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# Newsletter

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Beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a wave of indentured workers were brought by the British from India to Trinidad to work the plantations which had been abandoned by former slaves who had been freed by the abolition of slavery in 1838. By 1917, the end of indentureship, nearly 144,000 workers had been brought to Trinidad. The majority came from the North Indian areas of Agra and Oudh (Awadh), and while most were Hindu, there were Muslims among them, a minority of whom were Shi'a.

The Muslims brought their devotional practices with them to the Caribbean and they continued to commemorate the Muharram rituals on the plantations. Workers on the estates, including Muslims, Hindus, Creoles and Chinese, donated funds for the construction of the *ta'ziyahs*, which were carried in processions. Competition (sometimes violent) often arose between the estates for the most attractive *ta'ziyah*, or Hosay as it was often called (a colloquial pronunciation of Husayn). In Trinidad, as in India, a *ta'ziyah* (also known as *tadjah*) is an elaborately decorated, colourful simulacrum of the tomb of Husayn which is conveyed in processions.<sup>1</sup> In Iran, of course, *ta'ziyah* refers to ritual dramatic performances or 'passion-plays'.

The Muharram rituals quickly became the main symbol of Indian nationalism in the face of British colonialism and of a sense of identity vis-à-vis Indian minority status in the Black Caribbean. Despite their differences, however, the Creoles, Indians and others joined together in the Hosay processions to protest various injustices, including the reduction of wages on the plantations and the concomitant increase in workload. It has even been said that the Hosay gave symbolic form to a growing working-class consciousness throughout the Caribbean.<sup>2</sup> Such activities began to cause anxiety because of the allegedly increasing tendency to riotous behaviour. Throughout the 19th century, great alarm was expressed by British authorities and other colonists over the threat to public order of the Muharram rituals (as well as Carnival celebrations) culminating in the Hosay massacre of 1884 (referred to by the British as the 'Coolie Disturbances in Trinidad').

'Hosay' domes under construction



PHOTO: GUSTAV THAISS

# Muharram Rituals and the Carnivalesque in Trinidad

Interestingly, despite the violence often associated with Muharram rituals, the day of 'Ashura itself (the tenth of Muharram) has a somewhat ambiguous meaning in the Muslim world. It is a day on which numerous rituals of joy and happiness have been celebrated for centuries throughout the Sunni world, especially in North Africa and Egypt. On the other hand 'Ashura, for the Shi'a, is a day for rituals of remembrance and mourning commemorating the tragic martyrdom and self-sacrifice of Husayn at the battle of Karbala in 61/680. Indeed, some medieval scholars such as Ibn Taymiyya and al-Maqrizi have even suggested that the joyous celebration of 'Ashura among the Sunni was a later 'innovative' attempt to insult the Shi'a followers of Husayn ibn 'Ali, since such joyful practices are not supported by authentic *hadith*.<sup>3</sup> In India, many of the Muharram commemorations bring together both sorrowful and festive features.

## Muharram and the carnivalesque in Trinidad

Over the last century or so, what has been the major tragic event in the Shi'a Muslim ritual calendar has been increasingly transformed into a 'fête' with a carnival-like ambience, second only to the main carnival in the festival schedule of Trinidad. The Shi'a Muslim organizers deeply believe in the religious significance of this event while the 30-40,000 spectators/participants have little knowledge of its religious purpose. The non-Muslim spectators/participants (Afro-Trinidadians, Hindus, some Sunni and others) treat it as a *fête*, using terms borrowed from carnival such as 'bacchanal', 'jump-up', 'shake-up', and 'mas', which are appropriate to their definition of the situation. They view the Muharram rituals in this way partially because of the actions of the Shi'a themselves who borrow aspects of Carnival in the construction, style of public presentation and decoration. The Hosay is built in the *Imbarara* in the 'yard' of the builder and when they 'come out' onto the streets on Tasu'fa and 'Ashura, the event is transformed into public entertainment, into street theatre.

The Hosay/*ta'ziyah* structure varies in height, averaging 10 to 15 feet and is totally covered with brightly coloured tinfoil with added variations depending on the design in a given year, sometimes with strings of coloured lights, flowers, mirrors, or coloured cloth creating a dazzling display.<sup>4</sup> The upper section is decorated with domes of varying shapes and sizes and other impressive decorative features (Interestingly, while researching the construction of the Hosay/*ta'ziyah*, I noticed the builder was copying the dome-style of St. Basil's Orthodox Church in Moscow from the cover of a *National Geographic* magazine sitting on his workbench).

As the procession gains momentum on the streets, it is met by more participants who join in the rising emotional tension.

The battle drums evoke a feeling of great excitement and are evaluated by the spectators in terms of the 'sweetness' of their sounds. Many of the *tassa* drums have identifying 'names' painted on them as do the *pan* or steel drums in Carnival. Some are traditional such as 'Husayn', 'Karbala', or 'Hasan', while others have such 'names' as 'Conan', 'Rock and Roll', or 'Poison'. The latter is an interesting double-entendre in the best tradition of Calypso, representing both a significant word in the Muharram tradition, namely the poison associated with the death of Hasan, as well as being the name of a currently popular hard-rock group. As the Shi'a chant 'Hosay', 'Hosay', 'Hosay', spectators join in with slight, quickly spoken modifications such as 'Hosay, I say', 'Hosay, I say', the rhyming patterns of which are borrowed from the Calypso tradition in Trinidad.

Popular foods, soft drinks, rum and beer are available from street vendors, unlike water, which was traditionally available as a remembrance of the thirst of the martyrs. The Shi'a recognize that changes are occurring over which they seem to have little control; but at the same time they say 'We are living in Trinidad where 45% of the population is Negro and 42% is Indian, we must integrate. I've always maintained that the *ta'ziyah* in itself is a form of togetherness. It keeps us together'. This new multicultural interpretation of the Hosay is also reflected in the views of others. A Hindu Sadhu, for example, understood the Hosay to be a ritual remembrance of a conflict between two brothers, Hasan and Husayn, one of whom had been a Muslim and the other a Hindu, and 'they died together battling over their Faiths. People now make the *tadjahs* to commemorate their deaths, and "to show we should all live in unity together".<sup>5</sup>

Sunni Muslims in Guyana, Fiji and elsewhere were able to have similar *ta'ziyah* edifices and processions banned in their countries as un-Islamic and a 'mockery' of a 'pure' Islam. The Sunni in Trinidad, despite protests for the past century, have not been successful in banning the Hosay. One reason for this is government recognition, especially in recent years, of the value of tourism.

While the government acknowledges the Sunni Anjuman Sunnatul Jamaat Association as the official spokes-group for Muslims in Trinidad, it nevertheless has turned to tourism to gain needed foreign currency and has not hesitated to exploit its 'natural' cultural resources – the cultural performances and tourist 'productions' of its heterogeneous society. Carnival and the music of the steel band or Pan are two of the most important ethnic practices which have become objectified and displayed as heritage objects, distinctive of Trinidad as a national entity. Thus, while Carnival is largely an Afro-centric spectacle reflecting the very essence of the Trinidadian colonial experience, the Hosay represents the Indian and

the broader multicultural unity of the country and hence a value to be exploited. In many respects the *ta'ziyah* has become a moving, processional exhibit, an objectification not only of the architectural beauty, colours and display of the *ta'ziyah*, but also, to the government of Trinidad as well as to the people themselves (the Shi'a and non-Muslim participants), an embodiment of the ethos of the *fête* – the oneness and brotherhood of a heterogeneous society.

## To whom does the Hosay belong?

What is presently occurring in Trinidad is an implicit process of negotiation, which is defining and socially creating the reality of Hosay. But who 'owns' the 'rights' to a religious ritual? It may seem a patently ridiculous question, but the issue of authenticity and multi-vocality lies at its very core. If various religious and ethnic groups participate in a ritual such as the Hosay and give it idiosyncratic meanings, is it then not 'theirs', as well as belonging to organizers and sponsors, who have a different meaning of its 'truth'? In a very real sense the Hosay is an articulation of socio-cultural differences and similarities. In the discursive process, a ritual and social world is given meaning, but one which is always contestable and open to re-articulation. It is a never-ending process of negotiation. What *ta'ziyah* once was in India, it is not today; and what it is today, it will not be tomorrow, although in that process various participants try to fix its meaning to reflect their view of the world. ◆

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## Notes

1. On the *ta'ziyah* in India, see Shakeel Hossain, 'Tazia: Ephemeral Architecture in India', *Mimar: Architecture in Development*, 35, June, 1990, pp.10-17.
2. Rodney, Walter (1981) *A History of the Guyanese Working People 1881-1905*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
3. Maribel Fierro, 'The Celebration of 'Ashura in Sunni Islam', in: *The Arabist: Budapest, Studies in Arabic*, vols 13-14, 1995, pp. 193-208.
4. Excellent colour photos of the Hosay can be found in Judith Bettelheim and John Nunley, 'The Hosay Festival', in: John W. Nunley and Judith Bettelheim (eds.), *Caribbean Festival Arts: each and every bit of difference*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1988, pp. 119-206.
5. Gustav Thaiss, 'Contested meanings and the politics of authenticity', in: Akbar Ahmed and Hastings Donnan (eds.) *Islam, Globalization and Postmodernity*, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 60, fn.18.