhānah Shāhīzada Qasim	Nampally	~350 years
ʿĀshūrkhānah Taqī Hussain	Hyderabad suburb	~350 years
ʿĀshūrkhānah Koh-e-Imām ʿʿAlī	Sainikpuri	~350 years
ʿĀshūrkhānah Musheerabad	Musheerabad	176 years
ʿĀshūrkhānah Panjetani	Hyderbabad	76–80 years

The Qutb Shāhī rulers made important contributions to the development of a regional Deccani aesthetic for ʿAlam design (Khalidi, 1990). These objects typically feature a teardrop or pear-shaped form, usually topped with three vertical shafts, or more often, sticks, at the centre. The earliest examples drew upon the localised versions of Safavid designs that transitioned to India through Iranian migration and exchange. As the Qutb Shāhī state matured, the objects adopted new stylistic characteristics and craftsmanship through the appropriation of local materials, craftsmanship, and aesthetic sensibilities. The completion of Quli Qutb Shāh's formal Badshahi ʿĀshūrkhānah in 1591 also began to regularly formalise the ʿAlam into the ritual architecture of Hyderabad (Ruffle, 2020).

The establishment of ʿĀshūrkhānahs, or single-use buildings deliberately designed to house and display ʿAlams, is also significant for the formalisation of Shi'a ritual practice in its institutionalisation through Qutb Shāhī patronage. In this way, the architecturally based space created a permanent location for the veneration of the ʿAlam, transforming an object that acted predominantly as a processional symbol into a fixed object of devotion (Luther, 1991). The modification shows the continued contingent importance of an ʿAlam in Shi'a worldly and religious life and increasing importance as a part of social identity formation in spaces of communalism.

A distinctive aspect of the era was the advent of the Hussainī ʿAlam for Imām Husayn and his brother Abbas ibn ʿAlī. The two primary forms of Hussainī ʿAlam, Hussainī ʿAlam Kalān and Hussainī ʿAlam Khurd (Figure 1), were commissioned with the Golconda Fort complex. These objects had engravings of the Twelve Imāms with the replaced engraving of the first three caliphs of Sunni Islam. This displayed devotional practice paired with affirmative Twelver Shi'a identification under Qutb Shāhī Adoration, which would be consistent with other practices in Safavid Iran.

Figure 1. Hussainī ʿalam khurd, golconda fort, 1592–1593.

This intentional sectarian marking of the ʿAlam through inscriptional content demonstrated an existing role for it in articulating and reinforcing Shi'a theological positions. By inscribing the names of the Twelve Imāms while omitting the names of the first three caliphs (whose legitimacy Shi'a reject), these ʿAlams had become material expressions of doctrinal difference. Those Shia communities that used to live along with Sunnis were not only influenced by them; often, there were Sunni ritual spaces that were also established, asserting internal and sectarian solidarity.

The Qutb Shāhī ʿAlams were heavily laden with the use of zoomorphic imagery. The most obvious of these were dragons (Azadahā or makarā), usually depicted with emerald eyes and forked tongues, as symbols of power, courage, and divine protection. Their implications in Shi'a theology also represented the legendary sword Zulfaqār, the bifurcated sword of Imām ʿAlī, associated with justice and divine sanction. The emerald eyes were metaphors for spiritual vision and insight, while the forked tongue suggested a more moral duality—truth and falsehood, justice and tyranny—signalling a continual struggle between justice and oppression.

The materials used for these ʿAlams were gold, silver, brass, bronze, copper, and Panchalohā—a combination of five metals that is considered to be auspicious and sacred in Indian religious history. The change from earlier patterns limited to ironwork to metalwork reflecting a greater sophistication from the late sixteenth century, as well as cross-regional introductions, along with developments in Deccani metallurgy, reflects the significance of Iranian influence as well as practices. The Bidri style first appeared in the Deccan under the Bahmani emperors and sometimes made its way into the production of these ʿAlams. Although there are few examples of Bidri ʿAlams there are examples of them in some private collections, including those of Nawab Sartaj Jung, Mubasshir ʿAlī Khan, and Jagdish Mittal.

3.3. Categories of qutb shāhī ʿalam

I have identified four physical and functional types of Qutb Shāhī ʿAlams based on shape, ornamentation, material composition, and ritual context. These characteristics illustrate both diversity in art-forming and ritual contexts as highlighted through research and fieldwork.

i. Flat almond or off tear-drop shaped ʿalams: The group includes ʿAlams that have a flat almond or slightly elongated teardrop shape and are often presented with steel shafts. The major feature is made from metalwork that has occurred in piercing and which possesses upper blades that extend beyond the body of the ʿAlam. On either side of the blade, two projecting leaves flank the composition, with stylised dragon heads positioned at the lateral extremities. This group combines symbolic ferocity with balanced symmetry, drawing on both Iranian iconographic conventions and Deccani artistic idioms (Figure 2).

ii. Pear-shaped ʿalams with medallion and dragons: The second group is defined by ʿAlams featuring a flat pear-shaped body. These include projecting dragon heads along the sides and an ornamented upper blade that often terminates in or is surrounded by additional dragon motifs. Where the blade joins the openwork medallion, further decorative layering is found. This group displays greater visual density and a pronounced emphasis on zoomorphic symbolism, connecting the object to themes of divine guardianship and protective power (Figure 3).

iii. Calligraphic and geometric almond-shaped ʿalams: The third group comprises almond-shaped ʿAlams that omit zoomorphic or floral motifs such as dragons, leaves, or finials. Instead, these emphasise epigraphic and geometric ornamentation, showcasing complex calligraphy, often in mirror script (musannā), and symmetrical geometric arrangements. These forms prioritise theological content, with inscriptions of Qur'anic verses or names of the Twelve Imāms serving as the principal decorative and devotional feature (Figure 4).

iv. Palm-shaped ʿalams with abrak: The fourth group consists of three-pronged, palm-shaped ʿAlams, which are common to the Deccan and were associated with the use of sandalwood paste (known as Khāk-i-Shifā), which is considered to have medicinal properties. This group often contained or had Abrak applied to it. Abrak is a metallic or silver glittering substance used in devotional contexts; the historical sources mention that it was also applied to the Mubarak Kalān (sacred white cloths) during Muharram rituals, creating an impression that we associate today with stars descending from the sky. In the Qutb Shāhī period, ʿAlams were decorated using similar aesthetic practices so that they twinkled in spirit during mourning rituals and processions (Figure 5).

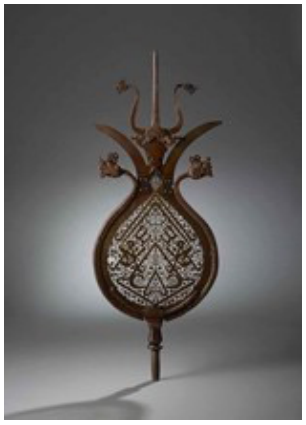

Figure 2. Flat almond shaped

Figure 3. Pear-shaped

Figure 4. Calligraphic almond-shaped

Figure 5. Palm shaped

3.4. ʻAlams of awadh dynasty (1722-1858)

In northern India, the Awadh dynasty emerged as a major locus of Shi'a political power and religious patronage during the decline of the Safavid Empire in Iran (1722) and the Qutb Shāhī dynasty in the Deccan (1687). The Awadh dynasty was aligned in its cultural and religious histories with Persian traditions, producing a rich and significant Shi'a material culture and ritual and architectural development while serving as an important centre for Shi'a Islam. The dynasty was founded by Sa'adat ''Alī Khan, who was followed in succession by his nephew and son-in-law, Safdar Jang (1739-1754), who sanctioned the institutionalized observance of Shi'a religious rites mainly through the commissioning of ʻAlams and the building of Imāmbāras.

Shuja'-ud-Daulā, the son of Safdar Jang, is remembered as the person during whose time we see the first organised ʻAlam processions recorded in Uttar Pradesh. This was a turning point in creating a ritualisation of ʻAlam-bearing processions in Faizabad under the auspices of Shuja'-ud-Daulā. This period is also significant because of Sadr Jahan Begum, who, after her marriage to Shuja'-ud-Daulā, constructed an Imāmbāra at Moti Bagh and installed the ʻAlams, which were the established form influenced by Safavid forms. References from the historical studies record the use of the ʻAlam in a military context, such as when Sayyid Ghulām ʻAlī Khan wrote about the Third Battle of Panipat (1761) (Rizvi, 1969). There is also a famous record from this period when, during a meeting between Shuja'-ud-Daulā and Ahmad Shāh Durrani, the Afghan ruler collected Shuja'-ud-Daulā's tears in his handkerchief in reverence (it was after he witnessed his mourning for Imām Husayn) (Haider, 1896). This indicates that the deep emotive and spiritual reverence for the ʻAlam is related to a broader Shi'a identity.

The capital of the dynasty was moved to Lucknow by Asaf-ud-Daulā (1775-1797), who presided over a golden age of Shi'a religious architecture, not least due to the construction of the Great Imāmbāra in 1784. It was at this time that the use of Taziyāh began to expand both ritually and architecturally, and Jawahar ʻAlī Khan, the Khwajā sara and secretary to Bahu Begum, was a significant advocate for Shi'a art and practice. He acquired an Imāmbāra in Faizabad that allowed for the display of various sizes of ʻAlams and Taziyāh, some of which have survived to this day. The addition of rectangular fabric banners, or patkā, added to ʻAlam became a feature of the Awadhi ritual aesthetic (Knighton, 1990).

The architectural integration of ʻAlams in the Imāmbāras is a substantial shift in their ritual use and symbolic meaning. By including them in permanency in the religious buildings, the Nawabs of Awadh placed ʻAlams out of the category of a temporary object of procession to a permanent signifier of sanctified religious space. Gilded and silver ʻAlams were installed during the reign of Sa'adat ʻAlī Khan II (1798-1814), particularly at the shrine of ʻAbbās ibn ʻAlī in Lucknow. He also sponsored the construction of the Dargāh of ʻAbbās ʻAlambardar, a replication of the Karbala shrine. According to

local traditions, the Sufi dervish Mirza Faqeera Beg was divinely guided to discover a hand-shaped ʿAlam, which became a sacred relic enshrined in the Dargāh. William Knighton (1855) later observed this relic displayed on the fifth day of Muharram, elevated on a platform with numerous accompanying ʿAlams and emblems, drawing large crowds offering prayers and nazr (sacred offerings).

Successive rulers such as Ghazi ud-Din Hyder (1814-1827) upheld this tradition by constructing Shāhnajaf Imāmbāra, a replica of the Najaf shrine of Imām ʿAlī, whose interior was adorned with numerous ʿAlams bearing iconography such as the lion and the mahi-maratib, or "Fish of Dignity," a Persian-origin Mughal military honour that later found its way into Awadhi ʿAlams (Sleeman, 1995). Initially granted as a sign of prestige to exceptional commanders, this emblem is absent in Safavid ʿAlams, appearing instead in Qajarī versions.

Knighton noted that, during the reign of Nasir-ud-Din Haider (1827-1837), as many as fifty thousand ʿAlams were carried in Muharram processions. In addition to lion imagery, as opposed to older dynasties' dragon representations, ʿAlams displayed variations that were intended to emphasise distinctive features such as differences in size or decoration. ʿAlam mounted on elephants had also become prominent, drawing more spectators to the already grand processions compared to previous dynasties.

The scale and spectacle of these Muharram processions under the patronage of Nawabi rulers turned the ʿAlam from a mainly religious symbol into a constitutive aspect of public culture and civic identity through the participation of tens of thousands in the public spaces dedicated to the displays of the dynamics of these ritual processions. These public rituals served not only religious purposes but also political ones, demonstrating the Nawabs' piety and legitimacy while reinforcing social hierarchies and power relations through elaborate protocols of precedence and display.

The Kamān ka ʿAlam was introduced during the Nawabi era, especially in the Muharram processions. This style has roots in the proto-style of the Safavid era, where the symbolism of the ʿAlam was already developing in terms of its use in religious and commemorative events. Kamān ka ʿAlam, a black pole bearing two swords hung from a reversed bow, first documented in Amroha in 1797, became emblematic of Shi'a military-religious symbolism. Though originally signs of victory called nishān, they were assimilated into Shi'a devotional rituals across India (Figure 6). European travellers such as Della Valle, Kotov, Olearius, Tavernier, and Chardin recorded the impressive scale and visual impact of these standards in Safavid Muharram processions.

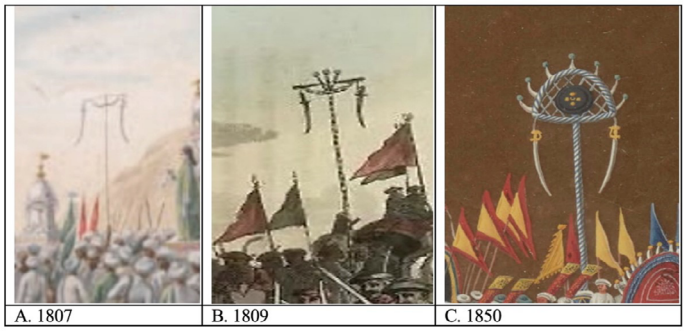

Figure 6. Nishān ʿAlams of the awadh region in different illustrations.

During Muhammad 'Alī Shāh's reign (1837-1842), ʿAlams were paraded atop seventeen elephants, with attendants in black robes holding banners inscribed with the names of the Panjtan in silver thread. Amjad ʿʿAlī Shāh (1842-1847) purchased a valuable ʿAlam from Prince Mirza Haider Shikoh and later oversaw the construction of the Imāmbāra of Sibtainabad and Imāmbāra of Umdah Mahal, Mathiaburj, Kolkata (Figure 7), where these banners were prominently displayed. Similarly, the Imāmbāra of Makkāh Darzi in Sitapur, built during Asaf-ud-Daulā's period, incorporated ʿAlams as integral architectural elements.

Figure 7. Imāmbarā umdah mahal, mathiaburj, kolkata.

This tradition continued under Wajid ʿAlī Shāh (1847-1856), prime minister of the Awadh region, whose court marked the height of Awadhi Shi'a culture. The ʿAlams associated with this era adopted peacock motifs and mahi maratib, with an idiom of taking indigenous and fusing it with Persian. After the British forced Wajid ʿAlī Shāh into exile to Calcutta, he took several ʿAlams with him and audaciously constructed an Imāmbāra that preserved many aspects of the ritual legacy of Lucknow. The persistence of ritual forms, artistic motifs, and symbolic iconography all demonstrates the significant role of the ʿAlam in Awadhi Shi'a culture. The looting of ʿAlams during Wajid ʿAlī Shāh's exile demonstrates their utility as portable models of religious and cultural identity and also creates royal identities for the king. In a setting of political crisis and cultural ruptures, these material objects articulated concrete links of after-awareness to homeland and continuity of tradition, as they allowed people to 'carry' religious networks and identity with them in different geographic contexts.

The fieldwork to study the ʿAlams of Awadh was conducted through extensive fieldwork in this region, with documentation of ritual spaces, historical and oral records, inscriptions, provenance studies, and various contemporary accounts. Due to the limited and sparse availability of the written sources, this study relied on a combination of local historical records, personal observations, findings from travelogues and diaries, and the testimonies of artisans and custodians. Among the significant sites documented from the Nawabi period in Awadh are Barā Imāmbāra (Asafi Imāmbāra), Chota Imāmbāra, Imāmbāra Naya Mahal, Shāhī Najaf Imāmbāra, Sibtainabad Imāmbāra, Imāmbāra Ghufrān Ma'ab, and the Dargāh of Hazrat ʿAbbas in Rustam Nagar.

These examples from the very early Timurid period highlight the long-standing association of ʿAlams with political power in the region, predating Shi'a rule in Awadh. By giving ʿAlams as gifts between rulers, we gain an indication of the power and prestige with which they conferred upon their giver. The ability for ʿAlams to provide a certain level of political legitimacy and define relationships of patronage and alliance was evident. The political aspect of ʿAlam symbolism would eventually become intertwined with religious meanings under the Nawabi dynasty, leading to a complicated symbolic language of religious and secular.

Several critical sites have important reservations of ʿAlams, including Imāmbāra Moghul Sahiba, Rauza-e-Kazmain (Lucknow), Imāmbāra Qasr-e-Hussainī, Ghariyawali Imāmbāra, Imāmbāra Agha Baqar, and Imāmbāra Sultanat Manzil. In addition, there are additional regional Imāmbāras in smaller towns, Kothi Rani Dulhan (Aligarh), Imāmbāra of the Royal Estate of Mahmudabad (Sitapur), Rudauli Imāmbāras (Irshadia, Rudauli), Imāmbāra of Lorpur Estate (Ambedkarnagar), Sultanpur, Rampur, Bareilly, Allahabad, Zaidpur, and Meerut. These Imāmbāras have been highly important for housing the religious and artistic heritage of Awadhi ʿAlams.

The migration of Persian artisans into Awadh illustrates the role of transregional networks in the expansion of Shi'a material culture in India. These craftspeople brought techniques, forms, and symbolic languages from Safavid Iran and transformed them to fit local contexts and local preferences. Through this cultural adaptation, the emergence of distinct regional styles that embraced both Persian influences and indigenous artistic traditions reflected a complex interplay of global and local forces in constituting Indian Shi'a identity. The diversification presented in Awadhi ʿAlams represents a melding of styles from Persia, India, and the Mughal. Early Awadhi ʿAlams, especially those from Faizabad, particularly reference ideology from the Mughal period, which would later be stylised to articulate Shi'a religious aesthetics. The most prevalent style of Awadhi ʿAlam is the Panjā, which is shaped like a symmetrical, double-gourd (Naqavi, 1897).

This newly emerged Awadh ʿAlam's Panjā form consists of:

- A broad lower section like an elongated pear, tapering at both ends and flanked by serpent-like curvatures on both sides.
- A pierced lattice of arabesque and floral motifs with calligraphic inscriptions.
- A foliated finial developed in a spearhead-like tip, often adorned with embossed and pierced patterns.

This Panjā form has the inscription of the names of the five holy figures in Shia Islam (Panjtan): the Prophet Muhammad, Imām ʿAlī, Fatima, Imām Hasan, and Imām Husayn. By associating the ʿAlam with such theological significance, it is now tied to essential Shi'a principles about the unique status and authority of the family of the Prophet. The hand shape also resonates with the hand of Abbas ibn ʿAlī, who was killed while trying to bring water to the camp under siege at Karbala; it is a sad reminder of Abbas' sacrifice as well as the tragedy of Karbala as a whole. This distinctive Panjā form likely evolved from Mughal prototypes, with influences from Turkish ʿAlam designs introduced into the Mughal court through its ancestral Turkic connections. Comparisons can be drawn between these ʿAlams and a mid-18th-century Turkish ʿAlam housed in the National Museum of Copenhagen, which was seized from a Turkish admiral in 1658 CE by the Danish mercenary Cort Adler.

ʿAlams that utilized Safavid inlay designs were made during the Mughal period, with some examples dating to the early seventeenth century during the reign of Shāh Jahan (1628-1658). These ʿAlams included plant decoration as well as animal forms, both of which show stylistic parallels to earlier Mughal and Deccani illuminations from the early seventeenth century (Kiran, 2020). During this period, the ʿAlam also became smaller in size, coinciding with the North Indian practice of placing these on a pole instead of the Deccan practice of placing them on the floor or applying them to a wall. There is evidence of this transition in Tughluqi finials at Haswa Imāmbāra, which would suggest a change of regional fashion in ʿAlams.

These regional variations in ʿAlam display and usage embody different ritual practices that suggest regional spatial practices within Indian Shi'a communities. North Indian practice mounted the ʿAlam on a pole for processional purposes and to signal the religious identity of the procession in public. In Deccan, the display of the ʿAlam on the floor or wall was part of an architectural setting, allowing them to be placed as a permanent sacred space with other objects or structures. The regional appropriations of the ʿAlam demonstrate the adaptable character of Shi'a ritual practices in different cultural contexts and configurations.

Figure 8. Mughal emperor shāh alam's ʿalam (18th century). *Source: Victoria and albert museum, london*

Later gilt-metal ʿAlams, such as ones from approximately 1800 CE, preserve the distinctness of Awadhi ʿAlams styles associated with the Nawabi period. They represent the highest realization of Awadhi ʿAlam forms associated with Alam Shāh and were the last ʿAlams to use Mughal qualities. The similarities in style are present in Awadhi ʿAlams, but distinctive features are unlike the Deccan ʿAlam styles, which usually had a five-leaf opening at the top (Figure 8).

The importation of ʿAlams both from Iran and Iraq, as well as local specimens, demonstrates the continuing links between Indian Shi'a communities and a larger Shi'a world. These imported objects provided individuals with physical connections to the sacred sites of Shi'a Islam, highlighting the transnational character of Shi'a religious identity as well as the prestige afforded to possessing ʿAlams from these sacred sites. This relationship of geopolitical imports and local objects showcased to the material world a variety of both global and local uses and expressions of Shi'a identity.

Awadhi ʿAlams were produced by using several materials, such as:

- Stain, bronze, and brass are often inlaid with silver or gold.
- Gilded copper and beaten iron, particularly during the reigns of Ghazi-ud-Din Haider and Nasir-ud-Din Haider.
- Bidri techniques, like those used in Deccani metalwork.

In terms of decorative techniques, Awadhi ʿAlams demonstrate a variety of methods such as nakkashī (engraving), ubhar nakkashī (relief work), silver netting, beating, and acid etching. These techniques added complexity and durability to the Awadhi ʿAlams as compared to ʿAlams from other regions of Northern India.

The material and technical sophistication of Awadhi ʿAlams transcended the civility of the Nawabi court; it expressed the votive significance attributed to these objects in Shi'a religious faith and practice. By picturing the fine materials and workmanship, the ʿAlam emerges as a material object of extreme religious and cultural worth, representing the boundaries of both spiritual commitment and political representation. The use of gold and silver materials also served as a visual quality verifier for the objects on display. The visual qualities of gold, silver, and other precious materials created a visual difference in the status of these objects and reinforced the social and religious hierarchies of Awadhi identity in society.

3.5. Categories of awadhi ʿalam

The ʿAlams of the Awadh region exhibit considerable variation in form, structure, and symbolic design. A typological analysis based on the number of vertical shafts reveals four major categories, each associated with specific stylistic and ritual features. These forms reflect evolving iconographic traditions, regional preferences, and sectarian aesthetics.

3.5.1. One vertical shaft ('naisā, 'nishān, 'ik sayfā or 'saifā'): ʿAlams in this basic form portray a single, large, vertical shaft. The variation in their finials is from all sides: circular discs, domes, spherical finials, flames, symmetrical wings or horns, crown-like projections, smooth, slightly carved curves, clusters of petals, hands, large domes, or snakes. The Jangī-'Alam standard is a good illustration of this form of ʿAlam. One-shaft ʿAlams seem to have been some of the first forms created in Awadh, based on the historic illustrations of the Faizabad procession in 1772. Several surviving forms can be seen in the Imāmbāra in Lucknow, Imāmbāra Kothi Khas Bagh (Rampur), Imāmbāra Mubarak Mahal (Bareilly), Imāmbāra Deewan Khan (Bareilly), Imāmbāra of Rani Mandi (Allahabad), and Imāmbāra Badi Sarkar (Zaidpur). For the one-shaft ʿAlam, the connections to its origins as a military standard are much clearer and more direct. Its vertical orientation with a notable finial recalls the form of battle standards, which were used to rally troops and indicate the position of commanders. This type of single-shaft ʿAlam seems to have been a common form indicating leadership or guidance in the religious sense; in particular, they were symbols of the Imāms' position as guides or leaders of the faithful (Figure 9).

3.5.2. Two vertical shafts (do-sayfā): ʿAlams in this category feature two vertical shafts, either parallel or diverging/converging. Some key design characteristics include paired symbols, variation in distance and angle between the shafts, and a variety of decorative connectors such as a crossbar, connecting arcs, or braided elements. These ʿAlams are located in Imāmbāra Iqbal Manzil Palace (Lucknow), Imāmbāra of the Mahmudabad estate, Imāmbāra Badi Sarkar (Zaidpur), etc. The dual-shaft arrangement has possible symbolic figures of duality and complementarity in Shi'a thought that might image the joining of Prophet Muhammad and Imām ʿAlī or Imām Hasan and Imām Husayn. It also may represent the concept of "the two weighty things" (thaqalayn) mentioned in hadith: the Quran and the Ahl al-Bayt (the family of the Prophet), which Shi'a Muslims are to follow for guidance (Figure 10).

3.5.3. Three-shafted ʿalam (teen sayfā): This category consists of ʿAlams that consist of three shafts that are orientated vertically. Generally, they have a triangular or tripod form. Some have elements of a trident, have triple-hocket designs, or others that are similar because they are in some type of three-fold or tri-part arrangement with symmetry or elaborate finials. Examples include the ʿAlam in the Imāmbāra of Mir Muhammad Hussain (Jais, Raebareli) and the ʿAlam of the Mahmudabad estate. The three-shafted ʿAlam has connotations of many triadic principles that have relevance and significance in Shi'a belief and symbolism. These might represent the Prophet Muhammad and his two successors in Shi'a thinking: Imām ʿAlī and Imām Hasan. They may also symbolize the three persons that Shi'a Islam views as most important in the narrative of Karbala, that is, Imām Husayn, his half-brother ʿAbbās, and his son ʿAlī al-Akbar (Figure 11).

3.5.4. Miscellaneous forms: This category includes some rare or unconventional ʿAlam designs, such as palm-shaped, spearhead, fish-shaped, crescent moon-shaped, palm-on-moon, circular plate, roundel, and yak tail. Other interesting forms include the neelā chakarā, inverted arrow-and-bow forms (Kamān wālā ʿAlam), and ʿAlams that were built with the bifurcated sword Zulfiqār. These other forms can carry unique references to Shi'a iconography and local creative interpretation.

These uncommon forms reflect the creative possibilities of the ʻAlam category, and this is a way of manifesting unique theological meanings, historical references, or regional invention. The fish-shaped ʻAlams are connected to the mahi-ye maratib (Fish of Dignity), which refers to royal authority, whereas the crescent moon form connects to Abbas ibn ʻAlī's title Moon of the Hashim clan. The Zulfiqar sword forms are direct references to Imām ʻAlī and the legendary sword he was said to possess that symbolized justice and divine endorsement. These unusual forms allowed for unique expressions of aspects of Shi'a theology and history through objecthood, creating a multifaceted visual lexicon capable of communicating intricate religious notions to varying audiences (Figure 12).

Figure. 9. One verticle shaft

Figure 10. Two verticle shaft

Figure 11. Three shafts

Figure 12. Miscellaneous type

This typological categorization illustrates an extraordinary variation within the Awadhi tradition of ʻAlam, which reflects, beyond aesthetic concerns, theological priorities and ritual functions. Each form of shaft diverged in both practical and symbolic ways, where the meaning ascribed to forms could be recognized in the way they were embedded in commemorative practices, historical references, or spiritual meanings. This range also reflects the creative use and adaptation of the ʻAlam form to depict the specific religious sensibilities and cultural contexts of the Awadhi Shi'a. Importantly, the ongoing development of the various types of ʻAlam over time reflects greater changes in Shi'a ritual practice and theological expression in India. Constituting, in their simplest and most generically military-derived forms, one set of religious behaviours to sophisticated and symbolic forms, the morphological development of the ʻAlam as a monument mirrors the growing sophistication and institutionalization of Shi'a religious culture under Nawabi patronage.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Research gap and new approach

This study expands upon this gap in the literature and utilises field-based documentation, archival research, and visual and epigraphic analysis to present a historical and regional understanding of the ʻAlam's development in dynastic, regional, and theological contexts throughout India. The transformation of the ʻAlam provides valuable insights into our knowledge of ritual symbolism, material culture, and sectarian expression. First, through a material culture lens, this study expands our understanding of religious artefacts to agency-driven actors of history instead of passive ritual objects. While previous analyses have focused on performative symbolism (Ruffle, 2011), this study situates the ʻAlam about actual practices of making, carrying, embedding, and venerating over time and across dynasties. Second, this study sharpens our views of sectarian aesthetics. Comparison between the material evidence available

from Qutb Shāhī Iran and Awadh highlights how Shi'a identity was materially coded: The Deccan's dragon motifs suggesting cosmic protection contrast with Awadh's Panjā and lion motifs foregrounding martyrdom and genealogical sanctity. This evidence suggests even contradictions to previous desires to overturn mandated or normative Shi'a material expressions. Expanding our purview of Shi'a material culture to observe localised visual grammars can inform future studies of those environments.

4.2. Material evolution and regional iconography

The movement from martial insignia to devotional iconography in the ʿAlam indicates complicated processes of cultural adaptation and the encoding of religious meaning. The raw material of the evidence is that the examples seem to exemplify regional typological variants constructed through local artistic vocabularies grounded in hybrid theological perspectives, as well as borrowings from the Rashtrakuta visual culture manifested in the Persianate indicators like calligraphic ornamentation that imitate inscriptions and iconographic, reformist indicators such as stylized dragons, and normative iconography like lions and horses, and incorporate them into local regional design features. The Deccan Qutb Shāhī dynasty, for instance, and similarly, the Awadh dynasty of North India, adapted the form of the ʿAlam to suit their own aesthetic and political contexts, therefore developing regional styles. The material variability not only indicate artistic ingenuity through the decorative modes, and the manners in which the extricable form of the object can be accentuated and deployed towards different readings, yet also suggests sectarian shifts in aesthetics and, more importantly, the specific one that contained political legitimation, the notion of martyrdom, and community identity previously considered to shift (Table 2).

Table 2. Comparison of qutb shāhī and awadhi ʿalam styles.

Aspect	Qutb Shāhī Deccan	Awadh Dynasty
Iconography	Dragon motifs, zoomorphic designs, Safavid influence.	Lion imagery, Panjā (hand) forms, Mughal influence.
Material and Craftsmanship	Heavier metalwork with emerald inlays; Panchaloha alloys; architectural embedding.	Gilded and silvered standards, intricate latticework, portable processional use.
Spatial Use	ʿAlams embedded in permanent architectural settings (Ashurkhana shrines).	ʿAlams prominently featured in grand Muharram processions.

This study has opened up new directions for interpreting ritual artefacts, but there are still challenges ahead. The scarcity of early ʿAlam copies has presented difficulties in establishing continuous visual genealogies of ʿAlam's. Future interdisciplinary research that employs both material analysis, oral histories, and archival cartography may provide even more insight into the regional mobility and transformation of Shi'a ritual objects. As well, exploring comparatives to other centres of Shi'a in Bengal, Kashmir, and Gujarat would assist in understanding broader mappings of sectarian materiality within South Asia. Lastly, the use of digital reconstruction may help explore new approaches to visualize the historical life of ʿAlam forms relative to changing ritual geographies.

5. CONCLUSION

The study shows how the symbolism and design of the ʿAlam were shaped by the rulership of positing regimes, such as the Qutb Shāhī dynasty in the Deccan and the Nawabi dynasty of Awadh. The political regimes engaged in symbolic practices centred on ʿAlams through a range of institutional processes, items of patronage, projects of architecture, and practice - these processes only further added to an object of multiple materiality and meaning, one which arose from the interests of the owners and producers and elevated the spiritual status of the object. In the Deccan, for instance, localized versions of motifs of Shi'a piety, such as dragons and palm designs, were produced from state-sponsored programs of patronage, while Awadh would coin its versions of ʿAlams that contributed to new pictorial schemes, such as the Panjā form and mahi-ye maratib, combining elements of Persian influence with their forms. In this way, material culture aided the localization and continuity of Shi'a identity across disparate geographies and political frontiers in India.

This research attempts to critically reinterpret the ʿAlam as something beyond a religious object; it represents an active, performative act of resistance, belonging, and memory. Whether presented as installed objects in local Imāmbāras, carried as part of the event in processions, or secured as objects of memory and preservation, the ʿAlam embodies centuries of evolving devotional practice, communal identities, and cultural negotiations over difference. Its future use in India and beyond represents the continued action of ritual objects that shape collective identity and express spiritual belonging through ritual action. This dissertation also bridges a gap in the scholarship regarding the study of the material and symbolic aspects of Shi'a rituals in South Asia and paves the way for interdisciplinary research into sacred material culture.

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