Throughout history, the ethnic and religious barriers, cultural diffusion, religious exchange and conversion have been part of the stage of Western attention after so many years of relative silence and indifference. Already in the 1980s, many analysts pointed to the tensions between Albanian and Serbian nationalism and divisions between the Christian Serbs and the (mainly) Muslim Albanians, and warned that such ethnic fault lines were tending to become a dangerous Balkan hotspot. Comparisons were drawn, especially by Serbian nationalists, with the famous Battle of Kosovo fought between the Ottoman Turks and Serbian Balkan forces in 1389 – a ‘clash of civilizations’ between two deeply antagonistic and incompatible nations. In light of the recent developments, it seems only logical that the rift between Albanian and Serbian nationalism and divisions be cleansed has catapulted this region to the centre of the world’s attention after so many years of religious and ethnic boundaries. At present this seems unimaginable, but until very recently, Muslims and Christians of different ethnic backgrounds visited one another’s sanctuaries, worshipped one another’s saints and ignored the evident theological objections of religious orthodoxies. Particularly in the field of popular religion, which religious authorities traditionally control the least, boundaries were most often disregarded. There are numerous examples in Kosovo (and beyond) where Muslim and Christian forms of pilgrimage and saint veneration have amalgamated and formal religious boundaries were most often disregarded. There are numerous examples in Kosovo (and beyond) where Muslim and Christian forms of pilgrimage and saint veneration have amalgamated and formal religious divisions have become blurred. Most interestingly, in Kosovo, Serbian Orthodox shrines have often demonstrated a propensity to attract Muslim pilgrims of various ethnic backgrounds. The following account deals with one such Serbian shrine, Zoolite, which I visited in 1991. It is a fascinating case of how symbolic before, due to processes of mutual assimilation and absorption. One of the most interesting features of life in this small town was that old urban Albanian families were Slavophone, that is to say, they did not speak Albanian at home, but rather a Slavic dialect (na govor – our tongue). During the 1921 census, the majority of urban Albanians in Kosovo had therefore been registered under the category ‘Serbs or Croats’. During my own research, some asserted that their language was similar to Macedonian, apparently trying to dissociate from any connection with Serbian. Since most Albanians had been sacked from their jobs in 1990, there was now a great deal of ‘bad blood’ between local Serbs and Albanians.

During the pilgrimage, the entrance of the monastery is animated by booths, mainly manned by Gypsies selling snacks and various toys and trinkets; whereas within the confines of the monastery there is an outdoor café run by Serbian youth from the village. There are also other simple, improvised fairground attractions run by Gypsies. During my visit, a Serbian tradesman was selling posters and badges containing images of leading Serbian nationalists like Vuk Draskovic, Slobodan Milosevic, and Vojislav Seselj, as well as small Serbian flags and other Chetnik paraphernalia. From the café I could hear old Chetnik songs, and in the afternoon, down in the village, I saw an Albanian café with Albanian music blaring from the speakers. This was just opposite a Serb barbecue emitting even more dehumanizing denigrating levels of Serbian songs. While in 1991 Albanians boycotted the pilgrimage, Gypsies were present in quite substantial numbers. These were mostly Orthodox or ‘Serbian’ Gypsies (Srpski cigani) from Suva Reka and Rahovec who seemed to be quite well assimilated into the Serbian community. During the holiday, Serbs and Gypsies closely intermingled, apparently knowing each other quite well. While I was present, there was also a smaller but quite conspicuous presence of Muslim Gypsy women, wearing the characteristic wide baggy trousers and speaking Albanian, who hardly joined in with Serbs and Orthodox Gypsies; obviously they were not part of the Orthodox communities developing within the walls of the monastery. Although this was meant to be a feast, the atmosphere was quite tense during my visit: the war had just started and (as a Dutchman) I sensed a great deal of suspicion (at a time when the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hans van den Broek, was heading the European Community efforts to stop the war in former Yugoslavia). At dawn shots were fired, probably by some drunken Serbs, and later that morning army jets flew over, as a reminder to everyone that the situation was far from normal. Suspicion was, however, not only directed against foreigners: I witnessed a Serb pilgrim from Prizren accusing a local Albanian of being an Albanian ‘spy’, because of his local dialect, which sounded to him like an Albanian speaking Serbian. After the poor peasant showed his ID to his fellow Serb from Prizren he was told jokingly, but not without serious overtones, ‘You had better change your language if you want us to become friends’. Deep distrust is characteristic of the Serb
Beginning in the 19th 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 in 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 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 Muharram rituals on the plantations. Workers on the estates, including Muslims, Hindus, Creoles and Chinese, donated funds for the construction of the tarjahiyyah, which were carried in processions. Competition (sometimes violent) often arose between the estates for the most attractive tarjahiyyah, or Hosay as it was often called (a colloquial pronunciation of Husayn). In Trinidad, as in India, a tarjahiyyah (also known as tahar) is an elaborately decorated, colourful simulacrum of the tomb of Husayn which is conveyed in processions.1 In Iran, of course, tarjahiyyah 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-a-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.2 Such activities began to cause anxiety because of the allegedly increasing tendency to riots and violence. 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 Disturbance’).

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 ‘fete’ with a carnivalesque ambience.3 Second only to the main carnival in Trinidad, the Hosay is the festival schedule of the Trinidad. The Shi’a Muslims organize deeply believe in the religious and ethnic groups participate in a ritual such as the Hosay and give it idio-syntactic 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 social world is given meaning, which is always contestable and open to rearticulation. It is a never-ending process of negotiation. What tarjahiyyah 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.

Interestingly, despite the violence often associated with Muharram rituals, the day of Ashura used (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, in countries such as Pakistan, the Hosay is a day for rituals of remembrance and mourning commemorating the tragic martyrdom and self-sacrifice of Husayn at the battle of Karbala in 616/680. Indeed, some medieval scholars such as Ibn Taymiyya and al-Marrāzī have even suggested that the joyous activities were a later ‘innovative’ attempt to insulate the Shi’as of Husayn ibn ‘Ali, since such joyful practices are not supported by authentic hadith.4 In India, many of the Muharram commemorations bring together both sorrowful and festive features.

Hosay/ta’ziyeh construction

The Hosay/ta’ziyeh structure varies in height, averaging 15 to 17 feet and is usually 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.5 The upper section is decorated with domes of varying shapes and other impressive decorative features (interestingly, while re-searching the construction of the Hosay/ ta’ziyeh, 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. The ambiences in this way partake of the Muharram ritual, which has become a moving, processional exhibit, an objectifica-tion not only of the architectural beauty, colours and display of the ta’ziyeh, 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 integral process of Trinidad, which is defining and socially creating the reality of Hosay. But who ‘owns’ the ‘rights’ to a reli-gious ritual? It may seem a patently ridicu-lous 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 idio-syntactic 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 social world is given meaning, which is always contestable and open to rearticulation. It is a never-ending process of negotiation. What tarjahiyyah 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.6

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Regional issues

The Caribbean: GUSTAV THAISS

Muharram Rituals and the carnivalesque in Trinidad

The Shi’a recognize that changes are occurring, the Hosay represents the Indian and the Trinidadian colonial experience, namely the poison associated with the consciousness throughout the Caribbean. Such activities began to cause anxiety because of the allegedly increasing tendency to riots and violence. 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 Disturbance’).

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