

**Critical Study of theories surrounding the  
historic arrival of a popular Shiite festival  
in contemporary Sunni Malaysia**

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**Critical Study of theories surrounding the historic arrival of a popular  
Shiite festival in contemporary Sunni Malaysia**

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In contemporary Malaysia (especially Penang) *boria* refers to a choral street performance performed annually by a number of troupes. The troupes are composed predominantly of Sunni Malays and may represent a street, *kampong* (a village) or districts. *Boria* are performed merely for fun and entertainment and often include an annual singing competition. The size, membership, themes and movements of each *boria* troupe may vary from year to year. Likewise, the themes and contents of the *boria* performed by the different troupes also changes each year and can have a comical, political or satirical notion. But, foremost what is common to most troupes is that *boria* is generally performed during the first ten days of Islamic lunar month of Muharram.

The first ten days of Muharram are, for predominantly Muslims of the smaller Shiite denomination, times of sorrow for the death of Imam Hussein. Imam Hussein (also spelt Hossayn, Hossain) was the grandson of Prophet Muhammad who was murdered in the ninth century A.D. with his seventy-two family members and companions in the field of Karbala by Yazid's (ruler of Iraq and Syria) army of four thousand. Most Shiites have since commemorated this event privately or publicly by mourning processions and public performances of sad passion plays. In contemporary times many non-Shiite Muslims consider Muharram displays of grief and public commemoration of the battle of Karbala as deviation from the true faith; while, others (including many Malays) simply consider it as the beginning of the Islamic lunar year celebrations (referred to as *Awal* Muharram in Malaysia). On the other hand many other contemporary non-Shiite Muslims consider public commemoration of Imam Hussein during the Muharram festival as religious distortions from historic Shiite Persia.

Like contemporary *boria*, nineteenth century *boria* is believed to have consisted an annual event held during the first ten days of Muharram in which various troupes dressed up as different characters and often accompanied by music. Most scholars report, however, that nineteenth century *boria* were performed chiefly by Indian migrants comprising an amalgamation of sepoys (especially the Indian Native Infantry), labourers, convicts or traders rather than the native Malays and that the performances were not competitive but fairly religious corresponding to the Shiite Muharram festival. Thus these scholars continue that it was these Indians who first introduced the Shiite Muharram festival with its spins of religious zeal and pathos into nineteenth century Malaysia and that the local Sunni Malays by either observance or intermarriage with Indian migrants gradually adopted the religious Muharram festival as their own, transforming it into a non-religious practice. Likewise, the origin of the word *boria* is argued by various scholars to be either from Persian or Indian languages. Both of which are thought were introduced into the Malay language directly from India.

There is no doubt that the term *boria* is simply a follow on of the name given to the religious Muharram festival. Several early accounts and photos of *boria*, which shows it to resemble religious Muharram festival, can confirm this. Yet the Malay adaptation of the term *boria* in the late nineteenth century does not necessarily mean that it represented a transformation from a religious into a non-religious festival as argued by virtually all scholars.<sup>1</sup> Certainly the eclectic dressing up of *boria* troupes and its contemporary non-religious nature is not historically unusual. And can easily be documented in earlier records of non-religious troupes accompanying the religious Muharram festivals in parts of India, Indonesia and even in earlier part of the nineteenth century Penang. Thus perhaps what is unusual is the indigenous derivation and adaptation of the term *boria* for the non-religious participants of the religious

Muharram festival. On the other hand there is no conclusive evidence that *boria* in Malaysia had Shiite or Persian beginnings; nor, that there was any significant Shiite minority in any part of the Malay peninsular that would give rise to the religious Muharram festival.

As part of a larger project I will limit this study to theories surrounding the historic arrival of the word *boria* in contemporary Malaysia. I will critically examine plausible theories surrounding *boria's* introduction from Indian or Persian languages and connection to the Shiite religious Muharram festival and demonstrate that much ambiguity still exists. A study of *boria* will not only offer deeper understanding of the religious and social developments of Islam in Malaysia but may also reflect the change of perceptions towards the more hybrid popular Islam which existed prior to the arrival of the orthodox reform movement in the late nineteenth century. This orthodoxy certainly manifested itself during political, religious and social uncertainties following the First World War when at both Penang and the northern Malay state of Kedah religious Islamic officials moved to ban *boria*. In fact little is known about Islam and society in the Malay Archipelago prior to the arrival of Islamic orthodoxy and local Malay sources on the subject are rather scarce, sketchy or in the case of historic documents have been tampered with.<sup>2</sup>

Most scholars are rather vague as to the historic origin of the word *boria*, its Indian participants and its connection to the month of Muharram. With virtually all scholarly accounts of *boria* citing or being heavily dependent on theories first published in an article by G. T. Haughton (1897: 312-313) which is thought to be the first scholarly work on *boria* in either English or Malay. Haughton's report that the word was of Persian origin and that it arrived by Indians rather than a direct Persian one is widely accepted today.

There is however a certain ambiguity on the question of the Persian or Indian origin of the word *boria*. Foremost is Haughton (1897) himself whose vague statement about *boria* is quite confusing: 'It is of Persian origin, according to Forbes, and means a "mat" in Hindustani.' (Haughton 1897: 312)

There is no indication of who Forbes is or reliable a source he is. Other than this short reference to Persia there seems to be no further connection or reference to Persia or the Persian language in his article. Thus, bringing some doubt on the connection of *boria* to Persia by scholars basing their facts and evidence solely on Haughton's article. Perhaps these scholars may have arrived at these conclusions by accepting popular contemporary beliefs that the Muharram festival is intertwined with Shiite school of Islam and Persia. Besides the historic or contemporary Persian usage of the word is not in any way connected with any aspect of the religious Muharram festival. Nor does the word appear in any well-known poetry and eulogies associated with the tragedy of Karbala or the observance of indoor or outdoor religious Muharram festival (Hadley 1776; Ubool Fuzl Moohummud 1815; Pelly 1879; Yule 1886; Steingass 1892; Dekhoda 1947; Amid 1964; Beiza'i 1966; Moghadam 1972; Chelkowski 1979; Schimmel 1986; Badiyi & Azizi et al 1988; Johan 1993; Safa 1992/1994; *Gulzari Ashura* 1996; *Tufani Karbala* 1997).

What's more Haughton (1897) cites in length an unusual account of '*boriah*' (not *boria*) given to him by an Indian in Penang.<sup>3</sup> According to this the word '*boriah*' is of: 'Hindustani and Deccan languages'

And that:

'The plain meaning of the word Boriah in the Hindustani and Deccan language is a place of prayer (praying carpet), and the Malay call it Tikar (a mat).' (Haughton 1897: 312)

It is therefore clear that the Indian's account of *boriah* makes no references to 'Persia' but rather the 'Hindustani' and 'Deccan' languages. Furthermore, his translation of the word as 'a place of prayer' indicates that he is not referring to just any type of mat used as ordinary floor covering. Thus the significance of prayer mat to the religious Muharram festival is not entirely clear. Conversely, following this reference to the origin of the word '*boriah*' the Indian in Penang suggests the word '*boria*' to be traced back to the year 1845 A.D. when the '21<sup>st</sup> Regiment was transferred from Madras to Penang, during which, the Muslim members of this Regiment were given ten days off during the time of Muharram simply 'for the purpose of mourning for the grandson of the prophet'. And that they then used to 'dress up in clothes made of mats' and 'form parties and sing songs of mourning' while representing: 'four persons, Nanak Shah, Jogi Majnun, Balva Ghaghri and Boria. [*Sic*]' (Haughton 1897: 312)

Consequently, the 'Penang Indian' offers yet another perspective on the use of the word '*boria*' in Penang as the name of one of 'persons' represented in the Muharram festival. Thus, he seems to be making a distinction between the words: '*boria*' (one of the four 'persons' in the Muharram festival) and '*boriah*' (a place of prayer).<sup>4</sup> In addition the account creates several questions particularly the comment that a Regiment introduced the word '*boria*' from Madras. This is a Tamil speaking area of Southern India and the Regiment would have had few Decani or Hindustani speakers from Central or Northern India.

In any case besides Haughton's article several later scholars using other independent sources suggest an Indian origin for both the word and performance of *boria*. Wilkinson (1901), in his dictionary published only four years after Haughton's article also suggests the word to be of Hindustani origin but does not elaborate further:

'بوریا' *boria* Hind. A topical song; a favourite form of entertainment during the Muharram at Penang. (Wilkinson 1901: 128)

It is, therefore, entirely possible that Wilkinson (1901) may either have arrived at this Hindustani origin of the word *boria* from Haughton's article. On the other hand, the above description by Wilkinson does not specify who were *boria*'s participants then or how the word came to be associated with the Muharram festival at Penang.

Perhaps in response to theories put forward in Haughton's article, Muhammad Yusof Ibn Sultan Meydin in his 1922 Malay book '*Boria dan Benchananya*' [meaning 'Boria and its Evils'] accepts the existence of the word *boria* as a 'mat'. He also agrees with the notion that the *boria* troupes formed parties during the Muharram festival. Yet, in contrast to Haughton's article Muhammad Yusof (1922) believes *boria* to be derived from the Hindustani word 'بورای' (Romanised as '*bura*', '*borai*' or '*boora*') meaning to act crazy.

This short reference on the origin of '*boria*' by Muhammad Yusof creates several problems. Foremost that with respect to the word '*bura*' he gives no indication on how, why or when the Malays adapted and transformed it into the word '*boria*'. Besides on the roots of '*boria*' he only refers to its introduction through 'Bengali convicts' sent to Penang by the British authorities a hundred years earlier (hence circa 1820). There is no indication whatsoever why these Bengali speaking convicts would introduce a Hindustani word alien to them (Muhammad Yusof 1922: 2, 6). The negative image of *boria* and its origin by Muhammad Yusof clearly reflects both the title and an attachment at the end of his book. The attachment is simply a reproduction of a decree issued to the Muslims of Penang by several religious authorities (including the Mufti) of Penang during Muharram 1339AH (September 1920AD) informing them of the banning of *boria*. This unsuccessful attempt by religious authorities at Penang from 1917 to 1924 and a similar one in neighbouring Kedah in 1920 (R. O. 1935: 26; Fujimoto 1988: 177) reflects the new interpretation of Islam by both the religious entities of the Malay

Peninsula and the newly western educated population. Furthermore, at the same period it appears there was growing a further apprehension amongst the British colonial officials in the Malay Peninsula of *boria's* supposedly connection to the notorious indigenous Muslim and Chinese secret societies (Hamilton 1920; Stirling 1925; R. O. 1935; Wynne 1941). This suspicion I believe led officials to take a favourable stance towards restricting times of *boria* at Penang and issuing licences to hold *boria's* at Perak well to the Second World War (R. O. 1935: 26-27; Wynne 1941; Mahani Musa 2003).

The Hindustani origin of the word *boria* is also suggested by an unidentified writer (signing off as R.O.) in an article, which appeared in the '*Malayan Police Magazine*' of 1935.<sup>5</sup> The author is definite on *boria's* Indian roots but with respect to its meaning offers two different possibilities. According to the first possibility: 'its root meaning refers perhaps to the Indian word for a strolling beggar: one who sings and begs as he moves from village to village.'

And the second possibility from:

'five singers who for some unknown reason sang with their heads stuck through a mat. ... for Bori in Hindustani means a mat.' (R. O. 1935: 26).

R.O. gives no sources for these statements and it is not clear how his description of strolling beggars with their heads in mats is related to the Muharram festival. One may expect in both historic Indian and Malay context words such as Fakir, Sufi or Yogi be used. Also, none of the dictionaries consulted in this study agree with his interpretation of the Hindustani word '*Bori*' as a mat (see Table 1).

In a speech delivered to Penang's Rotary Club two years later Dr Kamal Mohammad Ariff (**Figure 1**) strongly supported the Hindustani origin of the word *boria* and meaning as a 'mat'. (Khoo, Kay Kim & Ranjit Singh Malhi 1993: 28)



**Figure 1: Dr K. M. Ariff (Who's Who in Malaya 1925: 32)**

By examining Dr Ariff's speech it becomes evident that his Hindustani translation of the word *boria* is similar to Haughton's article but rather than referring to the four characters identified as 'persons' he simply acknowledges them as 'four kinds of plays.' In contrast to theories on the arrival of *boria* through Indian military regiments, beggars or Bengali criminals Ariff simply believes it to be 'introduced into Penang by the early Muslim settlers from India.'

From this general statement by Ariff it is not clear who these early Muslim settlers were and from which part of the Indian subcontinent they came from. Nevertheless, this speech may point to the common view that the word *boria* and the performance were common amongst all early Muslim Indians and that they were the ones to introduce a non-Malay or Shiite practice.

In a long and detailed study of the Muharram festival and the nineteenth century origin of the word *boria* Wynne (1941) concludes that it was historically introduced into Malay language from Hindustani but it does not have a direct:

'Hindi or Hindustani origin for it there is, in fact no such word in Hindustani.' (Wynne 1941: 191)

However, he notes that eventually in the early parts of the twentieth century the word *boria* found its way in the Hindustani language. To substantiate this finding Wynne simply quotes Ram Narain Lal's '*Students Practical Hindustani Dictionary*' published in 1913. According to this the word *boriya* is said to be Persian meaning 'a mat made of palm leaves or rushes'. He concludes:

'It seems, however unsafe to accept Ram Narain Lal's authority uncorroborated for although his rendering exactly fits the meaning assigned to the word by Haughton's informant, the word had evidently been current in this meaning for some twenty-five years at least prior to the appearance of Narain Lal's dictionary (1913) and its inclusion therein may, therefore, be a case of inter-mutation, or displacement or assimilation of meaning.' (Wynne 1941: 191)

Subsequently, unable to trace the word *boria* earlier than the year 1913 AD Wynne (1941) attempts to trace the Indian origin of *boria* through other means. But, in order to achieve this objective he maintains that any attempts of this sort must be done within the Hindustani or Indian Shiite Muharram traditions. Perhaps a contributing factor to this assumption was his inability to document and track a Shiite minority in any part of the Malay Peninsula.

It should be stressed that these remarks must be dealt with extreme caution since, contrary to Wynne's opinion, the word *boria* does appear in Forbes dictionary of 1866 as well as in other nineteenth century Hindustani dictionaries (see Table 1). It is indeed strange that Wynne could simply just miss the word '*boriya* or *huriya*' in his study of Forbes dictionary (1866: 131). Similarly, this clear-cut mistake by Wynne certainly brings some doubt on his overall research methodology.

Wynne (1941) also re-examined Haughton's article and accepts the Indian account that there were four 'persons' including one named 'Boria' in the Muharram festival. Wynne is then the first (and perhaps the only) scholar to identify these 'persons' represented during the Muharram festival of India as described in a book and translated by Herklots (1832). According to Wynne:

'We submit for acceptance that the "four persons" in the Boria mentioned by Haughton are identifiable in the Herklots' description of the Moharram as follows:

Haughton	Herklots
1. Nanak Shah	1. The Nanak Shahi
2. Jogi Majnun	2. The Jogi
	The Majnun Faqirs
3. Balva Ghaghri	3. The Ghagriwala
4. Boria	4. The Bhar-bhariya or "Foolish Chatterers"'

(Wynne 1941: 193)

From the above statement by Wynne (1941) it is clear that from Herklots book he was unable to pin point a direct reference to the 'person' identified in Haughton's article as

'Boria'. The connection of the names is nothing more than an assumption on Wynne's part from which he derives the following conclusion:

'We suggest that the true origin of the name Boria is to be found in a corruption of the Hindustani term Bhar-bhariya, or "Foolish Chatterers", the reduplicative prefix of which has been dropped.' [Sic] (Wynne 1941: 193)

Interestingly Wynne's new approach with respect to the connection of Haughton's 'persons' and Herklots 'Sufi Fakirs' does seem logical. This connection is further supported by the fact that roughly twenty years earlier Yusuf Ibn Sultan Meydin (1922: 5) referred to *boria* performers as 'Fakirs'. Equally within the context of 'Sufi Fakirs' other than Herklots and Haughton Muhammad Yusuf Ibn Sultan Meydin and Dr Kamal Mohammad Ariff also mention 'Nanak Shah' and 'Jogi'. Hence this unearthing by Wynne (1941) is astounding not only with respect to the origin of the word but also the *boria* performance.



**Figure 2: A group of Indian Fakirs (Butler 1872: 192)**

However, other than this brief connection of 'persons' to the 'Sufi Fakirs' Wynne (1941) does not elaborate on this much further. Nor does he examine the significance of this connection from a historic perspective, in particular with respect to its arrival into various parts of the Malay world. Little is also said of the Muharram 'Sufi Fakirs' in India or other parts of the Muslim world and Wynne fails to mention if this was a common practice among all Muslims or it was specific to a designated region.

On the other hand one may wonder if Wynne would still suggest the origin of the 'person' as the word 'Bhar-bhariya' if he was aware that it does not appear in Herklots less accessible 1832 or 1863 editions but only in Crooke's 1921 revised edition.<sup>6</sup>

Despite Wynne's suggestion that the word *boria* is connected to 'Sufi Fakir', he inexplicably suggests the possibility that the word 'Bhar-bhariya' is derived from four independent Hindustani derivations. For two of these possibilities Wynne cites Platts dictionary of 1895 (Wynne 1941: 193). According to this the first possibility is from the word 'Barbarahut' meaning as 'gibberish, chatter'. And the second possibility to be a Sanskrit word used in Hindustani called 'Bharya (بھاریا)' of which quoting Platts (1895) gives as 'a wife or married woman' or 'A musical mode; or the wife of a deity presiding over a musical mode'. For obscure reasons with respect to the first possibility Wynne (1941) believes it to be connected with the 'Thug-slang or Ramaseena word Boreeahut or Bore meaning loud talking, bellowing, uproar'. Likewise, with no supporting

documentation Wynne believes the second meaning of the word 'Bharya' to be 'tempting to connect it with the topical songs of Penang'. Besides these two possibilities from Plats (1895) dictionary Wynne suggests two other words. The first is the word 'Bora' that:

'is the name by which Thugs of Behar and Bengal are known among themselves in the *Ramasee* slang; and as such devotees might also be expected to be present in the Penang Moharram, their names might have become corrupted to represent the debased Boria performance.' [Sic] (Wynne 1941: 194)

Yet Wynne regarding this possibility believes: 'None of these fanciful derivations have much to recommend them.' As to the last possibility Wynne believes it to have been derived from the word:

'*Bohora*, a sect of Ismaili Shiahhs of Guzerat and the Deccan, who might be expected to be represented in the Penang Moharram and from whose name Haughton's informant might have taken the name of the person he calls "Boria".' [Sic] (Wynne 1941: 194)

The person named "Boria" that he refers to here is one of the stock characters in the passion plays. At first glance Wynne's possible root word of 'Bohora' seems likely. This follows not only the proximity of their Romanised spelling and sound; but, also the popular belief that anything to do with the Muharram festival is to be connected with the Shiite school of Islam. However, by examining the Perso-Arabic spellings of 'Bohora' (بيهورا or بوهري)<sup>7</sup> and 'Boria' (بوريا) it becomes clear that they differ from each other radically and not likely to be confused by people literate in that script.

This casts doubt on the possible connection between the two words. Moreover, the Shiite 'Bohora' of Gujarat are all of Gujarati speaking background and not Hindustani (*Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, Gujarat Population* 1899: 24; Schimmel 1980: 72). This is of course not to say a historic trading community like them would not have been familiar with some Hindustani, Arabic or Persian. On the other hand, despite being portrayed by Wynne (1941) as Shiite in fact many of the 'Bohora' are of the Sunni branch of Islam, Jains or Hindus (Yule 1886: 105-106; *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, Gujarat Population* 1899: 24-25; Hollister 1953: 271, 276-277, 293; Schimmel 1980: 72; Daftary 1990: 313-314). Consequently it is possible the 'person' named as 'Boria' referred to the Sunni, Jain or Hindu 'Bohoras' and not the smaller Shiite group. Also, the Shiite segment of the 'Bohora' in comparison to other Shiite denominations tend to stay aloof during the Muharram festival by observing private rather than public meetings.<sup>8</sup> This casts further doubts on their connection to Muharram and the *boria* festivals. What is more, Wynne in his overall study of the subject fails to document with certainty the presence of any definite Shiite denominations in nineteenth century Penang or Malaysia.

More than a decade after Wynne in 1952 the respected Southeast Asian scholar Windstedt in his Malay-English Dictionary confirms the Hindustani origin of the word *boria*. According to this: 'boria, Hind., bands of musicians that serenaded (Penang) houses in the month of Muharram.' [Sic] (Windstedt 1952: 31)

Thus Winstedt (1952) is perhaps taking a different view from earlier scholars by making virtually no reference to beggars, topical songs or mats but rather the contemporary understanding of the term.

Another Malaysian scholar, Mahd Ishak Abdul Aziz, writing in 1979 suggests four equally possible Indian origins for the word *boria* and its connection to the Muharram festival. Of these possibilities he derives one from Haughton's article, two from Muhammad Yusof Ibn Sultan Meydin's book and one from his own research.

According to his independent research: '*Boria berasal daripada kata 'Bori' (i.e. 'Boria has its roots in the word 'Bori'')*' and the word '*Bori*': '*adalah nama satu suku kaum di India yang tinggal di Gujerat.*' (i.e. "is the name of a community in India which live in Gujerat"). (Mahd. Ishak Abdul Aziz 1979: 8)

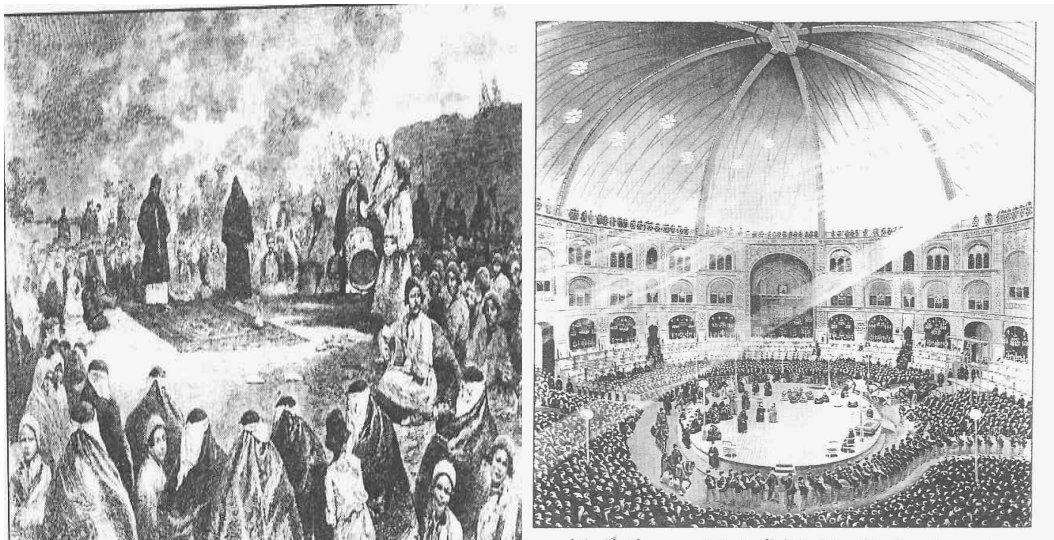


**Figure 3: A nineteenth century drawing of a 'Borah' (Crawford 1897: 196)**

With respect to the name '*Bori*' Mahd. Ishak Abdul Aziz (1979) is likely referring to the previously mentioned Gujarati community of 'Bohora' cited earlier by Wynne (1941). This connection can further be bolstered by Mahd. Ishak Abdul Aziz (1979) believing the '*Bori*' to belong to Shia faith (no reference to their Ismaili tendencies) and that they performed a '*teater Takziya*' (theatrical re-enactment) of the Karbala tragedy during the month of Muharram. (Mahd. Ishak Abdul Aziz 1979: 8-9) Hence he was also under the impression that members of the 'Bohora' community were members of the Shiite school of Islam. But, unlike Wynne's theory that the 'Bohora' were one of the four 'persons' identified as 'Boria' Mahd. Ishak Abdul Aziz (1979) suggests no such connection. According to him *boria* refers to the public celebrations of the Muharram festival by members of the '*Bori*' community (*kaum Bori*). Thus, he concludes the word 'Boria' to be derived from:

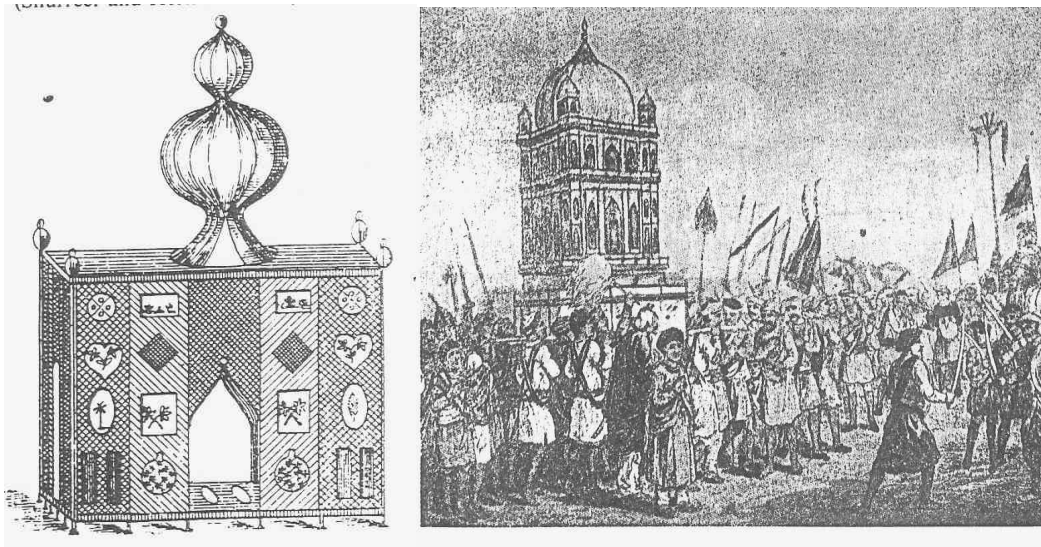
'tersebut sebagai Boria yang bermaksud "kaum Bori yang ria". Bori + Ria= Boria'  
(Mahd. Ishak Abdul Aziz 1979: 8)  
(i.e. "the mentioned *boria* which means 'community Bori' which are cheerful (*Ria*)  
*Bori+Ria=Boria*")

This suggestion by Mahd. Ishak Abdul Aziz (1979) creates several problems. Foremost is that all members of this Gujarati Shiite community consider the first ten days of the month of Muharram as religiously sacred and a time of mourning. Consequently, even if 'theatrical displays' were performed it would be expected that they would show no sign of celebration or happiness; but, rather mourning, sadness and tragedy. Besides '*teater Takziya*' is common only within the majority Twelver Iranian and Middle Eastern Shiite denomination and it is also public displays of tragedy confined to certain areas and not mobile (**Figure 4**). Therefore, there are serious doubts on the connection of '*Ria*' to the word '*Bori*'.



**Figure 4: Late 19<sup>th</sup> century *Tazieh* in rural and urban Iran (Beiza'i 2000: 118, 122)**

On the other hand, the widely documented word *Tazieh*, *Tazia*, *Taziah*, *Taziya*, *Tazeea*, or *Taja* associated with the Northern Indian Muslim and non-Muslim participants of the Muharram festival like the Gujaratis involves no sad religious passion plays or theatre, but rather represents symbolic replicas of mosques made of glass, wood, paper and tassels which are displayed and carried through the town (**Figure 5**).



**Figure 5: Early 19<sup>th</sup> century *Tazieh* in India (Shurreef 1832: Plate I; Broughton 1813: Figure 2)**

Writing on *boria* in both Malay (1982) and English (1987) Dr Rahmah Bujang is definite of *boria*'s Indian origin. He does not suggest possible Indian geographic origins, meaning and derivations for the word. Rather he tends to consider *boria* as a synonym for the Muharram festival and focus on its Indian participants as merely 'Shi'ite Muslims' constituting a 'minority Indian group'. (Bujang 1987: 111-112) It is not clear from what sources Dr Rahmah Bujang (1987) derives the 'Shi'ite Indian' connection.

Thus one may wonder if she was referring to the mentioned Gujarati 'Bohora' group or simply accepts the common belief that the Muharram festival is typically not only synonymous with *boria* but also with Shiite Islam. Besides she makes the common mistake of connecting the Middle Eastern notion of '*taziya*' to that of India.

Similarly, Fujimoto (1988) is of the opinion that religious Muharram festival corresponds to that of the '*boria* festival'. Nonetheless, despite Fujimoto's (1988) possible 'Hindi' origin of the word *boria* she believes that the '*boria* festival':  
'was purely a South Indian festival.' (Fujimoto 1988: 169-170)

Then again, it is not clear how these South Indian participants of *boria* decide on a 'Hindi' rather than a Southern Indian word for their festival.

Writing in 1994 Malaysian scholar Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof is certain that the term and performance of *boria* is of Persian and Shiite origin. Yet, despite this certainty he suggests two alternative Indian theories on the origin of *boria*. According to the first:

'... the term *boria* derives from the Buria, or Bohri, an Indian Muslim community, who apparently staged performances, during Muharram, to commemorate the family of Ali.' (Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof 1994: 31)

And concerning the second theory he writes: 'Finally, the term *boria* means, in several Indian languages, 'sackcloth'.' (Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof 1994: 32)

Although Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof (1994) is not clear on the identity of these 'Buria' or 'Bohri' Muslims; yet, it is likely that he is referring to the previously mentioned Gujarati 'Bohora' community. However, if this assumption is true then it is unclear from what sources he derived these names or his information. In the meantime, Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof's second theory that the word *boria* means 'sackcloth' can perhaps be accepted. But, he fails to shed further light into its connection with the wider religious Muharram festival.

In a recent newspaper article Professor Khoo Kay Kim (2000: 6) suggests the Hindi origin of the word 'Boria' meaning 'a mat' came about because during the Muharram festival people: 'had mats for covering or perhaps they spread mats on the floor to perform'.

This latest study on *boria* by Professor Khoo Kay Kim certainly points out that since the publication of Haughton's article for more than a century little has changed. With nearly all scholars continuing to accept popular theories surrounding the origin of the word, its arrival and connection to the religious Muharram festival. At any rate, due to a lack of nineteenth century primary sources many questions remain unanswered. With most secondary sources at hand either sketchy in detail or somewhat biased towards aspects of the '*boria*' performance and its participants. This is certainly true for the common view that only members of the Shiite school of Islam observe religious Muharram festival. On the other hand *boria*'s historic ability to continue to survive despite its negative image, earlier claims of religious heresy, official banning decrees and claims of conspiracy through secret society connections need to be applauded.

Nonetheless, despite these biased viewpoints and uncertainties one thing emerges that the characters and performance have much in common with the Muharram Sufi and Fakirs of India. This perhaps points towards the origin of the performance in India while, its name besides originating from Arabic, Persia or India could have other roots including a local Malay origin of the word and practice.

Language & Year (A.D.)	Origin	Word	Romanised	Scholar	Translation
<b>Hindustani</b>					
1834*	H	‘بورا’	Bora	Shakespear, John	A canvas bag (esp. for rice) a sack
	S	‘بورای’	baura-l		Madness, insanity
	S	‘بورا’	Baura		Mad, insane
	P	‘بوریا’	Boriya		A mat
	H	‘بور’	Bur		Barren (land)
	H	‘بورى’	Buri		A point of spear
	H	‘بوریا’	Buriya		A diver
1859	P	NG	Boriya	Forbes, Duncan	A kind of mat
	H	NG	Bauri		Mad, an insane woman
	H	NG	Bora or bora		A canvas bag (particularly for holding about two maunds of rice), a sack
	NG	NG	Bohra		A class of bankers and money lenders
	H	NG	bura.i		Mischief, badness, evil
	D	NG	Bora		Deaf
1866	P	‘بوریا’	Boriya or boriya	Forbes, Duncan	A kind of mat
	P	NG	buriya-baf		A mat maker
	D	‘بورا’	Bora		A canvas bag
	H	‘بوریا’	Buriya		A diver
<b>Bengali</b>					
1886*	B	Baulia	boliah/bauleah	Yule, Henry	A kind of light accommodation boat with a cabin, in use on the Bengal river.

Language & Year (A.D.)	Origin	Word	Romanised	Scholar	Translation
	B	Bhada	Bora; boora; boraes		A kind of cargo boat used in the rivers of Bengal
1965	NG	NG	bhore/bhoria	Dabbs A. Jack	Filled/covered
	NG	NG	Bora		Anything cooked in a ball
	NG	NG	Bari		House
	NG	NG	huri		Old woman
	NG	NG	BOsta		Gunny sack
	NG	NG	choigher		Mat, cover
1988	NG	NG	bou (colloquial)	Murshid, Ghulam	Wife
<b>Gujarati (including Khojki)</b>					
1400s#	NG	NG	Boriya	Imam Shah (Syed)	Recognition
1886*	H, G, S	bohra, bohora, Uyavah ari	Bora; Bohrah; Borahs; Boras	Yule, Henry	A trader or man of affairs. Two classes (1) Shi'a Bohras essentially townspeople and (2) Sunni Bohras essentially peasants...

\* Indicates that the text consulted is from a later reprint/edition.

**H** denotes aboriginal or purely Indian  
**S, D** denotes from Sanskrit or Decani (Dakhani)  
**B, G, P** denotes from Bengali, Gujarati or Persian  
**NG** denotes Not Given.

**Table 1: References to *boria* and related words**

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<sup>1</sup> One may expected the Malays to use other common names or phrases associated with the Muharram festival of India, Sumatra or the Middle East (such as the Muharram, Ashura, Tabut or Tazia) to their adaptation of the festival.

<sup>2</sup> Writing in the first half of the nineteenth century Munshi Abdullah (1970: 280) a Malaysian writer lamented this trend and wrote: 'The wrong view is taken by teachers who demand the burning of most of the ancient manuscripts and stories form all over the Malay States on the grounds that they contain solecisms and false doctrine. Why should you believe the falsehoods in them? Let them remain where they are.'

<sup>3</sup> The identity of the 'Indian in Penang' cited by Haughton is not known. Likewise, it is not possible to know in what form or language this account was obtained by Haughton.

<sup>4</sup> Both words which definitely sound similar in their Romanised writings; but, different in their Malay/Jawi sounds and writing (*boria* spelled بوريا in Malay/Jawi as opposed to *boriah* بوريه).

<sup>5</sup> R.O. is likely to be the English scholar and writer R. O. Winstedt.

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<sup>6</sup> Crooke (1921: xv) writes that in contrast to the earlier edited translations of the book by Herklots, in his edition he has simply taken the liberty to add or omit new information and statistics.

<sup>7</sup> *The Calcutta Review* 1848: 135. And Muhammad Najm ul Ghani Khan Saheb Ibn Abdul Ghani 1332 Hijri (1912), *Selkul Jawaher fi Ahval al Bawaher yakni Davoodieh Bohora ki Tareekh*, Murad Abad (India), Matbah Matlah al Uloom va Akhbar. (In Urdu)

<sup>8</sup> In fact little has been written on the participation of the Shiite 'Bohora' during the historic Muharram festival. But from what can be gathered just like contemporary times private sermons have traditionally been central to their observance of the festival (Hollister 1953: 304).