

Revisiting Shi'a Influence in Idrisid Morocco: Governance, Legitimacy, and the Reconfiguration of Religious Identity

Muhammad Farhan

University of Dar al-Hadith al-Hassania, Rabat, Maroko

*Corresponding Author: muhammadibrahimsecond@gmail.com

Abstract: This study revisits the influence of Shi'a in the context of the Idrisid Dynasty in Morocco through a political sociology perspective. It aims to analyze how religious legitimacy, particularly claims of descent from the Prophet Muhammad (Ahl al-Bayt), functioned as a foundation of political authority as well as a mechanism for the construction of religious identity in the early Maghrib. In addition, the study explores how this influence has been represented and reinterpreted in both historical narratives and contemporary socio-religious contexts. This research employs a qualitative approach based on library research, drawing upon classical historical sources and modern academic studies relevant to the Idrisid period and the early development of Shi'a. The analysis focuses on the relationship between power, legitimacy, and identity within society. The findings indicate that Shi'a affiliation in the context of the Idrisid Dynasty was primarily symbolic and political rather than a fully institutionalized theological system. Genealogical claims to the Ahl al-Bayt played a crucial role in strengthening political legitimacy amid social fragmentation and intergroup conflict. Over time, this influence underwent socio-cultural transformation, resulting in diverse interpretations within contemporary Moroccan society, both in the form of cultural practices and religious discourse. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between religion and power in Islamic history, while also offering a critical perspective on the process of reconfiguring religious identity within modern social dynamics.

Keywords: Idrisid Dynasty, Shi'a, Political Sociology, Religious Legitimacy, Religious Identity.

Received: January 02, 2026

Accepted: March 27, 2026

Published: March 31, 2026

To Cite this Article: Farhan, M. (2026). Revisiting Shi'a Influence in Idrisid Morocco: Governance, Legitimacy, and the Reconfiguration of Religious Identity. *Abdurrauf Social Science*, 3(1), 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.70742/arsos.v3i1.559>



Copyright © 2026 by Author(s)

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Introduction

In discussions of Shi'ism, the Idrisid Dynasty is frequently identified as an early political formation linked to Shi'a influence in North Africa. The historical development of Shi'a teachings has remained a subject of scholarly inquiry, especially in relation to their doctrinal evolution and cultural implications.

This cannot be separated from several Shi'a doctrines which, according to society, are considered very strange and far different from the teachings or guidance brought by the Messenger of Allah and Islamic law itself. This was especially evident during the conflict between Sunnis and Shi'a in Sampang, Madura, in 2012, which attracted significant public attention. This phenomenon certainly became a source of concern for society, where the causes of the conflict then escalated into attitudes of rejection toward Shi'a teachings by local figures and institutions, which subsequently became a "legitimization" for Sunni followers to carry out acts of violence against Shi'a followers. In the end, it cannot be denied that amid the diversity of the Indonesian nation, there exists a very large potential for conflict. This potential for conflict will escalate further if society is unable to respond to these differences maturely. Conflict, especially that with religious nuances, will very easily escalate if it obtains "legitimacy" from religious figures and institutions, so that the conflicting parties do not hesitate to use all means, including violence, to eliminate their opponents. (Zattullah, 2021) In addition, it is also considered capable of disrupting the proper practice of worship according to Islamic law. Not only that, but this can also become a concern within society if such teachings spread widely, as they could damage the social order and even the religious life among fellow Muslims.

When speaking about Shi'ism, the name of the Idrisid Dynasty is certainly familiar, as this dynasty can be categorized as the largest pioneering Shi'a dynasty on the African continent. The Idrisid Dynasty itself was the first Islamic dynasty established in the Maghrib al-Aqsha (Morocco). Besides being the first Islamic dynasty in Morocco, this dynasty also attempted to introduce Shi'a principles, albeit in a more tolerant form, to the region. Although its territory was small, the Idrisids became a center of Islamic power in Morocco, despite the diversity of local governments with various beliefs.

The Idrisid Dynasty is often associated with early Shi'a influence in North Africa, particularly through its claim of Alid descent, which provided a

form of religious and political legitimacy (Bennison, 2016)(Bosworth, 1996). However, several scholars argue that this influence was more symbolic and cultural rather than doctrinally institutionalized (M. Zweiri & König, 2008)(M. , Zweiri & König, 2021). Furthermore, the historical development of Shi'a traditions in the Maghreb has been the subject of ongoing scholarly debate, particularly regarding their scope and long-term impact (Al-Tamimi, 2024).

The political situation and conditions in the Maghrib region, which were experiencing internal tribal conflicts, opened space for the establishment of a new dynasty, namely the Idrisids. These inter-tribal conflicts involved Berber tribes such as the Shanhaja, Masmudiyah, and Burghuathah. The Masmudiyah were one of the Berber tribes who firmly adhered to Ahl al-Sunnah, while the Burghuathah were a tribe considered deviant because they created a new religious ideology. This tribe became the strongest among the other tribes.(Marwan & Padila, 2022)

Morocco was no exception, as in its time it had once become one of the main pioneers of Shi'ism during the reign of the Idrisid Dynasty, which governed Morocco for several centuries. One of the supporting factors for the formation of Shi'a doctrine within the Idrisid Dynasty was inseparable from the condition of Morocco before the establishment of the Idrisid Dynasty, where several small kingdoms adhered to Shi'a beliefs and greatly influenced society and culture in Morocco at that time, continuing into the period when the Idrisid Dynasty ruled Morocco.

It is appropriate for this matter to become a serious discussion and to be clearly summarized regarding the essence and history of Shi'ism itself to eliminate feelings of concern and vigilance toward teachings that deviate from the creed of Muslims, especially among laypeople who can easily follow various teachings that may be far removed from the guidance of Islamic law. Despite the historical association between the Idrisid Dynasty and Shi'a influence in North Africa, there is still limited scholarly consensus regarding the extent and nature of this relationship. Furthermore, existing studies often present fragmented interpretations, leading to continued ambiguity in understanding the role of the Idrisid Dynasty in the development of Shi'a traditions in Morocco. Several academics and researchers have conducted studies presented in the form of writings in various books and journals regarding the history and forms of Shi'a teaching that deviate from Islamic law. This is certainly done to

avoid misunderstandings and to safeguard the structure of Islamic teachings and the creed in accordance with the teachings and creed brought by the noble Messenger, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

The main purpose of publishing this article in the *Kasbah Journal* is to examine the historical and cultural influence of Shi'a traditions within Moroccan society, with particular attention to their manifestation in local cultural practices and socio-religious expressions. Rather than engaging in theological evaluation or normative judgment, this research focuses on how Shi'a-related elements have been historically interpreted, transmitted, and recontextualized within specific social and cultural settings in Morocco. In this sense, the study positions Shi'a influence as a historical and cultural phenomenon that interacts with broader processes of religious and social development.

One of the cultural practices often associated with discussions of Shi'a influence is the commemoration of Ashura. Ashura is a significant observance in Shi'a Islam, marking the martyrdom of Imam Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, at the Battle of Karbala. While this commemoration is most prominently observed in Shi'a-majority regions such as Iran and parts of Iraq, variations of Ashura-related rituals and cultural expressions can also be found in other Muslim societies, including Morocco, where local traditions and historical developments have shaped its observance in distinctive ways.

This study employs a qualitative research approach based on library research, drawing upon historical texts, scholarly articles, and academic discussions related to Moroccan socio-religious history, particularly during and prior to the Idrisid period. The analysis seeks to trace the historical trajectories of religious influence and to understand the socio-political and cultural conditions that contributed to the emergence and transformation of religious practices in the region. By doing so, this research aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of the interaction between Shi'a traditions and Moroccan cultural identity within a broader historical framework.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research design as the primary methodological approach to analyze the historical relationship between the Idrisid Dynasty and the development of Shi'a influence in Morocco. The qualitative approach is

considered appropriate because the study focuses on interpreting historical narratives, religious ideas, and socio-cultural dynamics through descriptive and analytical examination rather than quantitative measurement.

The research is conducted using a library research method by collecting data from a wide range of written sources, including classical historical texts, academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and scholarly publications related to the Idrisid Dynasty and Shi'a history in North Africa. Primary sources consist of historical accounts and early chronicles that document the political formation and development of the Idrisid state, while secondary sources include modern academic studies that critically examine Shi'a traditions and their historical interpretations in the Maghreb region. The selection of sources is based on their academic credibility, relevance to the research topic, and recognition within established scholarly literature.

Data collection is carried out through documentation techniques, involving the identification, classification, and critical review of relevant literature. The collected data are then analyzed using a combination of descriptive analysis and historical interpretation. Descriptive analysis is used to present the historical background of the Idrisid Dynasty and the socio-political conditions of early Morocco, while historical interpretation is applied to examine the development and transmission of religious ideas within their broader historical context.

In addition, this study applies a historiographical approach to Islamic history to situate the Idrisid Dynasty within the broader narrative of early Islamic political and religious developments in North Africa. This approach allows the research to critically examine historical sources within their contextual frameworks without imposing normative theological judgments. Source triangulation is also employed by comparing multiple historical accounts and academic interpretations to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings. Through this methodological framework, the study aims to produce a structured and objective analysis of the historical interaction between political authority and religious discourse in early Moroccan history.

Result and Discussion

Historical Background of the Idrisid Dynasty in Morocco

The historical emergence of the Idrisid Dynasty in Morocco is closely associated with the broader political fragmentation of the Maghreb region during the early Islamic period. In this context, the establishment of the Idrisid authority has been interpreted by scholars as part of a process of religious legitimization, in which claims of descent from the Prophet Muhammad played a significant political role (Bennison, 2016). From the perspective of the sociology of religion, such legitimacy can be understood as a mechanism through which emerging dynasties reinforced authority by embedding religious symbolism within political structures.

In relation to Shi'a influence, existing scholarship presents differing interpretations regarding the extent to which Shi'a doctrines shaped the ideological foundations of the Idrisid state. Some studies suggest that the Idrisids reflected a form of Alid or proto-Shi'i legitimacy rather than a fully developed Shi'a doctrinal system (Bosworth, 1996). This interpretation is further supported by comparative historical analyses that emphasize the symbolic rather than institutional nature of Shi'a affiliation in early North African dynasties (Zweiri & König, 2008).

Compared to previous research, this study aligns with the view that Shi'a influence in the Idrisid context should be understood primarily as a socio-political and symbolic phenomenon rather than a structured theological framework. However, unlike earlier works that focus mainly on political legitimacy, this study highlights the importance of cultural transmission in shaping how Shi'a-related elements were later interpreted within Moroccan historical narratives.

Literally, Shi'a means "followers," "supporters," "party," or "group." Terminologically, the term refers to a group among Muslims who, in both spiritual-religious and political dimensions, support the descendants of Prophet Muhammad through the lineage of Fatimah and Ali ibn Abi Talib, commonly known as Ahl al-Bayt. (Anshori, 2008) In the beginning, the Shi'a group was a political movement that did not at all lead to matters of creed. They initially functioned merely as pioneers for certain political interests. However, as time went on, their development became increasingly rapid, causing their focus and vision to expand beyond political concerns and extend into matters of theology. This was reflected in the belief of some among them who claimed that Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) was divine. This belief angered Ali ibn Abi Talib,

and he consistently preached to them against such claims. However, due to their excessive fanaticism toward Ali, they did not listen to the admonitions delivered by him.

Eventually, Ali ibn Abi Talib devised a plan by preparing a trench of fire. He ordered a trench to be dug, then ignited a fire within it, and punished those who persisted in declaring that Ali was God. Yet this did not eliminate their fanaticism toward him. Some of them continued to proclaim Ali as divine, even though they had to accept being cast into the fiery trench. They justified their belief with the statement:

“No one punishes with fire except the Lord of the Fire.”

This hadith was used by them as an argument to deify Ali ibn Abi Talib, even though they were thrown into the trench of fire.

Shi'ism, which had already emerged during the period of the Rightly Guided Caliphs and continues to develop until today, remains a subject of discussion among Muslims due to its ideological differences from what is generally understood by the majority of Muslims, including in matters of worship. Since the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, which was inspired by Shi'a doctrinal teachings, its influence has not been confined to Iran alone but has also had a significant impact on several Arab countries, including Indonesia (Fikar & Santalia, 2024). Because the negative influence attributed to Shi'ism is believed not to spread only to a single group but almost throughout the world, it is therefore considered necessary that matters regarded as deviant and unfounded in creed, which form part of Shi'a ideology, be eliminated so as not to produce significant influence and impact upon society, especially among Muslims. Cultural aspects may also be affected by the spread of Shi'a teachings. As a result, in several countries where there is a considerable number of Shi'a adherents, various traditions are found which are believed to be obligatory cultural practices in accordance with what was performed by earlier generations of Shi'a followers.

Shi'a adherents firmly believe that Ali ibn Abi Talib (may Allah be pleased with him) was the rightful Imam of the Muslims after the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) and that he should have been the first caliph after the Prophet. However, as expressed by the contemporary Shi'a thinker Ali Shariati:

“Ali’s mission surpassed all testimonies, and his jihad was greater than all the battlefields he had ever faced, such as Uhud, Hunayn, Khandaq, and Badr. He did not utter a single word to preserve the unity of Islam, as he once said: I remained patient though there was a thorn in my eye and a bone in my throat. His attitude was like that of a biological mother whose baby is taken by another woman. The mother knows well that the woman will not harm the baby unless she attempts to seize the child from her, and if that happens, the woman would be ready to sacrifice anything, including the baby. Therefore, the biological mother remains silent to protect her child, even though the child is not in her arms.”

Meanwhile, the renowned Egyptian intellectual Abbas Mahmoud al-Aqqad wrote that “Ali truly believed in his right regarding that matter (the Imamate), but he wished that it be recognized as a right demanded first by the community before he himself demanded it. Therefore, he did not actively claim that right. However, he and several companions did not immediately pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr (may Allah be pleased with him) until six months after the beginning of Abu Bakr’s caliphate.”(Shihab, 2022)

Shi’a also view that prayer is more virtuous when facing a stone or the soil of Karbala, which symbolizes the killing of Husayn ibn Ali in 680 CE in Karbala.(Yumitro, 2017) Even the Forum Ulama Umat Indonesia on 22 March 2012 issued a fatwa stating that the teachings brought by Shi’ism are deviant teachings due to concerns about their development within society. Individuals or groups who believe in, teach, and disseminate the whole or part of the Shi’a doctrines mentioned above, whether they identify themselves as Shi’a followers or not, are considered deviant, misleading, and outside Islam (Yumitro, 2017).

The Idrisid Dynasty, also known as the Adarisah dynasty, was the first dynasty established in Morocco. This kingdom ruled Morocco from 788 CE to 974 CE. The Idrisid state was founded by a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, namely Idris ibn Abdullah, son of Abdullah ibn Hasan, who was the grandson of Hasan ibn Ali, and great-grandson of Ali ibn Abi Talib and Fatimah bint Muhammad. He was called al-Mahdi by Sunni circles and al-Kamil by Shi’a circles. The Idrisid Dynasty emerged at a time when the Abbasid Caliphate was still politically strong.

The territory of the Idrisid Dynasty was the Maghrib (Morocco). This dynasty is considered the first dynasty associated with Shi’a-oriented tendencies. The greatest Idrisid ruler was Yahya IV (905–922 CE). During its development,

the dynasty succeeded in recording significant civilizational progress during its era.

Idris ibn Abdullah chose Morocco as the base of his power for several reasons. First, the Berber people in Morocco welcomed his presence openly. Second, Morocco was sufficiently conducive to establishing an autonomous political authority.(Dinasti et al., 2016) Several historians also put forward different opinions regarding the factors or reasons why the Idrisid Dynasty was able to maintain a very strong existence in Morocco. This was partly because Morocco was located in a strategic position, being far from the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad. This strategic location was used as the most suitable area for the Idrisid government to seek protection from threats posed by the Abbasid dynasty, since the Idrisid Dynasty emerged when the Abbasid dynasty was still very strong and influential in the world. This also made the Abbasids reluctant to attack the Idrisid state.

The strong Islamic influence within the Idrisid state became one of the main factors that enabled the dynasty to develop rapidly. The Idrisid Dynasty played an important role in the spread of Islam in the Maghrib region, especially in Morocco. As descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, the Idrisids were regarded as a legitimate dynasty that provided legitimacy for the spread of Islamic teachings in the region. With the establishment of Fez as a political and educational center, mosques and centers of learning were built, making the city a growing center of Islamic civilization.

The greatest Idrisid ruler was Yahya IV (292 H/905 CE-309 H/922 CE), who succeeded in restoring Volubilis, a Roman city, into the city of Fez. The Idrisid Dynasty contributed to the spread of Islamic culture and religion to the Berber people and the indigenous population. This dynasty eventually fell after being conquered by the Fatimid Caliphate in 374 H/985 CE. The Idrisid Dynasty also left behind Al-Qarawiyyin Mosque and the Andalusian Mosque in Fez, which were founded in 244 H/859 CE.(Amin, 2024)

When discussing the background of the establishment of the Idrisid Dynasty, it cannot be separated from the Battle of Fakh, which occurred during the period of the Abbasid Caliphate when the caliphate was under the rule of Al-Hadi. At that time, the Alawiyyun group once again launched a rebellion against the Abbasids in Fakh, a small town located between Mecca and Medina, led by Al-Husayn ibn Ali ibn al-Hasan. In this battle, the Alawiyyun group was

defeated, resulting in the death of al-Husayn along with a number of other members of the Alawiyyun family.(Rahayu, n.d.)

The Battle of Fakh can be regarded as the initial starting point for the establishment of the Idrisid Dynasty. This battle occurred in 786 CE and marked a significant historical moment for the Shi'a, as it directly involved the role of Husayn ibn Ali in opposing the Abbasid government. After the battle was won by the Abbasid caliphal forces, several troops from the camp of Husayn ibn Ali became scattered and disorganized. Two figures who survived and managed to escape from the battle were Yahya ibn Abdullah ibn al-Hasan and Idris ibn al-Hasan. They succeeded in fleeing from the pursuit and surveillance of the Abbasid forces until they reached North Africa.

Idris ibn al-Hasan eventually arrived in the Maghrib al-Aqsha. He did not arrive alone but was accompanied by his trusted companion, Rashid, in 786 CE. Idris did not remain passive; he began seeking access and opportunities to influence the political coalition in the Maghrib al-Aqsha. He immediately sought support from Moroccan leaders in order to build a political coalition.

The situation and conditions in the northern region of the Maghrib al-Aqsha were highly conducive to the emergence of a new political leadership. This condition arose due to internal conflicts that divided the region. The conflicts involved Berber tribes, particularly between the Shanhajiyah (Sanhadja), the Masmudiyah (Masmouda), who still firmly adhered to Ahl al-Sunnah, and the Burghuathah (Berghwata), who had created a new religious ideology.

The new religion of the Burghuathah had significantly deviated from Islamic creed and was closer to heresy. Therefore, in the Maghrib region, there spread views declaring the Burghuathah tribe and their new ideology as disbelievers. The Masmudiyah tribes were concerned about the deviant creed of the Burghuathah. They attempted to resist the oppression of the Burghuathah tribe. However, their own unstable and chaotic internal situation made them in need of a leader who could unite them under one banner to free them from hegemony. In another place, Idris and Rashid, after wandering for two years, arrived in the city of Tangier, which at that time was the capital of the Maghrib al-Aqsha. In that city, Rashid began propagating the appointment of an Alawi amir who could raise the banner of Islam and free the people from oppression and heresy.

The propaganda calling for the appointment of a leader from the lineage of Ahl al-Bayt proved capable of attracting and mobilizing widespread support. Within a relatively short time, many people joined due to Rashid's persistent efforts in promoting his ideas among the Awarba tribe. The majority of supporters came from the region of Walili (Volubilis), which at that time was the trade center of the Moroccan tribes. After the preparations and supporters were ready and solid, Rashid proposed that Idris be appointed as the leader of the Moroccan tribes. The proposal immediately received a warm welcome from the leaders of Awarba, as they saw Idris as the best figure who could save them from the influence of the Burghuathah tribe and fight for their fate. Subsequently, Idris came to Walili in August 788 CE and was appointed by its inhabitants as their leader as well as the head of the Awarba tribe of the Maghrib.

Other branches of Awarba that were already weary of the Burghuathah soon followed and joined, including Lawatah, Miknasah, and Zuwarah. Centered in Walili, Idris continued to actively expand his influence. His efforts bore fruit, and almost the entire northern region of the Maghrib al-Aqsha submitted to him. He then carried out further expansion to subdue other tribes through diplomacy or, if necessary, by force. In 789 CE, Idris succeeded in expanding his territory from Qairuwan to the Atlantic Ocean. In this expansion, he seized many areas previously under the control of the Abbasid state.

The Abbasid Caliph, Harun al-Rashid, became angry upon hearing of the emergence of the Idrisid Dynasty, which had become a threat to Abbasid authority in Ifriqiya (an area encompassing Tunisia, Tripolitania, and Constantinople). The emergence of Shi'a power anywhere in the Islamic world was not something that the Abbasid state would ignore. Therefore, the Caliph took the necessary measures to eliminate the Idrisid state and its leader. In this matter, Yahya al-Barmaki, one of the Caliph's viziers, proposed a method to remove Idris by assigning a cunning agent to carry out the mission.

The assassination of Idris was then set in motion. The Caliph approved the idea. He appointed a physician named Sulaiman ibn Jarir, who was known by the title *Asy-Syamakh al-Yamami*, to carry out the mission. Sulaiman immediately departed for Ifriqiya, carrying a letter addressed to the governor of Ifriqiya at that time, Ibrahim ibn al-Aghlab. The letter contained instructions

for the governor to facilitate him in executing the Caliph's mission. Ibrahim then permitted Sulaiman to cross the borders of his territory and proceed toward the Maghrib al-Aqsha. After crossing Ifriqiya, Sulaiman eventually succeeded in meeting Idris and pretended that he wished to serve under him.

The Influence of Shi'ism of the Idrisid Dynasty on Moroccan Culture

The Idrisid Dynasty was established in Morocco, and this dynasty became the main base for the spread of Shi'a teachings in the Maghrib region. (Yasir & Santalia, 2024) Shi'a teachings did not only left historical records in Morocco, but also left cultural traces that, in several regions, remain part of Moroccan cultural life until today. This phenomenon cannot be separated from the role of the Idrisid Dynasty as the earliest political foundation for the emergence and consolidation of Shi'i influence in Morocco.

The Idrisid Dynasty was the first dynasty in Morocco associated with Shi'a affiliation. It played a significant role in spreading Shi'a doctrine through political authority and religious legitimacy. The dissemination of this doctrine was carried out in a subtle and gradual manner, which enabled it to be accepted by segments of the Berber population, particularly the Zenata tribes.

This acceptance was closely linked to the claim of the dynasty's founder, Idris I, that he was a descendant of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, a lineage that held strong religious and symbolic appeal. As a result, several Zenata Berber groups were willing to recognize him as their leader and unite under his authority, contributing to the establishment of the Idrisid state. Through this political consolidation, Shi'i influence was able to spread more easily among the local population. (Marwan & Padila, 2022)

There are several Moroccan cultural practices that continue to develop in certain regions as a reflection of historical influences associated with the Shi'a presence during the Idrisid period. These cultural remnants remain a subject of debate among Muslim communities, particularly regarding their historical roots and religious interpretation. Among the most frequently discussed cultural phenomena are the following:

1. The Polemic of the 'Ashura Celebration

Unlike in some countries—such as Iran—where 'Ashura is commemorated with mourning rituals, black banners, and in certain contexts symbolic acts of self-

flagellation, Morocco has developed a markedly different cultural expression of the day.

In Morocco, ‘Ashura (10 Muharram) is often celebrated with joy, social gatherings, games, and folkloric customs rather than overt expressions of grief. The atmosphere is festive rather than mournful, and public sadness related to the tragedy of Karbala is generally absent in popular practice.

In a 2016 article published by CNN Arabic, Rachid El Jarmouni—religious sociology expert and graduate of Mohammed V University, as well as lecturer at Moulay Ismail University—explained that one reason for the striking difference between eastern and western Islamic traditions is that Muslims in the western Islamic world, particularly in Morocco, tend to approach ‘Ashura as a day of joy. According to this perspective, the festive expression functions as a cultural mechanism to transcend or symbolically “overcome” the brutality of the tragedy of Karbala.

The commemoration of ‘Ashura is historically connected to the killing of Husayn ibn ‘Ali, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, during the tragedy of Karbala under the rule of Yazid ibn Mu‘awiyah. This event became a defining moment in Shi‘a identity and the foundation for the annual mourning of ‘Ashura. However, in Morocco—where Sunni Islam is dominant—the remembrance evolved into a folkloric and socially embedded tradition rather than a ritualized mourning ceremony.

2. The Polemic of the Figure “Baba ‘Aishur.”

Another debated cultural element is the symbolic figure known as “Baba ‘Aishur.” This character appears in Moroccan folk traditions associated with the celebration of ‘Ashura. Although ‘Ashura is more strongly linked to Shi‘a memory due to the tragedy of Karbala, in Morocco, the observance has developed in a folkloristic and syncretic form, giving rise to symbolic practices such as this one.

On the night of ‘Ashura, young girls traditionally bury leftover bones from dried meat consumed during the evening meal. The following morning, these bones are exhumed, and families create a symbolic representation of Baba ‘Aishur. The figure’s body is made from bones, and its clothing from woven wool. Children then carry the doll on a plate, walking around neighborhoods to collect money while invoking blessings in the name of Baba ‘Aishur.

The celebration often culminates in large bonfires around which both young and old gather. Festivities continue late into the night. At dawn, the symbolic “death” of Baba ‘Aishur is announced. Families gather the dolls, wrap them in a large white cloth—sometimes adding a lock of hair as part of the ritual symbolism—and bury them. Songs are sung once more, this time recounting the symbolic death of the figure, marking the conclusion of the celebration.

These traditions illustrate how historical religious narratives can evolve into localized cultural expressions. While some interpret these customs as traces of early Shi‘a influence during the Idrisid era, others view them primarily as folkloric developments shaped by Morocco’s unique religious and social context. (The Moorish Times, 2020)

3. The Fire Tradition in the Celebration of ‘Ashura

Another distinctive feature of Moroccan ‘Ashura celebrations is the fire ritual known locally as Ash-Syia‘alah. During the night of ‘Ashura, it is common to see children and adults gathering in narrow streets and neighborhood alleys, lighting bonfires made of wood, dry branches, and sometimes even old tires. The scene is often accompanied by enthusiastic chants such as, “*Ashuri, ‘Ashuri... ‘Alaika Nutliq Syu‘uri*”, expressing communal excitement rather than political protest.

This practice is not a demonstration or socio-economic protest, but rather a cultural expression transmitted across generations. Families and neighbors gather around the flames, creating a festive atmosphere that blends elements of folklore, communal identity, and seasonal celebration.

From a cultural perspective, some scholars interpret this fire ritual as part of Morocco’s localized and folkloric adaptation of ‘Ashura. While the commemoration of ‘Ashura historically relates to the tragedy of Karbala, in Morocco the observance evolved into forms that emphasize social cohesion and symbolic renewal rather than mourning. The fire, in this context, is often understood symbolically—as purification, renewal, or communal unity—rather than as a strictly theological ritual.

As with other ‘Ashura-related customs in Morocco, the tradition of Ash-Syia‘alah remains a topic of discussion among intellectuals and religious scholars. Some consider it a remnant of historical influences linked to early Shi‘a presence during the Idrisid period, while others view it primarily as a

product of local Maghribi cultural development shaped by Morocco's Sunni-majority religious landscape. (M. Fahrudin Al Mustofa, 2018)

During the celebration of 'Ashura, Moroccan society holds the Sha'ala tradition, which involves lighting bonfires at night. Children and teenagers often jump over the fire as part of the ritual. Some interpretations associate this tradition with the story of Prophet Ibrahim who was thrown into the fire by his people, while others view it as a symbol of struggle and salvation in Islamic history.

Attitudes of Moroccan Society in Facing Shi'a Culture in Morocco

It cannot be denied that the spread of Shi'a teachings has often become a topic of discussion among Moroccan society as well as neighboring communities. This cannot be separated from its rapid spread during the rule of the Idrisid Dynasty. However, several historians argue that although Shi'a influence spread during the Idrisid period, it does not mean that the kings at that time fully supported the movement or teachings. Instead, the leaders often called on the people to return to the Qur'an and Sunnah, although the connection to Ahl al-Bayt during that period remained very strong and became increasingly fanatical among some segments of society, which gradually led to the emergence of Shi'a teachings and movements that influenced Moroccan culture until today.

In response to this, the people of Morocco did not remain silent and simply accept it, but responded with caution and vigilance from religious, social, and political perspectives. This is because Morocco until today, still adheres strongly to the creed of Ahlus Sunnah wal Jamaah, which makes society wary of the entry of teachings considered deviant into their environment, including Shi'a teachings that could influence their culture and future generations.

The following are several findings from relevant academic research regarding the attitude or response of Moroccan society toward the spread of Shi'a teachings in the country known as the "Land of a Thousand Fortresses":

1. **Negative Attitude Toward the Shi'a Community**

Moroccan society often shows a negative attitude toward the Shi'a movement or teachings spread in their region. A study by Sean Yom and Gregory Aftandilian published in *Mediterranean Politics* (2021) found that about 59% of Moroccan citizens expressed discomfort having neighbors from the Shi'a community. This study shows that

negative perceptions of Iran as an ideological and strategic threat contribute to prejudice against Moroccan citizens who adhere to Shi'ism, even though they represent a very small minority in the country.(Matt Buehler & Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl, 2021)

2. Perception of Threat to National Identity

The Moroccan government views the spread of Shi'ism as a threat to the national religious identity dominated by Sunni Islam of the Maliki school. Diplomatic relations between Morocco and Iran have been severed several times, including in 2018, when Morocco accused Iran (through Hezbollah) of assisting the separatist Polisario group in Western Sahara and spreading Shi'a influence in Morocco.

3. Shi'a Community in Morocco and the Diaspora

Although a minority, the Shi'a community in Morocco still exists, especially in northern regions such as Tangier, Nador, and Oujda. Some Moroccan citizens living in Europe, particularly in Belgium, also adhere to Shi'ism and interact with local Shi'a communities. However, their activities are often monitored by Moroccan authorities because they are considered potentially capable of spreading Shi'a influence within the country.(Iman Lechkar, 2017)

4. Government Efforts in Preserving Sunni Identity

The Moroccan government actively promotes Sunni Islam of the Maliki school and Sufi traditions as part of national identity. Through support for Sufi orders such as the Qadiriyyah-Butshishiyah, the state seeks to strengthen religious moderation and reject foreign ideological influences, including Shi'ism.(Faitour, 2024)

Overall, the response of Moroccan society and government toward Shi'a culture tends to be negative, influenced by religious, political, and concerns over national stability factors. Although the Shi'a community in Morocco is relatively small, they often face social pressure and monitoring from local authorities.

In 2007, the regime further intensified its articulation of this "strong national identity," which was associated with moderate national Islam as a prerequisite for protecting state security from the harmful influence of "Eastern Islam," which not only reflected Salafi trends inspired by the Arabian Gulf and Egypt but also, increasingly, Shi'a Islam. News media reinforced the idea that

the Kingdom now faces a hidden Shi'a tendency linked to politicized Shi'a militias and institutions in Iran, Lebanon, and Iraq, as well as the small Moroccan Shi'a diaspora in Belgium.

By the end of 2008, the Moroccan High Council of Scholars called for the preservation of the country's "sanctity of religion" and its tradition of interfaith tolerance in the face of increasing doctrinal and sectarian threats. In his official speech to the council in the same year, Mohammed VI announced the establishment of a new Scientific Council for Moroccan citizens in Europe. By articulating a "space representation" that positioned the urban environment of Brussels inhabited by the Moroccan diaspora as a dangerous place for religious radicalism and the export of Iran-backed Shi'a influence into Moroccan national territory, the King urged the council to cooperate with Moroccan citizens in the country to ensure that they would not be affected by radical or deviant ideas. The council, he said, would safeguard security for Moroccan citizens, especially Moroccan youth living in Europe, within the framework of "Moroccan Islam".(Hmimnat, 2020) Morocco provides an ideal case for studying popular prejudice against Shi'a when they constitute a very small and insignificant minority.(Matt Buehler & Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl, 2021)

Shi'a in Morocco, such as Idris Hani in the past and those currently being trained, represent another indication of this assumption. Another indicator supporting this assumption is the fact that Shi'a is reported to practice 'Ashura secretly. In addition, Mokhliss and El Hamraoui reportedly claimed to have documented individuals who converted to Shi'a Islam, and in an investigation on the webpage www.albainah.net, whose author is unfortunately unknown, two names appeared who were allegedly Moroccan Sunni Muslims who converted to Twelver Shi'a Islam.

If this assumption is proven true, one may assume that events in Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon, all of which are countries with established Twelver Shi'a movements, would have influence, at least ideologically, on Twelver Shi'ism in Morocco.(M. Zweiri & König, 2008)

Conclusion

The presence of Shi'ism in Morocco can be understood as a limited yet significant socio-religious phenomenon within both academic and public

discourse. Although various narratives, figures, and cultural practices—such as the commemoration of ‘Ashura—are often associated with Shi’a identity, their scope and visibility remain dynamic and continue to be debated among scholars. Reports of conversion from Sunni Islam to Twelver Shi’ism have been noted in several sources; however, their empirical validity remains limited and requires more systematic academic verification. Therefore, non-academic sources should be approached with caution in scholarly analysis.

From a political sociology perspective, the development of Shi’a awareness in Morocco is closely linked to transnational influences originating from regions such as Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon. These influences operate through social networks, media circulation, and diaspora connections, reflecting broader patterns of religious globalization, although their impact remains indirect and highly dependent on local socio-political contexts. At both the state and societal levels, Morocco’s religious landscape is predominantly structured around Sunni Maliki orthodoxy, while alternative religious expressions such as Shi’ism exist within a limited and regulated social space. This condition highlights the complex interaction between religion and power, in which religious identity is constructed through the interplay of historical traditions, political authority, and global ideological influences. In this context, Shi’a dynamics in Morocco should not be understood as static, but rather as an ongoing process of negotiation between the preservation of religious uniformity and the emergence of interpretive plurality within contemporary Islamic society. This process reflects how religious identity is continuously reconfigured in response to social, political, and global transformations.

From a theoretical perspective, this study demonstrates that genealogical religious legitimacy—particularly claims of descent from the Ahl al-Bayt—functions not only as a source of political authority in historical contexts but also as a symbolic resource that is continuously reconstructed within modern social dynamics. These findings reinforce a political sociology approach that views religion as a socially constructed phenomenon negotiated through power relations, identity formation, and global contexts. Furthermore, the study shows that religious influence does not necessarily require formal institutionalization but can persist through symbolic and cultural forms that remain adaptive to social change.

This study has several limitations. First, it relies entirely on a library-based research approach, making it dependent on the availability and interpretation of written sources. Second, the lack of empirical field data limits the extent to which contemporary social practices are directly represented. Third, several issues related to conversion and the dynamics of Shi'a communities in Morocco rely on secondary sources that require further empirical verification.

Future research is encouraged to adopt empirical approaches, such as interviews, observation, or ethnographic methods, in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of socio-religious dynamics at the societal level. In addition, comparative studies across countries in the Maghrib or the broader Muslim world would be valuable in examining patterns of religious identity transformation within a wider global context.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to all parties who have provided support and contributions to the completion of this article, both directly and indirectly.

Author Contributions Statement

The author contributed to all stages of the research and writing process, including research design, data collection, data analysis, as well as manuscript preparation and revision.

AI Usage Statement

The author declares that Artificial Intelligence (AI) was used in a limited capacity during the preparation of this manuscript, specifically for improving grammar, sentence clarity, and formatting. The use of AI did not influence the scientific content, analysis, or conclusions of the study. The author takes full responsibility for the content of this article.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest, whether financial or non-financial, that could have influenced the results or interpretation of this study.

References

- Al-Tamimi, A. J. , et al. (2024). The emergence of Shi'ism in Morocco and its historical development. *Dawat Journal*.
- Anshori, A. Y. (2008). Ideologi Syi'ah: Penelusuran Sejarah. In *Jurnal Asy-Syir'ah* (Vol. 42).
- Bennison, A. K. (2016). The Almoravid and Almohad Empires. *Edinburgh University Press*.
- Bosworth, C. E. (1996). The New Islamic Dynasties: A Chronological and Genealogical Manual. *Edinburgh University Press*.
- Dinasti, A. S., Abbasiyah, K. B., & Syahraeni, A. (2016). DINASTI-DINASTI KECIL BANI ABBASIYAH. In *Jurnal Rihlah* (Vol. 1).
- Drs. Samsul Munir Amin, M. A. (2024). *Sejarah Peradaban Islam*. bumi aksara group. <https://books.google.co.ma/books?id=bM0cEQAAQBAJ>
- Faitour, M. (2024). Morocco's Distinctive Islam at a Crossroads: The State's Support for Sufism. *Religions*, 15(10). <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15101257>
- Fikar, Z., & Santalia, I. (2024). Sejarah Munculnya Syiah dan Perkembangannya di Dunia Islam. *SETYAKI: Jurnal Studi Keagamaan Islam*, 2(1), 19–24. <https://doi.org/10.59966/setyaki.v2i1.956>
- Hmimnat, S. (2020). 'Spiritual security' as a (meta-)political strategy to compete over regional leadership: formation of Morocco's transnational religious policy towards Africa. *Journal of North African Studies*, 25(2), 189–227. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2018.1544073>
- Iman Lechkar. (2017). Being a "True" Shi'ite: The Poetics of Emotions among Belgian-Moroccan Shiites. *Journal of Muslims in Europe*.
- M. Fahrudin Al Mustofa. (2018, September 21). Serunya Merayakan Hari Asyura Di Maroko. *Perjalanan* .
- Marwan, M., & Padila, P. (2022). PERANAN DINASTI IDRISIYAH DALAM PENYEBARAN SYI'AH DI MAROKO 172-314 H/789-926 M. *Tanjak: Sejarah Dan Peradaban Islam*, 2(2), 205–215.
- Matt Buehler & Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl. (2021). The international sources of prejudice against Shi'a in the Middle East and North Africa: Original survey evidence from Morocco. *Mediterranean Politics*, (Department of

- Political Science, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN, USA; Political Science, Leiden University, Leiden, Netherlands), 470.
- Rahayu, A. (n.d.). BAB VIII RUTE PERDAGANGAN ISLAM ANTARBENUA (ASIA, AFRIKA, DAN EROPA). *PEMIKIRAN EKONOMI ISLAM DI LINTAS ZAMAN*, 93.
- Shihab, M. Q. (2022). *SUNNAH-SYIAH Bergandengan Tangan? Mungkinkah!* Lentera Hati. <https://books.google.co.ma/books?id=wqKaEAAAQBAJ>
- The Moorish Times. (2020). Baba Aishur, an Endangered Piece of Moroccan Folklore. In *culture* . 2020.
- Yasir, M., & Santalia, I. (2024). SEJARAH MUNCULNYA SYIAH DAN PERKEMBANGANNYA DI DUNIA ISLAM. *Jurnal Penelitian Multidisiplin Terpadu*, 8(12).
- Yumitro, G. (2017). Pengaruh Pemikiran dan Gerakan Politik Syiah Iran di Indonesia. *Dauliyah: Journal of Islam and International Affairs*, 2(2), 237–258.
- Zattullah, N. (2021). Konflik Sunni-Syiah di Sampang ditinjau dari teori segitiga konflik Johan Galtung. *Jurnal Ilmu Budaya*, 9(1), 86–101.
- Zweiri, M. , & König, I. (2021). Revisiting Shi'a in Morocco: Historical trajectories and contemporary dynamics. *The Journal of North African Studies*.
- Zweiri, M., & König, C. (2008). Are Shias rising in the western part of the Arab world? The case of Morocco. *The Journal of North African Studies*, 13(4), 513–529. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629380802343632>
- Zweiri, M., & König, I. (2008). The Shi'a in Morocco: History, ideology and contemporary politics. *The Journal of North African Studies*, 391–412.