

*Memory, Innovation and Emergent Ethnicities: The Creolization of an Indo-Trinidadian Performance.*¹

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1.

By now, ethnicity has been well-studied from a number of different perspectives by anthropologists, sociologists and folklorists, as well as by theorists in the fields of comparative literature and critical theory.² Though public events centered on religious displays and cultural performances contribute a great deal to the maintenance of a sense of ethnic identity, they have been less studied.³ Here, I would like to illustrate and explore the dialectic between religiosity and ethnicity, and also the effect of innovation on notions of unchanging tradition, by looking at *Hosay*, a large-scale Islamic ritual performance observed annually in St. James, an urban suburb of Port of Spain, the capital city of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.⁴ The event is associated primarily with East Indians, but because it is a public occasion, people belonging to other ethnic and religious backgrounds also attend and participate to some degree.

Like many other cultural events practiced by displaced people throughout the world, *Hosay* is a creative refraction of a transnational phenomenon passing through densely-layered local circumstances. While many participants understand it as a "traditional" event--canonized in a frozen form in the past and preserved through performance in the present--the ritual has changed a great deal due to the skillful, if often unconscious, innovations employed by participating community members. This is most readily apparent in the presentation and exegesis of the spectacle by Shi'i Muslims residing in the area.

The Shi'ah of St. James, one very small Islamic community within the Trinidadian East Indian population, are primarily responsible for keeping this urban ritual complex intact in a form that they think unaltered by the passage of time or movement through space. Their view is a minority opinion challenged by virtually every other cultural and ethnic group on the island. Needless to say, the issue at stake is not whose opinion is correct, but how exegetical arguments about a large-scale performance form a public matrix for the assertion of various identities. As we shall see below, the interpretations posed by majority groups have led to numerous discourses of contestation concerning not only the freedom of religious expression, but also the important issues of cultural rights and autonomy in a poly-ethnic society.⁵

This article will address some ideas that have become commonplace but not moot in the study of ethnic identity. For example, Barth's classic formulation of ethnic boundary construction as a process consisting of maintaining differences is still an important consideration for understanding how certain communities may perceive their own sociocultural role to be static and continuous in a heterogeneous nation-state.⁶ Although the Barthian paradigm is critical for understanding in-group and subjective attitudes concerning ethnic identity, it must be complemented with accounts of cultural

interaction. When cultures interact, ethnicity becomes "situational"⁷ and "creative,"⁸ or what I am calling "emergent."⁹ The assertion of ethnicity often occurs at the margins of sociological boundaries, such as public venues, where interaction occurs most frequently.¹⁰ Here, in these places of intense interaction, the possibility of transgressing boundaries presents itself most fully, resulting in the emergence of multiple identities as a strategy for coping with cultural encounter and change. The processes leading to the inevitable mixture of cultures formed from encounter and change have been variously referred to by resorting to linguistic and botanical metaphors such as creolization and hybridization respectively.¹¹ Being aware that concepts borrowed from the sciences have their limitations for describing cultural realities, I use the term creolization nonetheless, since it is often used by urban Trinidadians themselves to depict the dynamics of their present situation.¹²

Hosay is an occasion during which both the maintenance and change of ethnic identity can be documented as a process of creolization. In order to do so, however, I must present an encapsulation of the settlement of Trinidad by its various ethnic groups to provide the context for contemporary debates about the phenomenon under investigation. After providing the necessary historical background, I will present some of the relevant discourses about *Hosay* in an effort to show how the broader ramifications of one seemingly simple event can shape opinions and memories, identities and lives through a process of heated negotiation that affects not only the self-perceptions of individuals living in diasporic conditions, but also the larger cultural and religious ideologies that interweave ethnicity and nationalism.

Hosay is derived from the name of Hosayn or Husayn, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson (the son of his daughter), who was killed during a battle over political succession at Karbala, Iraq in AD 680. The outcome of this historical event led to rapid factionalism within Islam, resulting in a majority who believed that succession should be based on a vote of the elite families of the Mecca region (the Sunni), and those who held on to the conviction that succession must pass through the family of the Prophet (the Shi'ah). The narrative of Husayn's death as a martyrdom eventually accrued a mythical quality for Shi'i Muslims throughout the world and his suffering became a paradigm for life.

The first evidence of observances commemorating Husayn's death was noted by an Arab historian in 10th century Iraq.¹³ Mourning rituals, however, did not receive official sanction and royal patronage until the beginning of the Safavid dynasty in 16th century Persia, when Shi'i Islam was declared the state religion by Shah Ismail I. The annual commemorations developed into ritual dramas known as *ta'z̄yeh* (the so-called "Persian Passion Play") in Iran. Curiously, staged dramas of Husayn's martyrdom did not develop in the Indian subcontinent, even though other forms of processional rituals, known collectively as *muḡarram*, did.¹⁴ In South Asia the Persian-derived Urdu word *ta'z̄ya* (Trinidadian *tadjah*) came to stand for the model tombs used in these processions.

Although the occasion for taking out *ta'z̄yas* is central to Shi'i theology in many parts of the world, other Muslims and non-Muslims also participate in the event, albeit for different reasons. In countries like India, where Shi'ism is a minority religion, the process of absorbing alien ritual practices has inevitably developed as a mechanism of survival. This has been the case in Trinidad as well, where the observance has been adapting to Caribbean lifeways for the past 148 years. Prior to that, the observance

was unknown on the island; and despite the fact that some Afro-Trinidadian popular and revisionist historians would like to claim that a number of their enslaved ancestors from West Africa may have been Muslims prior to their conversion to other faiths in the New World, there is no evidence to suggest that *mujārram* observances predate the arrival of East Indians.

2.

East Indians arrived in Trinidad after successive colonial infrastructures had already been firmly developed. The Spanish legacy in Trinidad left a well-established estate or plantation system to be exploited by later colonialists.¹⁵ For the first 35 years of British rule, African slaves provided the necessary labor force to keep the large agricultural complex in good and profitable working order, but after abolition in 1834 a dire need for laborers arose. East Indians filled this gap. Laborers from the subcontinent had already started arriving in other regions of the Caribbean rim (i.e., British Guiana) as early as 1838, but the first did not arrive in Trinidad until 1845. Figures compiled for the period between 1851 and 1908 suggest that a total of 129,224 contracted Indians landed in Trinidad. Most chose to remain on the island after their period of indenture; less than 12% returned to the homeland.¹⁶ Today, Indo-Trinidadians are the second largest ethnic group on the island, comprising roughly 36% of the total population in the 1960's. Of these, approximately 70% are Hindu, 15% are said to belong to various Christian denominations and the remaining 15% are Muslim, all being subsumed under a general category of Sunni.

The Shi'ah, on the other hand, have not received separate mention in the historical record. Based on a perusal of numerous official documents, Robert J. Smith, for example, misleadingly claims that there are no Shi'ah on the island.¹⁷ Given the fact that many Shi'ah practice a theological principal termed *taqīyya* (dissimulation) to guard against religious persecution or discrimination, it is easy to see how Smith could have made this oversight.¹⁸ In fact, it is impossible to know what percentage of Trinidad's Muslims adhere to Shi'i doctrine. We do know, however, that Sunnis were among the earliest immigrants, and a number of Shi'i adherents must have been among them. My working assumption is that some Indian Shi'ah were recruited along with people of other faiths early on, arriving as generic Muslims who only later asserted their sectarian religious identity; and even then, only in subtle ways, if and when it suited their collective aspirations.¹⁹

Even though we can never be sure, a Shi'i oral historian (whose name must remain confidential), residing in St. James, suggests that a male ancestor mentally carried the *mujārram* ideals with him from Calcutta and quickly took steps to establish the emotive expression of sorrow for Husayn by introducing the construction of cenotaphs and the beating of drums. His view is consonant with Smith's contention that Islamic culture was initially carried in the "hearts and memories" of the transportees.²⁰ Although the exigencies of life on the plantations did not allow for the easy maintenance of cultural norms and religious praxis, such inward preservation allowed Muslims to reestablish their own sociocultural patterns in a timely fashion once their period of indenture had expired. At any rate, while other religious and cultural practices seemed subdued under the constraints of indenture, *Hosay* continued to be observed persistently on a number of plantations.

After the plantation period, Muslims and Hindus alike began squatting on unused land. Some founded permanent villages in low-cost areas, giving them Indian

names. Living together, coupled with the economic freedom brought about by the adoption of wet rice cultivation, allowed for a great deal of cultural autonomy, which, in turn, produced the appropriate conditions for an attempted replication of Indian culture on Trinidadian soil, implicated in the reestablishment and steady growth of Indic kinship patterns and sociopolitical organizations. Inhabiting inaccessible rural areas also allowed Indians to minimize their contact with non-Indians. Thus, East Indians began to reassert their cultural and ethnic identities through a policy of isolationism.²¹

Isolationism seems to have been even truer of Muslims when we compare their behavioral patterns with Hindus and Christians of East Indian descent. Aside from the minimally required economic and political interaction necessary for survival, Muslims did not mix very much with non-Indians because they were especially concerned about religious conversion and acculturation. Furthermore, during the years immediately following the end of the indenture period, they rarely lived in urban centers. Living "in the bush" aided Muslims in forestalling the impact of external forces that could have potentially influenced the realms of belief, ritual practice and family structure. Muslims thus lived in an isolated sociocultural milieu, having extensive contact only with other East Indians. Due to early Muslim xenophobia and the self-imposed insularity in which most East Indians lived generally, the *Hosay* observance slowly began to acquire an ethnic and cultural flavor that reflected coexistence and transcended Muslim/Hindu communal differences. This seems to have been the case from the plantation period onward, as will be suggested in the next section.

In the diasporic situation, cut off from the homeland, through a process of what we might call "cultural amnesia," time slowly continued to erode the memories of early experiences of the first generation of Indians living in Trinidad. The gradual decline of collective memory is due to a number of complicated and interrelated factors, ranging from the constant pressure for Christianization prior to independence in 1962 and absorption into the majority Afro-Trinidadian community afterwards, to a lack of formal religious education.²² These pressures, combined with the intensification of change brought on by modernity and growing religious factionalism in all communities after World War II, gave rise to a renewed sense of political weakness and uncertainty of belief among East Indians, which, in turn, led to further indigenous interrogation of an Indian identity, already being reconstructed from earlier fragments. The post-war years and an oil boom also created new jobs, resulting in a more mobile East Indian community. Mobility then led to more interaction with non-Indians, allowing a heightened degree of ideological and ritual cross-fertilization. Simultaneously, urban ideas were penetrating deeper into the bush as communication channels became more efficient with the increased availability of electronic media. These processes gave rise to the need for a reasonable amount of free play in interpretation to reconcile the incongruity between self-perceived notions of unchanging tradition and the growing need for innovation as a strategy for cultural adaptation. While cultural adaptation took place in virtually every sector of public life, it was most visible in outward religious practices. Thus even as the pious imaginings of East Indian Muslims continued to transform aspects of ritual and belief, the need to come to terms with being citizens in an emerging nation-state grew into an important concern.

3.

The tradition of *Hosay*, as many Indo-Trinidadian Muslims of the Shi'i persuasion are quick to point out, has been going on annually ever since the first indentured

laborers arrived from India. From missionary accounts, we know that the observance began to be practiced on the island within a decade of the arrival of the first indentured laborers.²³ Indeed, descriptions of the ritual portions of the event, even in more contemporary times, seem very familiar to those who have witnessed the phenomenon in South Asia. Consider, for example, Joan D. Koss' 1959 testimony:

During the festival of Muharram (popularly referred to as 'Hose') I watched a seemingly endless procession of women light lamps and murmur prayers while throwing rice and flowers to paper gilt tomb effigies (*tazias*) that were later carried in the processions. Those afflicted with an illness were thought to obtain blessings which could restore their health.²⁴

This observer easily could have been describing the parallel event anywhere in north India. Since many of the East Indians who were brought to Trinidad came from what is now Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, it is fairly clear that their traditions of *Hosay* are cognates of earlier forms practiced in north India.²⁵

Hosay in Trinidad was and still is characterized by familiar "Indian" events such as the mass *tadjah* processions mentioned above, drumming and eulogy recitation, "prayer meetings" in mosques, martial dance displays, etc. In addition, we also find less orthodox modes of action such as the consumption of alcohol, sensuous dancing and other forms of abandon, which do not conform to the sober and mournful experience that characterizes the observance in other parts of the world.²⁶ These antinomian modes of behavior are viewed by many of the island's Sunnis as un-Islamic. Yet many of those spiritually and physically involved in the construction of *tadjahs* and the performance of *mujarram* rites in St. James continue to insist that they are practicing something that adheres faithfully to the "Indian" way, taught to them by their forefathers.

It is historically accurate to say that the observance has continued more-or-less uninterrupted since the first landing,²⁷ but to assert that no performative change has occurred in the observance suggests a strong tendency on the part of the Indo-Trinidadian Shi'ah to question the forces of change by describing the ritualistic *Hosay* tradition as a set of practices not affected by time or space. By taking such a conservative position on the central event of their religious calendar, the Shi'ah maintain the sole distinctive feature of their sectarian position, while simultaneously connecting mentally with a shared Indic past. The continual reification of self-perceived cultural and spiritual continuity has served to establish a cognitive link with a homeland known more through imagination than historical or genealogical facts.²⁸

Although the St. James *Hosay* is organized by Shi'i families, more than this small minority is involved in its outward performance. True, they are the guardians of secret theological doctrines concerning the original meaning of the event, but accounts going back to the plantation period suggest that it was an event shared by all of the East Indians. Yet the development of *Hosay* remains undocumented and uncertain. Even though oral family histories of those Shi'ah involved in the organization of *Hosay* and the construction of *tadjahs* claim that their ancestors began the practice shortly after their arrival on the first boatload of indentures, the original list of passengers does not contain their names.²⁹ They may have used fictitious names to sign in or changed their names after arrival in an attempt to employ *taq¥yya*, a concealment of identity

permitted the Shi'ah in order to avoid persecution. In essence, aside from incomplete oral histories, we do not know precisely how *Hosay* began on the plantations. What is clear, however, is that all East Indians have been taking part in the spectacle, at least in a secular way (i.e., as a leisure-time activity).

On the other hand, there are also non-Shi'i participants of East Indian origin (i.e., Hindu and Christian) who participate in imagining the link with homeland through the *mujarram* observances, but deemphasize its spirituality. For them, the religious dimension of *Hosay* is respected by observing some of the taboos related to the construction of *tadjahs*. This religious aspect is downplayed in favor of the event's Indianness.³⁰ For many, it is simply a way of identifying with the homeland in a purely secular fashion, and even the observance of taboos is currently considered to be only non-religious custom by non-Muslims of East Indian descent. Whether Indo-Trinidadians performed *Hosay* out of a firm religious commitment or out of a nostalgia for the homeland in the past, they all identified one way or another with being "Indian." In this sense, *Hosay* was already an ethnic pageant that transcended religious affiliations in the pre-modern period, even while it allowed some Muslims to retain sectarian beliefs about the observance's nature and significance.

Within the intermingling spheres of religiosity and ethnicity, the Shi'ah remained a very small and secretive minority within a minority. Notwithstanding the participation of Trinidadians from all walks of life, including Afro-Trinidadians, Chinese and others, Indo-Trinidadians have continued to express their Indianness through *Hosay* over the generations.³¹ This has resulted in what is today one of the most spectacular cultural performances on the island; and even though it is lesser known than the famous Trinidad Carnival, the observance is certainly the most visible East Indian public display event found in St. James. Through *Hosay*, the homeland is "imagined" and presented in an encapsulated, religiocultural display to an audience knowing very little about India. The display itself then gives rise to other imaginings by non-Indians.

As might be surmised from the brief overview given above, *Hosay*, as observed today, is most likely rooted in Muslim interaction with East Indian Hindus and Christians during, and immediately after, the plantation period. This is not surprising in and of itself, since Hindus often participate in *mujarram* observances in India.³² But this tradition of participation, with a long, complex and global history, continued to develop in Trinidad by grafting elements of Afro-Trinidadian expressive culture onto it or, minimally, modifying preexisting practices, artifacts, and terminology to suit Caribbean sensibilities.³³ To make matters even more complex, the government has, at numerous points in the past, become involved in the propagation of *Hosay* as an item of national culture. This was highlighted in 1971 when the former Prime Minister, Dr. Eric Williams, visited the four *tadjah*-building yards in an attempt to convince the craftsmen that entering into commercial ventures would boost the economy by creating a touristic atmosphere for the annual event. This effort was aided by the government's Tourism Development Authority (TDA), which attempted to lure foreigners to the island with advertisements for special fares to fly with British West Indian Airlines (BWIA) during *Hosay*. So it is not surprising that when the month of Muharram falls after the Christmas holidays or after Carnival, a period of national "celebration" is often extended to include *Hosay*. Governmental validation resulting from the attempted fusion of ethnic and national identity has thus also contributed to the construction of multiple understandings of *Hosay*.

The contemporary processions that occur during the annual event have, to a limited extent, become nationalized, a regular feature of Trinidad's cultural landscape. As a result, *Hosay* cannot be perpetuated by Muslims alone, for they are no longer the sole custodians of the tradition.³⁴ Given the fact that these rites have historically developed as various local phenomena grafted onto a core performative narrative, it is useful to discuss the event in its contemporary Trinidadian context as a multicultural phenomenon, lending itself to many different interpretations.³⁵ As various ethnic and sectarian groups claim the right to include themselves in the *Hosay* milieu, interpretations often compete for authenticity and authority in the hermeneutic arena, acting as discourse strategies for the assertion of various identities. *Hosay* is, in this light, a contested image that is debated each year as the observance approaches. I would like to explore now some of the controversies surrounding *Hosay* that have been raised steadily as the event gained notoriety and popular attention over the years. I shall focus on the rhetorical and apologetic statements repeatedly appearing in the press, on the radio, and on the television screen.

4.

Much of the controversy focuses on the way that *Hosay* is practiced in Trinidad, or even whether it should be practiced at all. Although, as I mentioned above, Sunnis had participated in Indian *mujarram* observances for quite a long time, there has always been a degree of difference in ritual practice and a conflict of interpretations in theory as to why one should mourn the death of Husayn. For the Sunni, it is more a matter of respecting the death anniversary of a member of the Prophet's family. Further, they do not believe in the redemptive qualities associated with Husayn's actions. But the Shi'ah understand Husayn's martyrdom as both a theological and political issue. Unfortunately for them, they are not able to dictate how others, outside of their sectarian fold, participate. The large, drunken and unruly crowds present on the streets during the processions have given Sunnis more reasons to stigmatize *Hosay*, and by extension, the Shi'ah. Because Sunnis have passively observed the event throughout the past, they used to be content in simply trying to control interpretations of *Hosay*. Public drinking and dancing, however, have forced them to act more severely in modern times, calling for bans of the observance.

An attempt by Sunnis to ban *Hosay* was made as early as 1881,³⁶ but a concerted effort in modern times was not made until 1974, when the Islamic Youth Organization (IYM) orchestrated the mobilization of three larger governing bodies (the Tackveeyatul Islamic Association [TIA], the Anjuman-Sunnat-ul-Jamaat Association [ASJA], and the Trinidad Muslim League [TML]); leaders of all the groups met at the Nur-e-Islam Mosque in San Juan, Trinidad to draw up a resolution.³⁷ Their main objection was that *Hosay* should not be "celebrated." Because the observance has deteriorated into a "mockery," the argument goes, it is un-Islamic and should not be practiced at all. As one spokesman of the IYM later wrote to the *Express* in 1985:

...On the martyrdom of Hosein, it is said there was great rejoicing and revelry by the Kharjees. After beheading him, his head was stuck on the tip of a spear and they danced around shouting 'Hosein! Hosein!' no doubt in glorification of their victory.

Gradually, as time elapsed, it was perhaps conveniently changed to 'Hosay,' in an obvious attempt to distort the mockery of the celebration of the

martyrdom of Hosein. How could a sacred and great feast of martyrdom of a Muslim be turned into a celebration? Of course, such a celebration can only be done by enemies of the Muslims... ." ³⁸

Under pressure, even some Shi'i adherents have begun to take this position. For example, the above sentiments are echoed exactly in the following statement by Imtiaz Ali a few years later:

It is indeed sad to state that his death on this blessed day of Ashura or 10th of Muharram is observed in Trinidad as the festival of Hosay (from Hussein--the name of the blessed grandson of the Holy Prophet. UWBP). So jubilant were the apostates at his death that they paraded in the streets carrying his head and shouting, 'Hussein! Hussein! and this has lost all its original flavour and has been replaced by merry-making, feteing and drinking with all its attendant evils. ³⁹

Ali causally links celebration and alcohol in the latter portion of this quote to discredit the observance. To alleviate the issue of alcohol consumption, Sammy "Junior" Ali, a member of one of the four *tadjah*-building families in St. James, recently pointed out to journalists that drinking is a nuisance and should at least be curtailed, if not stopped altogether during *Hosay*.⁴⁰ But he, like all of the other participating family members, would not like to see the tradition come to a halt. Due to the economic benefits of the observance, neither would their sponsors, some of whom happen to be tavern owners of East Indian and African descent, catering to the insatiable thirst of the audience members. Because their establishments are located ideally along the main road where the processions take place, they would not like to lose the business generated during the three long nights of the spectacle. Both Junior and the rum peddlers would like to see *Hosay* continue, obviously for different reasons.

Leaders of Trinidad's orthodox Muslim bodies realize that it would be extremely difficult to have *Hosay* totally abolished, but because they feel that it "...is a deviation of misguided Muslims [i.e., the Shi'ah] and some who are not Muslims," ⁴¹ as Abdool Latie suggests, the observance should at least be contained within the four yards where the *tadjahs* are built. By eliminating the processions, there would be no revelry, and the Islamic nature of the observance would be restored. This position was voiced in 1983 by Imam Hassan Karimullah of the St. James Mosque (public relations officer of ASJA and vice-chairman of the Council of Imams) when he stated that "...the holding of parades is not a practice of Islam. ...Pious Muslims strongly condemn the display of festivity and rejoicing which creates an entirely unworthy notion of this day."⁴² Latie, linking the event with alien practices, then dogmatically suggests that the event is even an assault against the normative opinion held by practitioners of Muslim faith: "...the carnival-type celebration is totally out of keeping with the practice of Islam."⁴³ In short, Sunni leaders would like to agree on a compromise that would eliminate processions during *Hosay* while allowing the Shi'ah to continue their unique mode of worship within the privacy of their own yards. *Tadjah* builders, however, will not agree to this because they feel that the processions are an integral part of the overall context of *Hosay*.

Even though many *Hosay* participants go so far as to agree that the observance is not a time for celebration, they are forced to provide constant rejoinders in defence of their right to "observe" the occasion. For example, Mohammad "Hamdoo" Emamali,

long-time spokesman for the Hosay Organizing Committee, states that the "Hosay Festival is an occasion for lamenting and not, as onlookers make it, a time for feteing. Here in Trinidad we take everything and make it a fete."⁴⁴ Emamali places the blame on the audience, who can not be excluded by the organizers but can be criticized to take the pressure off of those actually involved in the ritual acts. Although he views this process of "carnivalization" in a negative light, he does go on to hint at an alternative and positive way of understanding the processional phenomenon as one of cultural creolization and homogenization: "Mixing is a very good thing. We should not have any differences: there ought not to be differences."⁴⁵

So far we have seen a number of polemical statements at play: the issue of celebration versus commemoration, intoxication and antinomianism versus sober piety, and carnivalization versus creolization. It is fairly clear that the Trinidadian Sunni and Shi'ah basically take opposing views on these contested issues, with some give and take on both sides. But Shair Ali, a descendent of Ghulam Hussein, said to be one of the original founders of the tradition on the island, has attempted to *justify festivity by linking it to piety* in his dual advocacy of the use of both terms: "commemoration" and "festival". In an influential editorial published in 1990, he states that "...the atmosphere of elation which is generated by those Muslims who participate in the Hosein festival is definitely justifiable" because "Hosein gave his life for Islam. To live was the death of Islam, to die was its preservation, so he died to protect Islam and his death should be marked both by sorrow and happiness."⁴⁶ This overtly Shi'i point of view has not been able to silence the opponents of the event. The following year an unidentified spokesman of ASJA spoke out in opposition to *Hosay* even more forcefully, sealing the verdict earlier imposed by Abdul Latie: "...it [*Hosay*] undermines the true nature and concepts and the moral, social and religious values of the Islamic religion" because it is "a bacchanalian event and the revelry and anti-Islamic practices connected with it are against the tenets and fundamental principles of Islam."⁴⁷

Sunni Muslims of Indian descent are not the only ones opposed to *Hosay* in its festive form. On July 23, 1991, the year after an aborted coup attempt led by Abu Bakr, the American-trained spiritual and political head of the Black Muslim community in Trinidad, another Black Muslim faction, known as the Saifud-din Tijani (SDT) or the Sword of Religion Group, brought out an anti-*Hosay* procession. Boldly walking in the opposing direction of the oncoming *tadjahs*, a small group of SDT members wearing sandwich signs to remind the crowd that "everyday is Karbala," carried a black coffin while chanting "There is no God but Allah [and] Muhammad is the Prophet of Allah" in Arabic.⁴⁸

Yet other Afro-Trinidadians, who wish to co-opt the observance for the purpose of both hedonism and nationalism, downplay the religious dimension even more than secular participants of Indian descent. Carl Jacobs, a Black journalist and lover of *Hosay*, took this position nearly two decades ago when he argued that aside from the tradition of *tadjah*-building, there is very little religiosity involved. Instead, he claimed that *Hosay* is a unique Trinidadian phenomenon, more social than religious: "So please," he wrote, "let us have no more talk about 'religious significance.' Who say? I say, Hosay!"⁴⁹ This position has not gone unheeded. The *tadjah* builder Anthony "Muggy" Millette, who converted from Islam to Christianity, recently mentioned to me that "it [*Hosay*] is an Indian thing. It is more cultural than religious." His statement rings even truer when we consider that he and a group of other Trinidadians still annually

build and parade a *tadjah* on Labor Day in New York City. As the Indian diaspora *via* the Caribbean continues, the cultural facet of the event will eventually come to overshadow the religious dimension, according to Muggy.⁵⁰

5.

What are we to make of this polyphony of voices? Certainly the rhetorical strategies employed above serve as vehicles for the assertion of multiple identities. As I have attempted to illustrate, religious identity is the central rallying point for Trinidadian Muslims during *Hosay*--albeit for opposing sectarian reasons--while Afro-Trinidadians of other faiths perceive it to be a period for the articulation of nationalist sentiment. But East Indian Hindus and Christians emphasize secular Indian culture in this same context. Broadly speaking, these three categories become polarized at *Hosay* time. Now if we look further at the processes leading up to the processions, even more categories must be added to the list.

As I mentioned earlier on, *tadjah* construction is a family affair. Four kin-based groups build *tadjahs* in the *imambaras* (place of an imam) situated within their respective family compounds. Although these families intermarry and socially interact throughout the rest of the year, each group unofficially competes to build the prettiest *tadjah*. Furthermore, the four groups also provide percussive accompaniment for their floats during the processions, each hoping to outdo the other by playing louder and better. Thus normal, everyday social interaction is curtailed as the month of Muharram approaches, leading into yard-based affiliations that supercede the nation-state, religion, and culture. Since peer pressure is exerted on individuals to remain faithful to one yard only, conflict necessarily arises as new micro-allegiances temporarily become the social order of the day. In extreme cases, this may lead to actual physical brawls, but usually amounts to simple pejorative gossip during the construction period prior to the processions and symbolic "clashes," as they are known, when the yard-based groups "face off" on the street to vie for the audience's enthusiastic response and support. Not only is yard identity at stake here, but personal identity as well, for the individual participants must constantly ask themselves searching ethical and epistemological questions: "Who am I? What am I? How am I?" Let me illustrate this point with one example drawn from many in my fieldnotes.

Harry Ramcharan (a pseudonym) is a middle-aged Hindu whose older brother is a master *tadjah* builder in St. James. Harry has been assisting his sibling, who converted to Islam, in the annual construction of the model cenotaphs at one of the *Hosay* yards since he was a young man. As a result, he has developed a style of building based on his brother's designs. Eventually, Harry married into another one of the *Hosay* yards, which has always been Shi'i in orientation. He began spending more social time with his wife's family, even though he continued to build *tadjahs* with his brother. But a few years ago (1991) Harry was asked, actually contracted, to design and oversee the building of the *tadjah* associated with his wife's family because this yard's master builder had retired. The result that year was two very similar looking *tadjahs*. In an environment where innovation and creativity of design is a criterion for aesthetic value, Harry's *tadjah* angered his brother and the other members of his familial yard to such a degree that he was temporarily ostracized. So serious was the dispute that his brother did not speak with Harry for the whole year. From the brother's point of view, Harry had "sold out" to "them" (Harry's wife's yard), not only because he accepted money to perform the job (which goes against the pious and sacrificial nature

of the creative act) but because he revealed secret construction techniques that previously gave his brother's *tadjahs* their distinctive mark. On the night of the *tadjah* procession, I overheard one audience member say that "this year there are two *tadjahs* from the same yard." Needless to say, such a confession damages yard-pride in an informally competitive environment.

Harry's dilemma was complex. On the one hand, he needed to satisfy his wife's family, who are all Shi'i in basic religious orientation, by complying with their request for artistic assistance. It was his well-intentioned way of showing support and trying to fit into a different religious environment. On the other, he needed to remain faithful to his hereditary yard by assisting his brother. His problem was that he did not succeed in properly negotiating these two roles, and as a result, he failed to play out with competence his two positions of husband and brother. It is not that Harry did not try, for he did insist that his two sons, both of whom practice the faith of their mother, beat drums in his hereditary yard. This was Harry's way of attempting to participate in the activities of both groups. The attempt failed and Harry's familial prestige suffered as a result. The following year, the issue was resolved and Harry was back building with his brother again, while continuing to guide and instruct future master builders in the yard of his in-laws.

The central question that must be asked here is if one should remain faithful to the nuclear, or to the extended family. Ideally, one should do both, but because of intermarriage this is an improbable achievement. Tensions thus flare as the three nights and one day of procession approach; and by the time the *tadjahs* hit the street on the first night, the atmosphere is divisive. However, once the processions are over, a period of realliance takes place during the great feasts that occur after the 10th of Muharram on Teejah Day, the time when the drums are put away for another year and the *tadjahs*, after being destroyed, are immersed in the ocean. Participants, who have been performing abstinences up until this point, also use the occasion for a "beach lime" or party, at which various yard members meet each other again, share food and gossip to rekindle enduring friendships and family ties.⁵¹ To return briefly to Harry, he could be seen "liming" with members of both groups after the 1991 processions, and this bid for normalcy eventually led to his reincorporation into his brother's yard.

6.

The analysis presented above suggests that ethnic identity is not simply a question of maintaining strict demarcations between social groups. Rather, events surrounding *Hosay* reconfirm that ethnicity is "situated,"⁵² being contextually formulated on both the social and individual levels. In the case of East Indians living in Trinidad, ethnicity is often an emergent vehicle of empowerment, used in different ways at different times in order to achieve variable objectives by a community which is economically stable but politically weak, and that often feels marginalized from the Afro-Trinidadian mainstream because of its South Asian origins. As a strategy for adaptation and a device for coping with cultural change, ethnicity must be multivalent, for it is not possible to always wear the same ethnic hat if one wants to be an Indo-Trinidadian Shi'i Muslim, a reliable friend, and a morally responsible family member. Rather, these "differential identities," as Bauman has termed them,⁵³ must interact constantly so that the individual can function normally in society. The trick to achieving a harmony of identities rests, of course, in the successful management of these identities: knowing when, where, how, and to what degree they must be asserted.⁵⁴ Herein lies the importance of studying

expressive culture in relation to ethnicity and nationhood. Through the negotiation and enactment of performance--in this instance *Hosay*--participants have the opportunity to display simultaneously their fluid identities while innovatively preserving a central religious observance that has been a paradigmatic feature of Shi'i worldview for over 1300 years.

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2 An extensive and concise review of the literature has already been published by Cohen (1978), followed by a lengthier survey a few years later by Bentley (1981). But because more than a decade has passed since those two works appeared, an update would be a welcome addition to this interdisciplinary field of study. Sollors (1989) does an excellent job of paving the way for a more comprehensive review, and Yelvington (1993) presents a uniquely Trinidadian point of view on the phenomenon.

3 But see Lockwood (1984).

4 Hosay is also practiced in a rural area of southern Trinidad, but I will focus my comments on St. James, since this is the area which best exemplifies my theoretical points. On the contrast between these two areas, see Chelkowski and Korom (In press).

5 On the rationale for using the prefix "poly" to replace "multi," see Eriksen (1991).

6 See Barth (1969).

7 See Cohen (1978: 387-389).

8 See Stern (1991).

9 I employ the term emergent here and throughout this paper in the sense used by performance theorists such as Georges (1969), Bauman (1975), Hymes (1981), Schieffelin (1985) and others to account for the constantly changing notions and definitions of cultural phenomena in their contextual milieux.

10 On this rationale, see Abrahams (1981).

11 Creolization, for example, has been utilized by Drummond (1980) and Hannerz (1987), while a number of people, drawing conspicuously on the works of Bakhtin, are attempting to develop the notion of hybridization. See, for example, Kapchan (1992).

12 Commenting specifically on Drummond (cited above), Jayawardena (1980:448) has warned that the model of cultural creolization can only be fully developed "...against the backdrop of prestige, economic and political interests that motivate the actors." I have attempted to account for these factors

in what follows.

13 The rites associated with Husayn seem to have diffused out towards the Caucasus in one direction and towards South Asia in the other.

¹⁴ *Muharram* is the name of the first lunar month of the Islamic calendar, during which the annual observance in honor of Husayn's martyrdom is observed. Hagiographical and historical accounts both confirm that Husayn was killed on the 10th day of this month.

¹⁵ All of the estates were designed for export. Of the 468 estates functioning during the waning years of Spanish rule, 159 were in sugar cane, while the remainder were in coffee, cotton, cocoa and indigo. See Smith (1963: 11).

16 Smith (1963: 22). His figures are based on the reliable Sanderson Report. In 1907, the total population of Trinidad was 338, 992, of which 102, 849 were East Indians. For a comprehensive study of Indian indenture, see Weller (1968).

17 Smith (1963: 154). Of the 63 mosques in Trinidad today, only one claims to be a strictly Shi'i place of prayer. This single faction may not be based on philosophical grounds, but on political and economic ones due to "infighting among the owners of mosques," as Dan Crowley has pointed out (personal correspondence, June 24, 1987).

18 For an explication of this theological principle, see Goldziher (1906) and Kohlberg (1975). Further, emigration records housed in Calcutta do not clearly list the sectarian affiliations (one can only surmise from surnames) of the first indentured laborers. It is thus not clear how many Shi'i Muslims, if any, were among the earliest immigrants. But it is impossible to conceive that no Shi'ah came to Trinidad, since they constituted a large minority population in areas where recruiting took place.

19 The argument is too long and complex to present here, but will be developed in a forthcoming book to be titled *Rites of Passage and the Passage of Rites*.

20 Smith (1963: xxix).

21 For a complete historical account of Muslims in Trinidad, see Smith (1963). Smith's ethnohistorical study of Charlieville is the most thorough exploration of an Indo-Trinidadian Islamic community to date. Khan's forthcoming dissertation should provide more updated information, as well as a welcome addition to the literature on East Indian ethnicity.

22 The non-sectarian public school system in Trinidad was started in 1851, but by 1870 religious (=Christian) discourse was firmly implanted in the curriculum. East Indian Hindus and Muslims did not have the right to establish their own religious schools until 1949. See Smith (1963: 94).

23 In his *My Missionary Memories* (1923), K. J. Grant notes that the first *tadjahs* were constructed in the 1850's on the Philippine Estate.

24 Koss (1959: 151).

25 In one instance of ritual practice, namely, the building of red and green moons to represent Husayn and his brother Hassan, I have documented evidence from the India Office Library in London to show that this tradition, which is still practiced in St. James today, existed in the same part of Bihar where heavy recruiting for laborers took place. See Korom (1992).

26 For a brief comparative overview of the observance's development in different parts of the world, see Chelkowski (1986).

27 *Hosay* has, on occasion, been temporarily banned in some locations on the island, but it has always been reinstated. For example, in 1989 *Hosay* was banned in Point Fortin due to pressure by Sunni groups. See the *Trinidad Guardian* (9/14/89: 1). But in Langdenville it was held for the first time in twenty years during 1987. See the *Trinidad Guardian* (10/19/87: 1). For more on why Sunnis would like to see *Hosay* banned, see below.

28 Indo-Trinidadian Muslims seem to care little about their exact South Asian points of origin. Smith (1963: 15) argues that Trinidadian "Hindus, possibly because of caste bonds, showed more interest in, and knowledge of, the original homes of their forebears. Muslims, on the other hand, feel a strong spiritual bond to all co-religionists and not to specific locales."

29 For a list of the names of the first passengers, see Brereton (1992: 221).

30 Eriksen (1992:122-123) has argued that "Indianness" in diasporic contexts must be identified and defined in the local context. This is certainly true from an analytic and objective point of view, yet East Indians in Trinidad often talk about this subjectively as an ontological quality. Here I use the term in the latter sense; that is, as a subtle, inherent property of being, rather than a simple conglomeration of externally visible manifestations such as customs, food and clothing.

31 Brereton (1979: 183) has suggested that the process of Afro-Trinidadian incorporation into the

ceremony has been going on since the 19th century. Nevertheless, it is only recently (i.e., since the emergence of the nation-state) that the event has become an arena of nationalistic display in urban Trinidad.

32 See, for example, Vedantam (1971: 56-58) and Burman (1961: 40).

33 See Gibbons (1979: 23-28).

34 It is, in fact, doubtful whether Muslims ever had complete control of Hosay, since we know that in India Hindus had already been involved economically, politically, and religiously in the production and display of rites related to Husayn's martyrdom from medieval times onward. Cole (1988) does a good job at showing the political vicissitudes of the rites during the development of the tradition in the area of India I am concerned about here.

35 On this facet of the phenomenon, see Chelkowski and Korom (In Press).

36 Prior to that year's observance, Harrack Singh, a Christian, decided that the Palmyra Estate should lead the procession. This was opposed by the Philippine Estate, and Singh was murdered as a result. Soon after, Sunni Muslims met Reverend Grant of the Canadian Mission. He suggested a letter to the government. 107 Sunnis signed the letter to Governor Freeling, which asked for a ban on Hosay. See Jha (1975). This eventually led to the infamous Hosay Riots of 1884. See Singh (1988).

37 See the Trinidad Guardian (9/3/74:3).

38 Mohammad (1985: 9).

39 Ali (1988: 9). UWPB is the standard English abbreviation for the refrain "Upon Whom Be Peace," which is always uttered after mention of the Prophet's name.

40 See Wilson (1992: 4). Bunny Emamali, current head of the Hosay Organizing Committee is of the same opinion: "...people ought to show more respect for the religious ceremony. We can't stop people from drinking, ...but we would like them to remember that this is a religious [=Muslim] festival and insist that it be maintained as such." See the Express (7/19/91: 21).

41 Leader (1983: 9).

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid. Although this statement seems like an implicit attack on the Carnival, it is not a direct affront against Afro-Trinidadians here, since Latie uses the term "carnival" here as a metaphor for celebration.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Ali (1990: 4).

47 Trinidad Guardian (7/24/91). In support of this, ASJA brought out a two-page advertisement, explaining the true nature of the observance. The ad ends with the following statement: "So it is that the height of mockery and a particularly gross insult, that some people in...disobedience to Allah Ta'ala, on the occasion of Ashura...palm it off on the country as the 'Islamic' or 'Muslim' festival of Hosay. Let us inform the country about this mockery and insult. And may Allah Ta'ala guide those people."

48 See the Express (7/24/91: 2). It is probably no coincidence that the coup attempt occurred during the month of Muharram as an act of defiance (an old historical Muharram theme). But it is not clear if the placard-bearing group, led by Abdul Kareem Abraham, is a splinter group of Abu Bakr's faction or not.

49 Jacobs (1964: 1). Although well-intentioned, Jacobs' statement offended many of St. James' Shi'ah, for he was not aware of the praying and fasting that always occurs among participants in the community during the preparatory phases of the event.

50 I am not certain whether "diaspora" is appropriate in this context, since by definition it implies a forced migration. But since a number of scholars have used Walker Connor's (1986) broad definition as anyone living outside of their homeland, the term still has some applicability. Furthermore, Safran (1991: 83) has recently suggested that we extend the notion to include any group who retains "a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland." This is certainly true of Trinidadian Indians.

51 For a fascinating study of the logic and poetics of "liming," see Eriksen (1990).

52 See Cohen (1978: 387-389), Moerman (1965, 1974), and Handelsman (1977).

53 Bauman (1972) uses this term with specific reference to contested identities.

54 As one Indian Muslim intellectual living in the USA recently put it: "...no matter what I call myself, two facts stand out: by my presence here I demand that the host people change their definition of themselves as Americans, and secondly, my presence here requires that I strenuously re-examine the question of my Indianness, not only in relation to this country but also in relation to what I imagine I left behind, as if frozen forever in time." See Naim (1993: 77-78).