

# Community Process and the Performance of Muharram Observances in Trinidad

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*Frank J. Korom and Peter J. Chelkowski*

*What I knew about Islam was what was known to everyone on the outside. [...] They had their own martyrs. Once a year mimic mausolea were wheeled through the streets; men "danced" with heavy crescent moons now one way, now the other; drums beat, and sometimes there were ritual stick fights. [...] Islam, going by what I saw of it from the outside, was less metaphysical and more direct [...].*

—V.S. Naipaul (1982:15–16)

The famed Trinidadian writer quoted above speaks to us as a liminar from the margins. Being of East Indian origin, he is squarely on the inside of the community of worshippers he witnesses, but being a Hindu, he is on the outside looking in. He simultaneously lacks and shares something with those he observes, not fully cognizant of the experiential directness that he so acutely points out. The writer's epistemological dilemma or lack of understanding concerning a major Islamic performative event displays a basic notion that we wish to make below, namely that things may not always be what they appear to be on the surface. Hermeneutic activity by spectator and believer alike thus creates layers of contextually embedded meaning.<sup>1</sup>

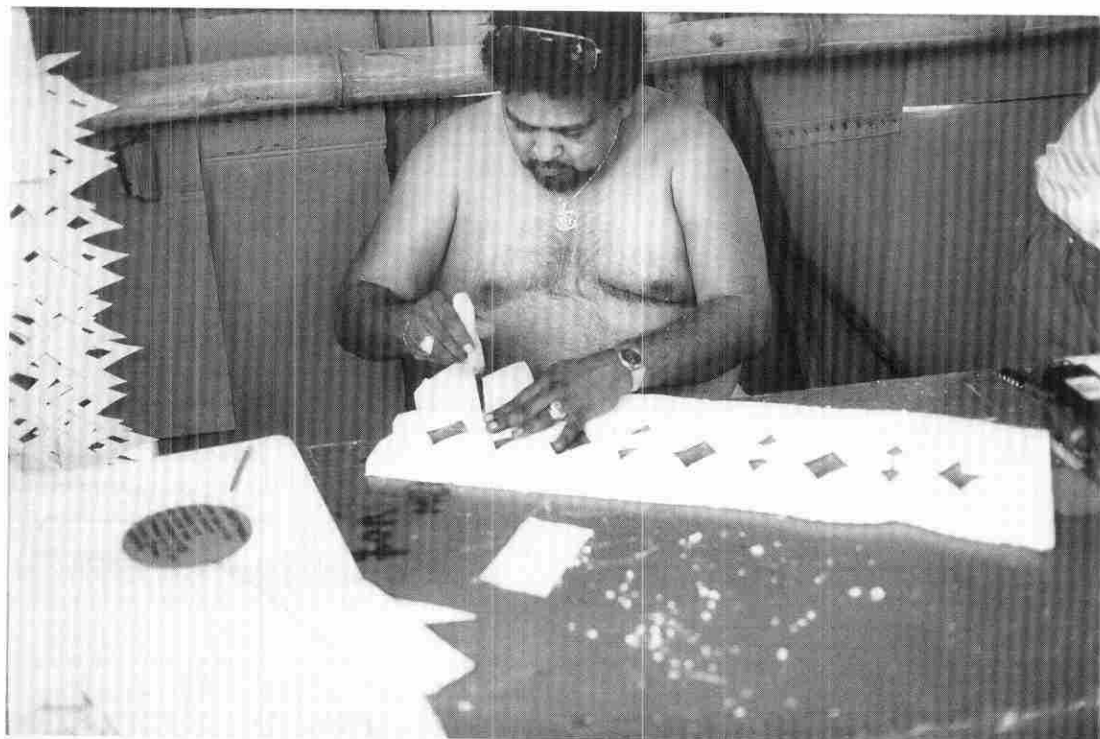
It is clear that performances embody multiple meanings for all communities—meanings which may not be the same for all involved. But the creation of meaning becomes even more complex and diverse during large public-display events when artisans, performers, and audience members come together in acts of creative expression. Moreover, in heterogeneous cultures where many ethnic and religious groups are represented, each respective group brings its own preconceived notions to bear on the event being performed and observed. Interpretations and understandings, therefore, may not always correspond to a prototypical set of historically derived assumptions about the phenomenon performed; and often meanings may vary to such a degree that they be-

come mutually exclusive.<sup>2</sup> In this essay, we wish to illustrate the above point by describing explicitly different sets of interpretations pertaining to the Islamic *muharram* observances as practiced in two locations—one rural, one urban—on the island of Trinidad. But before proceeding with our description, a brief historical overview of the tragic event which serves as the theological justification for the observance is provided to contextualize the Trinidadian variant of *muharram*.

### *Introduction*

In the year 680 CE, Husayn, the grandson of the prophet Muhammad, was brutally murdered along with his sons and followers on the plains of Karbala in what is now present-day Iraq. For the Shi'i Muslims, Husayn's death is considered the greatest symbolic act of redemption in history, and is to a large degree what distinguishes them from their Sunni brethren. Husayn's passion and suffering have been remembered for the last 1,300 years in the form of an annual observance during the month of Muharram.<sup>3</sup> The manifestation of this paradigmatic ritual varies according to its location and to the degree of influence exerted on it by local religions, cultures, and rituals.<sup>4</sup> From Karbala, the observances spread in many directions—west to what is today south Lebanon, east to Iran, northeast to the Caucasus, and southeast to India.<sup>5</sup> In the 19th century, it was transported to the Caribbean basin, and during the last two decades it has moved north from Trinidad to New York and beyond.

*1. Master Trinidadian tadjah builder and designer Anthony (Muggy) Millette cuts styrotex that will be used for the exterior of his 1991 creation. (Photo by Guha Shankar; courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution)*



### *The Middle East*

For the Shi'a, Husayn's tomb in Karbala remains a central point of religious orientation during the annual observances as well as throughout the year. The land around Husayn's tomb itself is one of the largest cemeteries in the world, since every Shi'i Muslim would like to be buried there. In regions near Karbala, like Iran, muharram participants carry a symbolic bier representing the one in which Husayn's body was carried from the battlefield to his final resting place. Along with several other forms of ritual expression, the bier-carrying has become a key performative activity in central Iran. Here, it is known as *nakhl*, meaning "date palm" in southern Iraqi dialect, for according to tradition, the original funeral bier was made from the branches of this tree.

The size of the bier varies; it can be an enormous, teardrop-shaped structure up to three stories tall that requires more than 150 participants to carry during processions. Such is the case in the town of Mehriz, located near the city of Yazd in central Iran, where the *nakhl* is draped in the symbolic colors of green (representing the prophet's family) and black (for mourning). On the front exterior, it is covered with mirrors so that participants and bystanders alike can see their own reflections on the surface of the bier, thereby experientially participating in the suffering and death of Husayn through a method of symbolic visualization.<sup>6</sup>

### *The Indian Subcontinent*

In places located farther from Karbala, such as the Caucasus and South Asia, pilgrimages were too difficult and transportation of the dead (to the cemetery around Husayn's tomb) too problematic. Therefore, creative strategies to metaphorically bring Karbala to local sites were devised as a way of bridging geographical distance, in order to attenuate the problem of alienation from the original site. In India, for example, local "karbalas" were created as burial grounds for those who could not make the pilgrimage to the actual site in Iraq. These local karbalas were created by bringing a bit of soil from the original Karbala and sprinkling it on the future site to sanctify the new space. The bier itself gradually became transformed into a representation of Husayn's mausoleum. The structure, called *ta'ziya* in Urdu, then came to represent both the bier and the tomb.<sup>7</sup> During the last few centuries, even in today's age of photography and international travel where artists would have an opportunity to see the tomb at Karbala, the original structure is not often used as a prototype for aesthetic creation because many artisans who build *ta'ziyas* in South Asia and elsewhere think that the act of artistic expression itself is a form of piety glorifying Husayn. One Trinidadian master builder, for example, beautifully described his 1991 creation as a "New York state of mind," owing to the fact that many of his materials and even conceptual models originated in the Big Apple's garment district (plate 1). In other words, the creativity of the artisan supersedes any need to remain true to the original design.<sup>8</sup>

The size and shape of the portable *ta'ziyas* vary greatly from small cenotaphlike structures built of papier-mâché, colored paper, and bamboo, to huge creations which must be either carried by many people or moved on wheels (plate 2). This aspect of the Muharram observances reflects, therefore, the close correlation of central historical events to their distance from Karbala through material objectification. Those closer to Karbala remain truer to the "original," whereas those farther



2. Mr. Ganpath, the builder (with white hair and mustache), helps to carry a "knot rose" tadjah to the Ganpath Camp in Cedros. (Photo by Peter J. Chelkouski, Jr.)

away have been more influenced by indigenous cultures, religions, and rituals. Having posited this, we do not wish to suggest that ta'ziyas built outside of the immediate area of Karbala are less "authentic" in any sense. Rather, we feel that because distance coupled with time can alter memories and result in gradations of cultural amnesia,<sup>9</sup> the processes of creative transformation that have shaped material representations of the tomb become central to the outward display of pious sentiment and emotion, leading to what may be called "subjective apprehension." From this point of view, which emphasizes creativity and production over degeneration and reduction, no claim is made for a prototype. All ta'ziyas and observances are real in the emergent contexts within which



3. An alam, or standard of Ali, father of Hassan and Husayn, is taken out in procession during Muharram 1973 in the "old city" of Lahore, Pakistan. (Photo by Richard Kurin)

they are displayed and performed. Yet use of a spatial model for conceptualizing change allows us one adequate way to get at larger historical processes of cultural creolization.

The dynamics described above are not unique to the Muslim worldview either. The center-periphery evolution of Muharram rituals could be compared with the development of the Christian holy week observances from Jerusalem to southern Germany, southern Italy, Spain, and Guatemala, where similar performative transformations of a central theological paradigm have developed in response to local ideologies and aesthetic systems.

India has proven very fertile for the transformation of many Husayn-related rituals. Here, indigenous rituals and festivals have had a great impact on Muharram observances. An example of this would be the immersion of the ta'ziyas in water at the end of the ceremonial period, a custom that parallels the immersion of Hindu icons at the conclusion of

processional rituals such as the Durga *pūja*.<sup>10</sup> Shi'i, as well as Sunni, Muslims, and Hindus participate in Muharram rituals. For example, one of the authors (Chelkowski) had the opportunity to observe a poignant example of Hindu-Muslim interaction in Hyderabad when he observed a group of Hindu women bringing an offering of coconuts and bananas to a standard of Ali (Husayn's father), which was covered with garlands of flowers in a little shrine devoted to it (plate 3).<sup>11</sup> Religious interaction of this sort is not limited to South Asia alone; it is a trademark of popular Islam in many parts of the world. But more specifically, the fusion of Islamic and Hindu elements can be observed quite clearly in South Asian diasporic communities, such as those of the Caribbean basin.

### *The Caribbean*

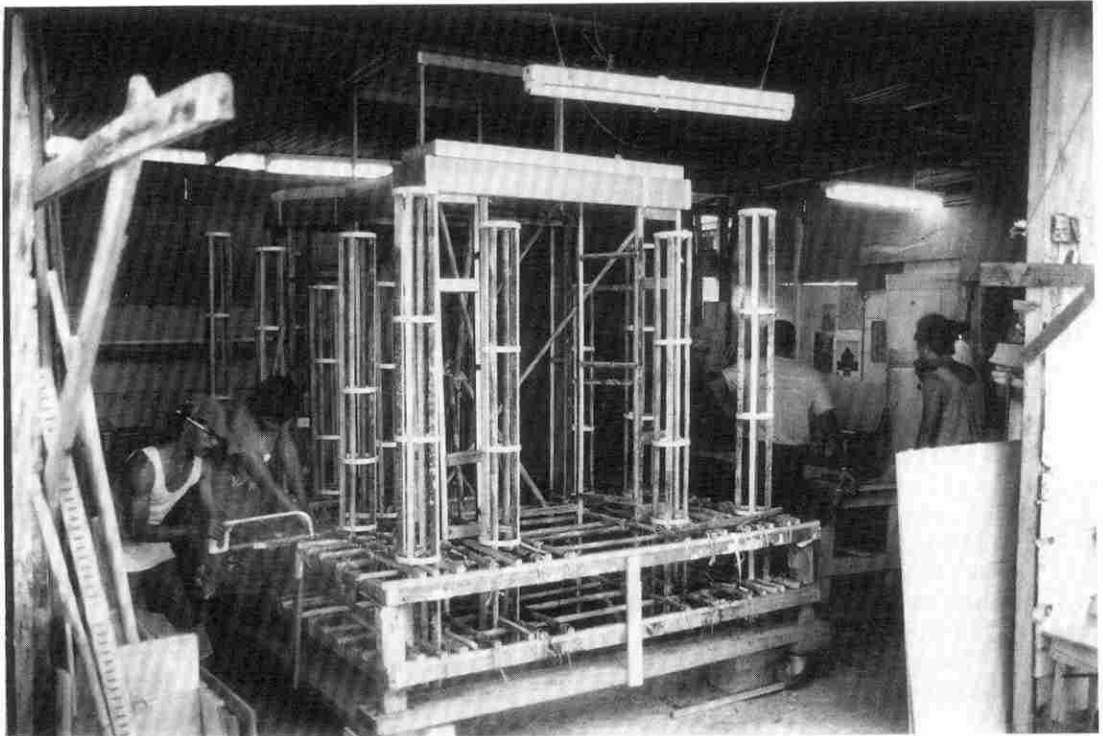
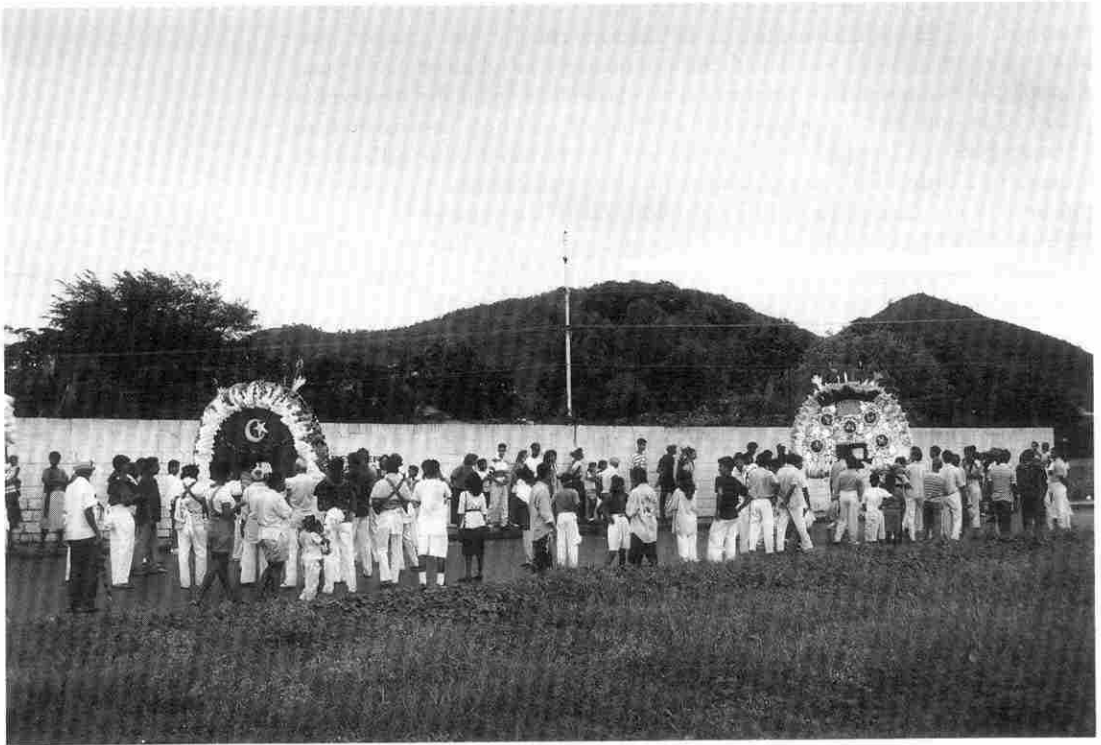
From 1845 to 1917, East Indians were brought as indentured laborers to the Caribbean basin and carried Muharram rites with them. In 1834, the British had freed their African slaves on the sugar cane plantations of the Caribbean colonies. At that time, before the introduction of the sugar beet on a commercial scale, sugar was still a precious commodity and its manufacture an important source of income. As the former slaves identified working on the cane plantations with slavery, they refused to work as free laborers and migrated to cities and towns. Plantation owners, in order to avert financial ruin, brought many indentured laborers from India (especially from what is today's state of Uttar Pradesh). These laborers were given free passage and a five-year contract to work for wages and, upon completion, a free return ticket to India.<sup>12</sup> Although a very few did return, the majority of East Indians stayed on and came to influence the local culture through the preservation of their own religions and expressive traditions. Among the cultural relics brought by East Indians, the Muharram rites came to eclipse all others in many parts of the basin (for example, Surinam, Guyana, Trinidad, Jamaica) by allowing Indians of numerous religious persuasions to participate equally in a public show of ethnic identity.

A very short time after the East Indians landed on Caribbean soil, the rituals, which are known as *Hosay* (derived from the name Husayn, often transliterated as Hosayn) in Trinidad and Jamaica, became a symbol of unity and often an act of defiance against colonial rule for the indentured immigrants. It was particularly in British Guiana that the *tadjah* (= ta'ziya)<sup>13</sup> became a symbol of defiance for sugarcane plantation laborers against their British masters.<sup>14</sup> That defiance, however, brought about catastrophe in Trinidad:

On October 30, 1884, there occurred on the British Caribbean island of Trinidad one of the most traumatic episodes in the shooting by the colonial police, supported by a detachment of British soldiers, of a number of participants in the Shia Muslim celebration of Muharram, better known in the island as the "Hosein" or "Hosay" festival. In terms of the island's historical experience, the casualties were relatively high—at least sixteen killed and over a hundred wounded.

The causes of the tragedy must be sought in a number of inter-related economic, cultural and political factors. (Singh 1988:1)

Hosay continues to this day as a set of rituals identifying the East Indians of Trinidad with their homeland. Imaginary as it may be, this



identification is due, in part, to the observance's combination of both Hindu and Muslim components. In Trinidad, despite the fact that it has been infused with the practices of indigenous cultures, many of those who participate in the building of *tadjahs* are not Muslims, but Hindus and Christians belonging to diverse ethnic groups. The Hosay observances in the Caribbean basin, particularly in Trinidad, were also influenced by the general presence of African rituals and, in turn, the Hosay had an impact on the Carnival, one of the most spectacular public display events held in Trinidad, and for which it has become famous (see, for example, Mahabir n.d.; and Gibbons 1979:23–28).<sup>15</sup>

Thus the general development, evolution, and transformation of the Muharram observances from their origins in Iraq to their contemporary manifestations in the Caribbean is the result of intercultural factors, making them a multidimensional set of traditions. As is the case with some forms of Christian pageantry, such as those specific cases mentioned above, the further one moves from the center to the periphery, the more spectacular and public the staging becomes.<sup>16</sup> In the case of the Trinidadian form, however, the most interesting developmental aspect is the fact that the mourning dimension has been transformed into a kind of celebration on one level of interpretation. This is a constant point of tension in Trinidad, where journalistic debates occur each year concerning the most appropriate way to “observe” or “celebrate” Hosay (see Ali 1990:4).

### *Hosay in Trinidad: The Contemporary Situation*

Today, there are two major centers of Muharram observance in Trinidad. One is in the town of St. James, a suburb of Port of Spain in the north, and the other is in the Cedros district in the southwest of the island (sporadic, small-scale Hosay observances are also to be found in other places, such as Tunapuna and Couva). Although one could speak of a unified Hosay tradition in Trinidad, variation due to rural/urban differentiation, ethnic and religious affiliation, etc., has shaped the observance in subtle ways. Further, some participants from St. James in the north emphatically state such differences by saying, for instance, “We have nothing to do with them” (e.g., the southern traditions). In fact, many of the people involved in the construction of the tomb replicas (*tadjahs*) in the north have never witnessed the observance as practiced in the south, even though some of them trace their lineage to the south, and vice versa. Parallel traditions have therefore developed out of one imagined parent tradition.<sup>17</sup> Some of the similarities and divergences are discussed below.

In St. James, the four family-based operations called “yards” (*imambarah*, or “camps”<sup>18</sup>) organize the Muharram observances. In the south, the yards have loose family associations and are primarily based on the community network following their plantation estates antecedents. In St. James, one also finds the construction and parading of two huge crescent “moons” (one red, the other green) by yet two more family-based yards (plate 4). Corporeal representations of the Prophet’s grandsons, Husayn and Hassan, the colors of the moons reflect one of the many oral legends associated with the brothers’ deaths: when Husayn was beheaded the moon turned red, and when Hassan died by poisoning the moon turned green.<sup>19</sup>

4. On Karbala Day in 1991, the Hosay moons of St. James travel to the Queen’s Royal College grounds. (Photo by Guha Shankar)

5. The *kathiya* and internal frame of the *Ghulam Hussein tadjah* is built inside their *imambarah*, located in St. James. (Photo by Guha Shankar)



In the north, the core practitioners of the observance are drawn from the Muslim community, especially from the very small body of Shi'a (it must, however, be underlined that the sectarian distinctions in Trinidad are ambiguous and perceived to be not very important by some practitioners). Among the Muslims, those who belong to more orthodox and/or fundamental groups stand apart from the others, regarding themselves as staunch Sunnis, defenders of the purity of Islam.<sup>20</sup> Such groups are often highly political and very critical of the Muharram observances in Trinidad, referring to them as a mockery that propagates "fêting" and "jumping-up." As a result, those who oversee Muharram activities, particularly the Shi'i organizers, must be on their guard against being criticized by such groups.

In the south, the number of Muslims involved in the observances is minuscule, and the Muharram rites are mainly organized by Hindus and Christians. This is not a new development; rather, it seems that it has been a persistent factor in the maintenance of the tradition in that part of the country. When one of the main organizers of the Muharram rites in the south was asked whether he sees a contradiction in the fact that he, being a Hindu, organizes, participates in, and believes in the power of the Muslim ritual, he retorted quite simply: "I presume I am a Muslim one month a year."<sup>21</sup> And although Muharram as performed in Trinidad on the whole must be regarded as an East Indian phenomenon, the observance in the Cedros area in the south should serve particularly as an example *par excellence* of cultural syncretism. Despite today's observance being an amalgam of many different cultural influences, those Trinidadians who are passive participants (for example, audience members) regard this as an East Indian "festival" or "fête." Moreover, some non-Muslims who are involved in the construction of the tadjahs suggest that the observance is more of a cultural performance than a religious one. These are important points that we shall return to below.

Another aspect of the observance of Hosay is that the southern version has not been subjected to great amounts of commercial exposure in the sense that media coverage of the event has been severely limited. This is partially due to the rural nature of the Cedros area. Having once been coastal sugar cane and coconut plantations, the surrounding communities have retained their rural flavor as stereotypical "sleepy fishing villages" in the "deep south." Consequentially, the Hosay observance has not attracted many spectators from beyond the immediate area. In contrast, the St. James Hosay is an urban set of rituals that has received a great amount of attention in the press, on television, and by word-of-mouth, resulting in more extravagant and lavish productions. Further, government organizations are gradually encroaching upon the observance from a detached, comfortable distance in order to promote it as a budding tourist attraction. The latter factor has influenced popular perceptions of the event to some degree, and needs to be considered when discussing the variety of meanings embedded in Hosay.

In both areas the Hosay consists of:

1. The building of replicas of Husayn's tomb, which in reality are not replicas but rather, as we argued above, artists' imaginative renderings of the original structure located at Karbala (plate 5). These are called tadjah, although today the use of the term in everyday discourse is less current, and Hosay has come to mean both the rituals and the edifices themselves.<sup>22</sup>



2. In addition, there is the building of a small *tadjah* which is devoted to Hassan, the brother of Husayn (plate 6). What is curious about this is that some of the active participants believe that Hassan died together with Husayn at Karbala. In reality, Hassan died 12 years earlier, probably poisoned by his wife. Although Hassan and Husayn are known by the Arabic dual form as *hasanayn*, and in many Muslim countries Hassan is also remembered during Muharram, the coalescence of the two brothers could be the result of the influence of Hindu epics and Indian lore regarding the heroic exploits of twin brothers (see, for example, Beck 1982). Whatever the case may be, it is clear that the communities' sacred history has been reconceptualized, continuing to undergo change as the creative process of imagining the past produces ever-newer versions of religious and ethnic identity.
3. In both locations, there is also the preparation of flags to be carried in the respective processions (plate 7).
4. Special foods are prepared during ten days of abstinence.
5. New *tassa* and bass drums are prepared, older, worn ones are reskinned (plate 8), and special beating "hands" (rhythms) are performed exclusively during Muharram (plate 9).<sup>23</sup>

6. *Small Hosay Night in St. James: at the center of the platform is a hosay for Hassan, surrounded by flags. (Photo by Guha Shankar)*

7. *Women of the Balma Hosay Camp of St. James carry flags behind the Balma flag platforms. (Photo by Guha Shankar)*

The process of building the large *tadjah* used to take 40 days,<sup>24</sup> but now, due to modern construction methods and materials (such as styrotex), the length of time spent on construction has become more flexible (plate 10). The minimum required, however, is to begin on the first day of Muharram,<sup>25</sup> as is common in many places in the south. In the north, work on the *tadjahs* usually begins on the holiday called Bakr Eid, the first day of Zil-Hajj, the last month of the Islamic calendar.



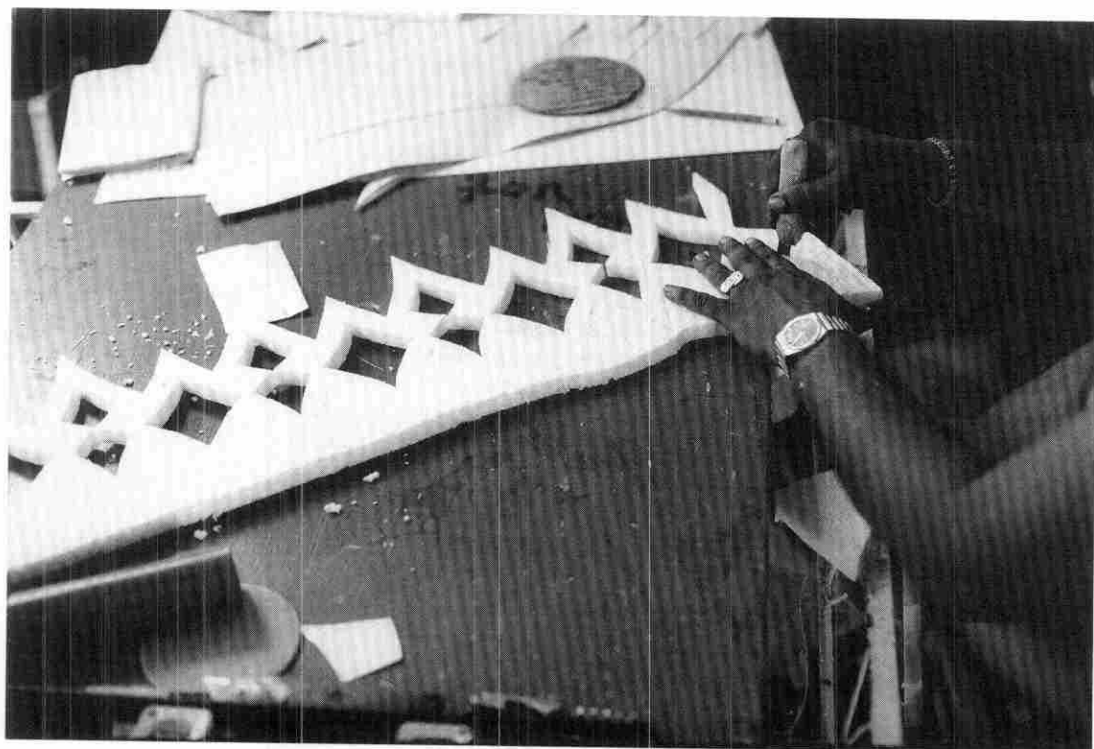
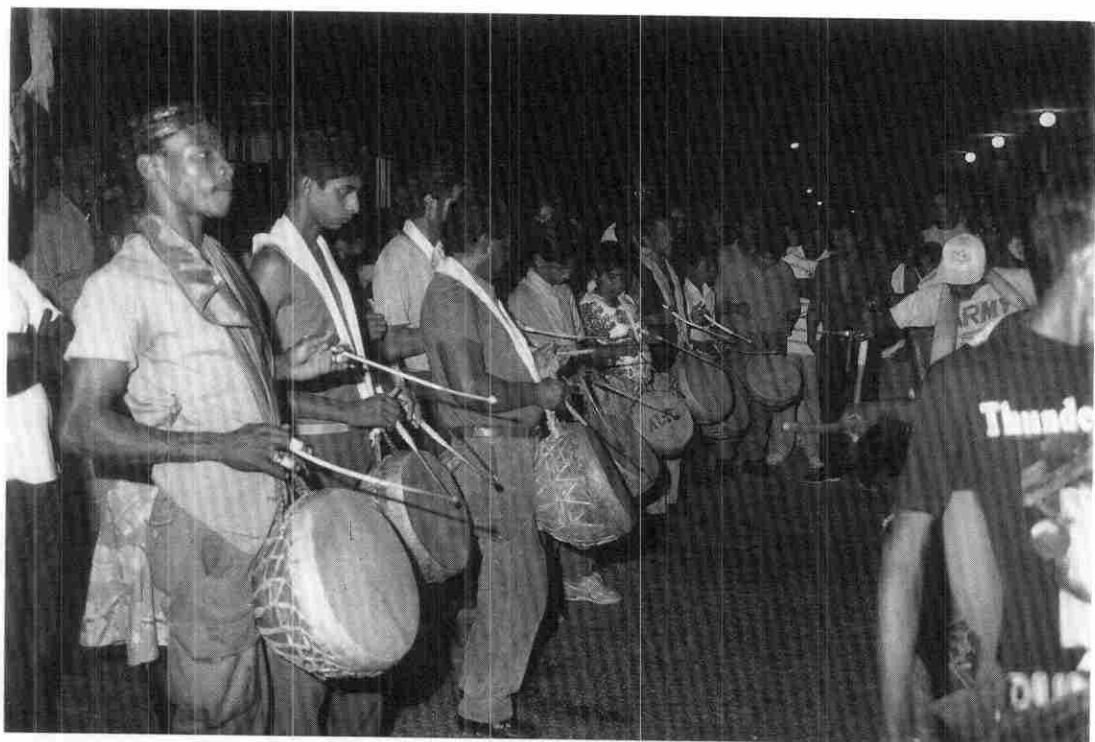
8. The final stages of a drum being skinned. (Photo by Frank J. Korom)

9. Tassa drummers from the Ghulam Hussein yard in St. James perform on the Western Main Road during the 1991 Flag Night processions. (Photo by Guha Shankar)

10. Detail work of styrotex cutting done by Anthony (Muggy) White, master builder and designer of the Bay Road tadjah in St. James. (Photo by Guha Shankar)

Many differences in structure, technique, and design exist between northern and southern tadjahs. The north, for example, is more "traditional" in building the *kathiya* (base) and internal frame, which is primarily made of *roseao*.<sup>26</sup> Today three of the four tadjah building crews in St. James employ *roseao* in binding the base and strengthening the frame. Otherwise, they have departed quite significantly from tradition in the scheme of color, shape, and external decor.

In the south, the frame is now made solely of wood (plate 11). However, the exterior is more "traditional," sometimes referred to locally as the "old style." The structure of the tadjah is angular, the color predominantly white, and the external decoration based on white paper flowers, called "knot roses."<sup>27</sup> In both north and south the height of the tadjah is currently limited to 15.5 feet due to the height of electrical and telephone wires in the streets, but some tadjahs were 20 or more feet high in the past. In both areas, each imambarah/camp has headmen

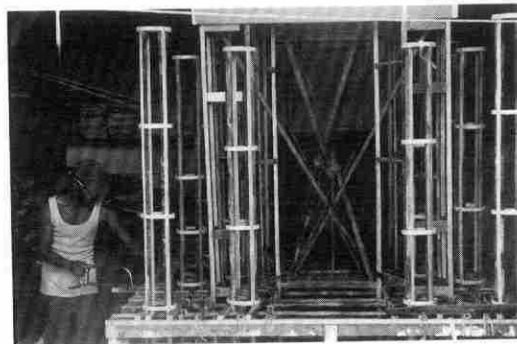


who are responsible for arrangements, permits from the police, and the orderly behavior of the crowd during the processional rituals and drumming. There are also the master builder, the builders themselves, and the men in charge of building drums (plate 12).

Although the whole event, beginning with the cutting of the roseao, can be construed as a ritual process, the most intense ritualistic portions of Hosay begin to increase from the first day of the month of Muharram. Those who are involved in tadjah preparation abstain from the intake of meat, fried foods, alcohol, and from sexual intercourse. In the past, the prohibition applied to the whole duration of the 40 days. Today some individuals engaged in tadjah building follow that prescription as a form of sacrifice, but it is more a matter of personal volition rather than a general rule. The key to a successful observance here is adaptability and tolerance because many of the prescriptions serve more as an ideal type, reflecting reality, not replicating it. Shoes must be removed while working in the imambarah. Since the imambarah is technically off-limits to women, they are not supposed to enter the sacred structure. In reality, however, postpubescent girls may work inside as long as they are not in a state of "pollution" (i.e., menstruating). Thus, whoever works on the structures is supposed to be ritually pure. These acts of abstinence, combined with long hours of hard work and financial investment are also viewed as a sacrifice by community members. Like the drama of Imam Husayn's martyrdom on the plains of Karbala, participants give up much during the ritual period in order to show grief and austerity for the prototypical martyr, thereby experientially identifying with his suffering. In general, prescription and practice are consonant in the urban north and rural south. Yet much variety is to be found on both the individual and community levels.<sup>28</sup> Below, we present a general sequence of events, pointing out certain variables where appropriate.

As mentioned above, ritual activities begin to increase from the first of Muharram. In St. James, an imam, or spiritual leader, begins a journey at 7:00 P.M. to each active yard to pray, reciting verses from the *Quran* in front of the *chowk*,<sup>29</sup> thereby, sanctifying it as a sacred space for the duration of the ten days (plate 13). Each yard has its own *chowk* which is usually a square large enough for the tadjah to be placed on. The *chowk* is often not far from the imambarah in which the tadjah is being built. After being transformed into sacred space through the process of prayer, this area becomes the locus of much familial activity, such as camp drumming, food offerings, and other forms of social interaction. After the prayers are recited, *malida*, a sweetmeat made of flour, sugar and, clarified butter, is distributed to all in atten-

11. Master builder and designer Narain (The Shark) Manmohansingh moving through the early stages of constructing a Cedros tadjah. (Photo by Peter J. Chelkowski, Jr.)



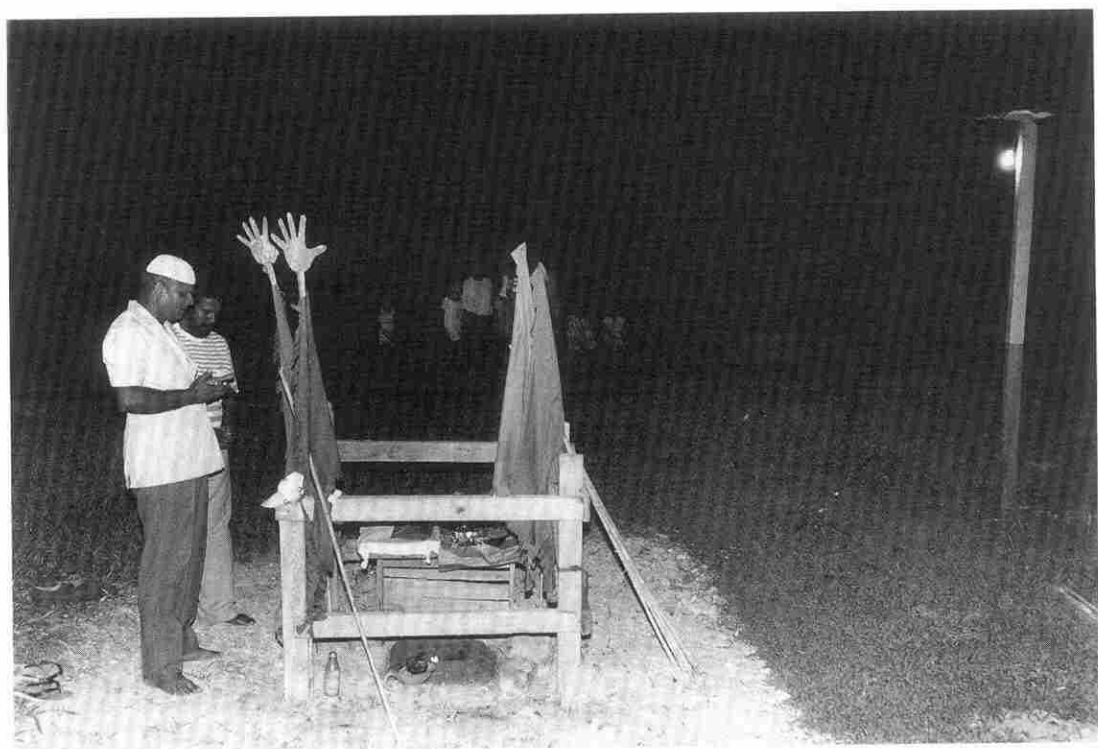
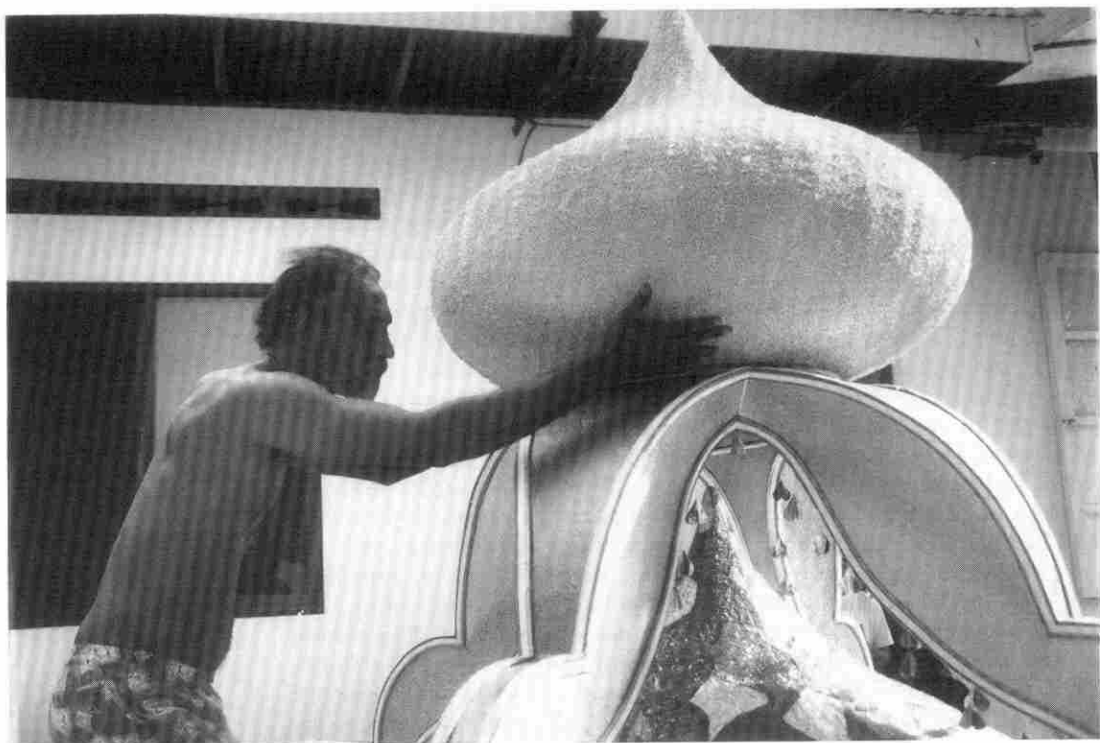
dance. This is followed by drumming as work on the *tadjahs* continues throughout the night. The basic pattern of worship activity continues each night in this fashion until the seventh of Muharram, although the pace quickens as an increased sense of urgency grows with each passing day.

Up to this point, these activities are primarily yard-based; that is, performed by and for family members and people who make up the collective yard group. In other words—aside from the drumming, which is performed for anyone who wishes to listen and/or to participate—the ritual activities in the yards are an insider phenomenon because they bring together the various groups involved in cohesive ways unknown to outsiders. They are domestic rites for the well-being of family and friends, as opposed to public rites of spectacle which follow. The last three nights of the Hosay open up the observance to the general public, since the central rituals performed on the eighth, ninth, and tenth of Muharram are processional rituals actualized outside of the yards. In both Cedros and St. James, participants insist that *tadjahs* must be brought out onto the streets in order to successfully complete the event. Making the observance public by bringing the ritual items outside not only allows for spectacle, but also allows a large audience to experience the aesthetic beauty of the *tadjahs*, while simultaneously creating new sets of meanings concerning the significance of the event. This notion of inside/outside perspective is a basic point of tension in the community at large.<sup>30</sup> As various groups' understandings shape and influence opinions about the observance, the event itself subtly changes in response to competing opinions.

So on the evening of the seventh of Muharram, called Flag Night, the rituals become public when each yard brings out a wheeled platform covered with flags reminiscent of the *alams*, or standards, paraded in parts of India, Pakistan, and Iran (plate 14). These flags not only represent the standards of Imam Husayn's party, but also visually signify "promises" (vows) made by individuals.<sup>31</sup> In Cedros the flags are mostly red and some are green, colors signifying Islam in general and the brothers specifically.<sup>32</sup> In St. James one finds a plethora of colors, each signifying a particular sort of promise. A few of the standards in both places are topped with *panjahs* made of pounded metal.<sup>33</sup>

Before the standards are taken out onto the street, they are consecrated with more communal prayer on the chowks of the yards. Drumming then signals the emergence of the flags (plate 15). The flags of each yard are brought out to the sound of drumming at approximately the same time. When they turn onto the main road, each yard lines up at an equal distance from the others. Drumming then continues while the flag platforms begin moving along the main road.<sup>34</sup> For the community of believers, this portion is a reenactment of the Husayn party's "peace" march, but the bystanders who surround the platforms use this occasion as an opportunity for a fête. As the standards solemnly move along the road, audience members dance sensually and sway rhythmically to the beat of the drums, a pattern of behavior in strict contrast to the movements of the yard people. The procession lasts until the early hours of the morning and Flag Night ends when each group returns their flags to their own respective yards.

The following evening, the eighth of Muharram, is dedicated to Husayn's older brother Hassan. This night is locally known as Small Hosay Night. The sequence of prayer, drumming, and procession continues, but this time a smaller *tadjah* (approximately three feet square) is





12. Master builder Noble Bisnath of Balma Hosay Camp, St. James, crowns his tadjah on the afternoon prior to Big Hosay Night. (Photo by Guha Shankar)

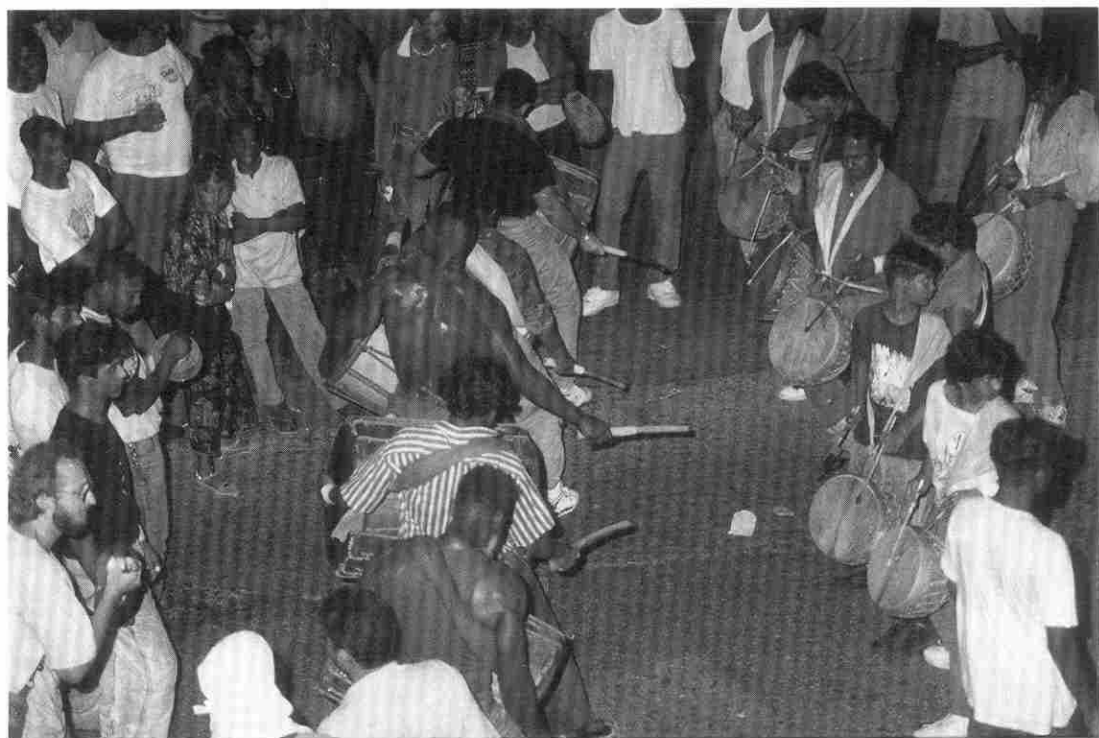
13. Caseem Ayattollah, the acting mojawir in Cedros, recites prayers on an earthen chowk. (Photo by Peter J. Chelkowsky, Jr.)

14. A muharram alam topped with a panjah is taken out into procession during the month of Muharram in 1973 in the "old city" of Lahore, Pakistan. (Photo by Richard Kurin)

placed on the platform along with some of the flags. Once again, the platforms move onto the streets to the accompaniment of drumming.<sup>35</sup> The crowd is larger on this evening, even though the largest audience will gather the next night for the processional display of the big tadjahs.

On the day of Big Hosay Night, the large tadjahs are brought out of the imambarahs and "crowned" with the domes that complete the structures (plate 16). The completed tadjahs are then placed on the chowks and prayers are once again recited prior to their leaving the yards. The big night is an exciting time for participants and audience alike, and the drumming is considered to be the best on this evening. When the tadjahs (and moons in St. James) move onto the street, the





spectacle begins. The multitude of people is overwhelming, and the excitement is akin to a great festival. Audience exegesis flows as spectators, consisting of people from all ethnic backgrounds and a few tourists, openly admire and comment on the shape and decoration of the tadjahs. The "competition" among the various camps as to who built the finest tadjah is openly discussed by the crowd. There is competition among the drummers as well in the form of a clash, when two yards face off to beat the "war hand." But for all of this, there are no judges and no awarding of prizes for the "best." Rather, everyone appreciates the aesthetic beauty of the colorful tadjahs. In St. James, the two moons add an extra dimension to the spectacle. There, the moons, representing the brothers, meet at a roughly predesignated spot in front of the local mosque, where they "kiss" or "touch," symbolizing their last meeting.<sup>16</sup> As this is performed the crowd applauds joyously, reversing the somber, mournful, and esoteric meaning embedded in this act for the community of builders and their families. For the crowd of onlookers, this is a joyous occasion, a celebration. At this point, it is very difficult to contain the crowd, which is more interested in the profane dimension of the event, the carnival-like atmosphere. Drinking of rum and beer by spectators increases with the steady progression of the parade. The crowds "lime" (party) by drinking, joking, and gossiping, while the participants beat and mourn till roughly 3:00 A.M. Each tadjah (and moon) is then finally moved back into its own yard, where it rests until late in the morning. Although opinions vary from yard to yard, local tradition holds that the tadjahs are "dead" from the end of this evening's performance, since the spirit of Husayn is believed to depart from the structures at approximately this time.

After their rest, the tadjahs are moved once again in procession around noon on the following day, known as Karbala Day. In Cedros, this daytime procession does not follow any prearranged plan, but in St. James the tadjahs and moons move along the same route and onward to the grounds of Queen's Royal College (QRC), where land was granted during colonial times for the purpose of serving as a local karbala. Since the tadjahs are now considered dead, the focus of attention shifts to the moons in St. James (plate 18). The moon men twirl ahead of the tadjahs and reach the QRC grounds first. Once arriving, the moons are erected upright, facing each other. Then an imam recites the *janaza*, or funeral prayers. By the time that the *janaza* is completed, the other tadjahs pass by QRC. The moons then depart the area and begin their return journey to St. James. As the tadjahs pass QRC, they also begin their return. By 6:00 P.M., all of the moons and tadjahs are once again resting on their respective chowks. In St. James, a complete day of rest follows before Teeja Day, the occasion for destroying and immersing the tadjahs. However, the pattern is somewhat different in Cedros. There, the tadjahs are moved to their appointed places at approximately 6:00 P.M. on Karbala Day.<sup>17</sup> The *mojawir*, as the imam is called in the south, says a short prayer, a farewell *marsiya* (elegy) is sung in Bhojpuri (a Hindi dialect), and finally the tadjahs are lifted on the shoulders of male volunteers and carried to the sea as the sun sets over the horizon. The tadjah floats for a brief time, but is soon toppled by the waves as darkness falls. The labor of many days and the artistic creation of many artisans is annihilated by its makers within a short span after completion. It is a sad moment, no doubt a catharsis for many, and there are more than a few damp eyes in the crowd.<sup>18</sup>

The next day, when the tadjahs, or parts of them, wash up on shore,

15. Drummers of the Ghulam Hussein Yard, St. James, perform during the procession on the Big Hosay Night of 1991. (Photo by Guha Shankar)

16. The "head" of the Balma tadjah being placed, guided by master builder Noble Bisnath (on the left). (Photo by Guha Shankar)



17. On Karbala Day in St. James, the Bay Road tadjah is "kissed" or "touched" by the red moon. (Photo by Guha Shankar)

the people of the camps gather the remains and bury them. Even though local meanings have been shaped by contextual exigencies, the ceremony's final moments hint at its somber beginnings and the crowds, often not aware of why they do so, react with appropriate solemnity. Each year, new tadjahs will be built, and after their very short lifespan, will meet the same end in the tranquil waters of the Caribbean, far removed from the harsh desert plains of Karbala.

### *Conclusion*

This brief explication of Hosay in Trinidad should suggest not only the theme of continuity and change with regards to theology and symbolism, but also community process in religious performance. More specifically, the notion of multiple meanings takes center stage, so to speak, because the event functions differently for audience members and performers/artisans by conjuring up variegated images drawn from a long history of Shi'i observance on the one hand and Trinidadian experience on the other. For the community of believers, the religious dimension, familial activity, and East Indian identity are highlighted through the inside, esoteric activities that occur during the 40 days lead-

ing up to the processions. Their experience is not shared by the general public, which interprets the three nights and one day of procession as a "celebration" performed in a festive atmosphere. As many bystanders say, "It is just another excuse for a fête," or "It is like a little carnival." For them it is also a community experience, but a profane one, celebrating sensuality and excess. Because the general audience is largely non-Muslim, consisting of people from all walks of Trinidadian life, they do not understand, nor are they interested in, the sacred dimension of Hosay. For many of them, the occasion is a "Trini thing," a display of national identity that transcends ethnic peculiarities as it obliterates religious significance.<sup>39</sup> But, like so many other religious public display events, the sacred and profane are intertwined, for as participants emphatically state, "The tadjahs must be taken out. The building of the tadjah is not enough."<sup>40</sup> Context thus determines the completeness of the event by providing access to closure. Like every cyclical event, there must be a point at which beginning and end merge to create parity. Otherwise, the efficacy of the sacrifice would be nullified. This was tragically punctuated in 1990 when, due to an aborted coup d'état, the tadjahs were not paraded entirely, even though they were completed and eventually immersed in St. James.<sup>41</sup> Yet participants lamented the fact that the event fell short of completion because the objects of veneration were not brought out.



18. The red moon in procession is on the way to the burial grounds at Queen's Royal College on Karbala Day. (Photo by Guha Shankar)

Audience/performer interaction in a public space, imbued with an aura of both sacred and profane meaning, defines this event and opens up the possibility of many levels of interpretation.<sup>42</sup> By doing so, the event is a double performance of sorts: esoteric, sacred, and ethnic on the inside; exoteric, profane, and national on the outside. The emergence of Hosay in Trinidad thus exemplifies the process of cultural creolization, grafting indigenous ethnic elements onto an imported substratum of ritual performance. By doing so, the Hosay observance has not only survived, but creatively responded to the various needs of a multicultural nation state through celebrating diversity.

### Notes

1. We wish to gratefully acknowledge the generous support provided by the Center for Folklife Programs and Cultural Studies at the Smithsonian Institution. All photography appears courtesy of the Smithsonian. Special thanks must be given to Guha Shankar for providing critical insights and technical assistance during and after intermittent periods of fieldwork from 1990–92. Thanks must also be given to Richard Kurin for extensive comments on an earlier draft and to Peter Seitel for suggestions on restructuring the essay. Any factual or interpretational errors are, of course, our own.
2. As has recently been shown for Islam in Gujarat by Peter van der Veer (1992).
3. Muslims follow the lunar calendar, which is counted from the time of the prophet Muhammad's migration from Mecca to Medina in 622 C.E. Husayn's death took place on the tenth day of Muharram in the year 61.
4. For a brief overview of such regional adaptation, see John Nunley and Judith Bettelheim on "The Hosay Festival" (1988).
5. On the diffusion and spread of Muharram rites, see Peter Chelkowski (1985).
6. This emotive and performative dimension of the observance has developed out of the principle of *tashabbuh* (imitation) (see Baktash 1979).
7. The term is used in a different sense in Iran to refer to dramatic enactments of the historic events pertaining to Husayn's martyrdom (see the various contributions in Chelkowski 1979).
8. Although we have developed this geospatial model for an objective understanding of the transformation of style, the idea has been confirmed by the artisans that we have worked with in Trinidad. Further, parallels to this exist in Hispanic and Polish Catholic traditions as well as in the Greek Orthodox Church. In all three, miniature items representing actual full-scale structures are built for processions during annual religious performances. The *szopkas* of Krakow, for example, are elaborate palace-like structures representing the stable and manger where Jesus was born. Such miniature palaces, mostly inspired by the design of St. Marie's Cathedral in Krakow, obviously bear little resemblance to mangers. Likewise, with the exception of the Sind in Pakistan, where fairly accurate models of Husayn's tomb are built, the South Asian *ta'ziya* resembles the architecture of an Indian mosque more than it does Husayn's mausoleum.
9. For an explication of this in the mental context of South Asian Hindus, see Lawrence Babb (1982).
10. This is how one scholarly observer describes the goddess festival: "It is an exuberant time, marked in one form or another by virtually every household. Neighborhood associations vie with one another in constructing images of Durga slaying Mahisa, and the procession of these images to the riverbank, where they will be immersed at the festival's end, is extraordinary. In Varanasi, for instance, hundreds of small groups accompany their respective images. Each Durga is lavishly decorated, celebrated by musicians, from a single drummer to a Western style brass band" (Coburn 1991:153).
11. For a very recent and detailed account of muharram in Hyderabad generally and Ali's central role specifically, see David Pinault (1992:79–168). For more specific historical data on Hindu participation, see Juan R. Cole (1988:115–17).
12. For the background on South Asians in Trinidad specifically, see Judith Ann Weller (1968).

13. The term *ta'ziya*, which comes from the Arabic *'aza* (to mourn or express grief), went through a phonetic shift from Urdu to Bhojpuri (a dialect of Hindi), during which the *z* became a *j*, thus producing *tadjah*, the Caribbean rendering. Today the *tadjah* is often called *hosay*, which means that the rituals and the ritual objects have now been combined into one conceptual field.
14. An unpublished article by Basdeo Mangru, "The Tadjah in British Guiana: Manipulation or Protest?" deals with the Hosay observance as the spirit of defiance against colonial rule. In ending his article Mangru writes: "The Tadjah tended to create a degree of solidarity among Hindus and Muslims, enabling them to be more demonstrative in preventing the powerful plantation system from reducing them to mere puppets" (n.d.:18).
15. The fact that the term "camp" is used to refer to the *imambarah* (place of the imam, the sacred space in which *tadjahs* are built) demonstrates not only a common vocabulary that is shared with Carnival (e.g., *mas camp*), but also mutual influence in terms of the social organization of artistic activities.
16. This is, of course, a generalization. It is clear that the reverse might also be true in some instances. That is, due to political exigencies, power relationships, etc., public performance might become more private or domestic as one moves from center to periphery, as has been pointed out by Richard Kurin (1992). But such expansion and retraction from internal to external and back again is precisely what constitutes the dynamic frame within which Muharram observances must be viewed and analyzed.
17. On the methodological value of utilizing "tradition" in the plural for studying variation within an overarching religious phenomenon, see Frank J. Korom (1992a:36-39).
18. The *imambarah*, a term used in north India to refer to the dwelling place of the Imam (= Husayn), is a roofed shack with three permanent walls and a collapsible one that is easily removed so that *tadjah* segments can be brought out and assembled in the adjacent yard. Note that in St. James, use of the word "camp" is discouraged, but used nonetheless.
19. These moons are apparently unique to Trinidad in contemporary times; no similar structures have been observed during Muharram rites elsewhere. However, illustrations of a large and small moon being paraded through the streets of a 19th-century Indian urban center do exist (see Korom 1992b). But, when Trinidadian participants viewed video footage of an Iranian *nakhl* with us, they were struck by the structural similarities (shape and ornamentation) that it shares with the moons. It may be the case that the *nakhl* served as a model for the development of the moons in South Asia.
20. The number of Muslims in Trinidad represents only seven percent of the total population, and within this small minority the ratio of Sunni to Shi'a in Trinidad is approximately six to one, paralleling worldwide populations of these sectarian groups.
21. On the personal oscillation between religious paths in postcolonial contexts, see Omer Stewart (1956:71-76).
22. For purposes of clarity, this paper will refer to the edifices in the processions as *tadjah* and the overall ritual as *Hosay*.
23. The shell of the *tassa* is ceramic and kettle-shaped. It is covered with a cured goat skin and is beaten with two wooden sticks known as "chops." The bass drums are cylindrical, made out of hollowed mango or cedar stumps covered with heavier goat skins on both ends. Many of the drums must be reskinned every year as the heads tear due to intense beating, humidity, and change of temperature (see Sadie 1984:532).
24. 40-day periods in Islam, like in many other religions, play very important roles as symbols of completion or perfection, especially among the Shi'i Muslims observing the death of Husayn on the 20th of the month of Safar (i.e., 40 days after the martyr's death). Even in Trinidad, in places like Tunapuna, a smaller *tadjah* is built for that occasion and is called a 40-day *tadjah*. This roughly corresponds to the *chup ta'ziya* (silent *ta'ziya*) of north India, a smaller procession often performed to mark the 40th day after the martyr's death.
25. The moon yards of St. James also construct their crescents within the ten-day period, the first ten days of Muharram.

26. Roseao is commonly called "giant reed," a grass known as *Arundo donax L.*
27. One of the structures built in 1991 was covered with 24,000 of these handmade knot roses.
28. Due to the brevity of this essay, variation cannot be dealt with at great length. A fuller and more detailed description and analysis will be available in our forthcoming book titled *Rites of Passage and the Passage of Rites*.
29. The chowk is freshly painted in white each year a few days before the beginning of Muharram. It is then demarcated by a fence and decorated with plants and a glass of water to represent the Euphrates River environment near the historical stage of events at Karbala. In this sense, the chowk parallels the Iranian ta'ziyeh stage, which also bears representations of vegetation and water. On the latter, see Parviz Mammoun (1967). The above description, however, reflects the urban St. James environment. In Cedros, the sacred areas are literally more "earthy," being made out of clay and turf (plate 17). But one builder in the south recently poured a formed concrete chowk perhaps in imitation of the northern model of permanence.
30. One could also discuss this variation in meaning in terms of esoteric/exoteric factors. For a classic example of this application, see William Hugh Jansen's "The Esoteric-Exoteric Factor in Folklore" (1959). The argument could be taken further by applying emic categories borrowed from Sufi mysticism—*batin* (internal meaning) and *zahir* (external meaning)—as Muslims in the Indian subcontinent do when discussing the possibility of multiple meanings for events associated with Muharram.
31. In both India and Trinidad, the tadjahs are believed to possess healing power. As such, the objects act as conduits between humans and the Divine, repositories of *baraka* (blessings). Indeed, many people tell *memorates* about their own healing experiences.
32. On the cupola of Husayn's tomb at Karbala a red flag always flies. The color symbolism in Islam is multivalent. In one instance green stands for the symbol of paradise and the *ahl al-bayt*, the "Family of the Prophet." On another level, green indicates poison. According to Shi'i tradition, Hassan was poisoned by one of his wives, as mentioned above.
33. Panjah literally means "palm of the hand," but has the symbolic meaning of the five members of the holy family of the prophet Muhammad: the prophet himself, his daughter Fatimah, his cousin and son-in-law Ali, and two of his grandsons, Hassan and Husayn (see plates 2, 4, 7, 13, 14, 18).
34. During Flag Night women of the yards walk behind the *kathiya*, a wheeled platform, carrying flags (symbolizing "promises," or vows) as part of the "sacrifice" (see plate 8). This practice, like other traditions, is gradually fading out as older members of the community of believers pass away.
35. Like the flag-carrying tradition, the once-prevalent custom of individuals carrying the small tadjahs the whole night long on their heads is no longer seen in St. James. However, this practice is known to have been performed in the recent past in Cedros.
36. In the absence of moons in Cedros, the tadjahs themselves kiss. But in St. James the moons kiss the tadjahs during the following day's procession (plate 21).
37. In Cedros, the beginning of the month of Muharram is reckoned slightly differently. Therefore, the event usually begins one day earlier than in St. James.
38. The phenomenological effect of this experience broadly fits into a more general pattern of the religious dimension of what one might call "disposable sacred art," another example of which is Navajo sandpainting (see Gill 1972).
39. This is the popular position taken by those who wish to see Hosay completely secularized and carnivalized. See, for example, the editorial in the *Trinidad Guardian* titled "Who Say? I Say, Hosay!" (Jacobs 1964). On the problem of studying the carnivalesque in religion, see Nathan A. Scott, Jr. (1987).
40. When asked about the crowds that observe the processions and their behavior, community members charitably responded, "Trinidad is a cosmopolitan country. We can't stop people from doing what they want."
41. In Cedros, participants defied police orders and brought out their tadjahs for precisely this reason!

42. Due to the sociological legacy of Emile Durkheim, scholars often take for granted the distinction between the two. Yet they often overlap or even exist simultaneously. For a cogent reevaluation of the distinction, see André Iteanu (1990).

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**Frank J. Korom** is Curator of Asian and Middle Eastern Collections at the Museum of International Folk Art in Sante Fe. He is a previous Postdoctoral Fellow at the Smithsonian Institution, and has published widely in the fields of South Asian religion and folklore. Dr. Korom is the coeditor of *Gender, Genre and Power in South Asian Expressive Traditions* (University of Pennsylvania, 1991), coauthor of *Folkloristics and Indian Folklore (India: Regional Resources Center for the Performing Arts, 1991)* and author of *Pakistani Folk Culture (Islamabad, Pakistan: Institute of Folk Heritage, 1988)*.

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**Peter J. Chelkowski** is Professor of Near Eastern Studies at New York University. Former Director of the Hagop Kevorkian Center at NYU, Dr. Chelkowski is the author and editor of numerous books on the literature, politics, and religions of Iran and other countries of the Near and Middle East. Among his many publications are *Mirror of the Invisible World: Tales from the Khamsah of Nizami (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1975)* *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran (New York University Press, 1975)*, and *Ideology and Power in the Middle East (Duke University Press, 1988)*.

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