

South Asia

Pushkar Sohoni and Torsten Tschacher, eds.

Non-Shia Practices of Muḥarram in South Asia and the Diaspora: Beyond Mourning

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When does Muharram (*muḥarram*) become a non-Shi'i practice? This question is the focus of Pushkar Sohoni and Torsten Tschacher's edited volume, *Non-Shia Practices of Muḥarram in South Asia and the Diaspora: Beyond Mourning*. For the Shi'a, commemoration of the martyrdom of the third Imam named Husain and his supporters at the battle of Karbala (Iraq) in 680 CE, as well as the suffering of the Imams and family of the Prophet Muhammad, known as the Ahl-e Bait, are periods of mourning. Among non-Shi'i communities in South Asia and the diaspora, the ritualized remembrance of Husain's martyrdom at Karbala during the month of Muharram has acquired myriad significations over the past four hundred or five hundred years. The chapters emphasize "secular" and nonsectarian dimensions of Muharram rituals in South Asian communities. The volume is divided into two parts, the first engaging with regional and linguistic perspectives, and the second with contexts in which Muslims (particularly Shi'as) are distinct minorities. Many of the chapters focus on the hypervisible ritual of the Muharram procession (*julūs*) on 10 Muharram (*'āshūrā'*), when devotional objects such as *ta'zīyas* (Lyons, Dandekar, Sohoni, Vahed), *tābūts* (Tschacher), and *tadjahs* (Korom) are taken out.

In chapter 2, "Ḥusayn's Hindu Defenders," Tryna Lyons introduces the history of the Mohyal (*mohyāl*) subcaste, which because of "the tumult of the nineteenth century engendered a spectacular series of legends that enlisted several thousand years of world history and at least three religions [Hinduism, Shi'ism, Sikhism] in the service of caste glorification" (15). Lyons traces narratives of Mohyal warrior-priests taking up arms for

Imam Husain to Bhera, a town located on the Jhelum River. In Bhera, and generally in the Punjab, during the late nineteenth century there were few public Muslim holidays, so “the visible face of Muslim piety was primarily their Shi‘i rituals” (17). As political fortunes shifted at the end of the nineteenth century until the cataclysm of the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, Lyons maps shifts in Mohyal identity, as many Brahmins dedicated to Husain (*husaynī brāhmaṇs*) who stayed in Pakistan practice a form of *taqīyyah* (religious dissimulation) or have converted to Islam, while those who crossed over to India have publicly proclaimed their caste status. While Lyons’s essay fills a lacuna about a Hindu community with claims to Imam Husain at Karbala, and which continues to participate in mourning his martyrdom during Muharram, this essay does not connect well with the others in the volume, which focus on processions, rituals, and material practices of non-Shi‘i communities.

In her essay, “An Ethnographic Exploration of Muḥarram(s) in Pune, Maharashtra” (chapter 3), Deepra Dandekar describes Muharram as a *festival* that has political importance and multiple meanings, especially in Hindu majority contexts, such as a “shared Marathi, *Puneri* [*sic*] (or Pune-ite) identity” (24). Dandekar argues that the participation of Hindus in Muharram processions by making *ta‘zīyas* (replicas of Imam Husain’s Karbala shrine-tomb), sponsoring musical bands, and walking in processions fosters “Marathi Muslim belonging and citizenship in Pune,” which produces their *punērī* identity as “ambivalently Hindu.” Muslims as a minority are thus another variety of “Hindus” (*ibid.*). To understand how religious minorities perform “Marathi-ness” to negotiate Hindu politics through the deployment of Sunni *ta‘zīya* processions, Dandekar employs a hydraulic model of compensatory counterbalancing between different communities engaged to maintain equilibrium. She also focuses on how Muharram rituals performed by Sunnis with their syncretistic qualities and Hindus with their cultural character have excluded the Shi‘a from participating in Marathi-ness because “they are often labelled ‘Irani’ and as foreigners to the region, despite the independent history of Shi‘ism in Western India” (32). Dandekar’s fieldwork identifies multiple Muharram(s) that are in communication, productive of different understandings of Imam Husain’s martyrdom, and responding to the varying pressures and modalities of Hindu nationalism through strategies of compensation and counterbalancing (36).

In chapter 4, “Visual Languages of Piety and Power: Ta‘zīahs and Temples in the Western Deccan,” Pushkar Sohoni’s essay offers historical perspective to chapter 3. In this chapter, Sohoni focuses on the *ta‘zīya* as, quoting Chelkowski (2009), “the interpretive, imaginary representation of Ḥosayn’s tomb that is carried in procession” in Mumbai and Pune in the nineteenth century (42). Sohoni describes the role of eighteenth-century Hindu temple architecture as a model for nineteenth-century *ta‘zīyas* in the Western Deccan (47–49). Sohoni argues that these “new architectural forms were emblematic of the region, and of political sovereignty,” and “that they evolved together” (49). Despite Tilak’s political desire to establish a ritual specifically for Hindus with the Ganesh procession, Sohoni’s chapter points to a larger pattern of co-evolution of ritual in the Western Deccan, which can be read as a counterpoint to Dandekar’s essay.

Chapters 5–7 shift focus to Muharram in the South Asian diaspora. In chapter 5, “The Idea of Religion and the Criminalisation of Muḥarram in the Straits Settlements, 1830–1870,” Torsten Tschacher traces the history of Muharram in the Straits Settlements during the British colonial period. Beginning in the 1860s, a series of incidents, culminating in the Penang Riots of 1867, led colonial authorities to ban public Muharram

festivities, which they linked to criminality. Indian convicts, Hindu thugs, and mixed-race descendants of Indian fathers and Malay mothers, known as Jawi Pekans (or Jawi Peranakans), were enthusiastic participants in Muharram in the Straits, raising alarm among the British who saw them as “‘the vilest of the vile’, [who were] responsible for turning an innocent religious ceremony into a raucous carnival” (53).

In the second half of the nineteenth century in the Straits, “religion” emerged as a contested category by which non-Christians had to explain to British colonial authorities the meanings of their ceremonies and to justify their processions (61). Tschacher argues that the delegitimization of Muharram was not because it became more political after the 1870s, but that colonial authorities classified such public religious events as “religious” (65). The irony is that the prohibition of Muharram in the Straits Settlements, which the government identified as a “religious” Shi’i event, had never existed, and “the Shia origins of the festival were immaterial” (65). However, it was the classificatory discourse by which the state evaluated Muharram rituals that linked religion, politics, race, and criminality (65).

In chapter 6, “Contestation and Transformation: Muḥarram Practices among Sunni Muslims in South Africa, 1860–2020,” Goolam Vahed shows the central place of Muharram rituals in the life of Indian Muslim indentured laborers in Natal, South Africa from the colonial period until the present. While the majority of Muslims in South Africa are Sunnis, Muharram was the first public Indian religious ceremony performed in Natal in 1860. The annual three days’ leave granted to indentured laborers, referred to by whites as “Coolie Christmas,” was celebrated with great enthusiasm by all Indians in Natal, serving as a vitally important social outlet for their “rigid and highly-controlled lives on plantations to sing, dance, play music, and generally enjoy themselves” (73). Vahed maps the transformations of Natal’s Muslim (and Hindu) communities over the past 150 years and the constantly shifting meaning of Muharram rituals shaped by the impacts of urbanization, as well as forced relocation caused by Apartheid policies, and labor migrations that were influenced by religious reform movements (87). The multiplicity of Muharram traditions, beliefs, and practices “underscore[s] that there is no hegemonic, universally authoritative Islamic tradition among Indian Muslims in South Africa” (87).

In the final chapter of the volume, “‘It Ain’t Religion; It’s Just Culture, Man!’: Muḥarram Controversies in the Indo-Caribbean Diaspora,” Frank J. Korom brings the reader to Trinidad and the United States (Queens, New York, and southern Florida), where he explores debates about the secular nature of Hosay (derived from the name “Husain,” and which takes place during Muharram). In the Indo-Caribbean festival of Hosay, *tadjahs* are constructed and taken out in procession accompanied by cymbals and kettledrums (*tassa*). The perennial debate that circulates for Indo-Trinidadians regarding Hosay is whether one “prays” or “plays.” Korom argues, it “depends on whom you ask the question to” (97). Korom proposes a process of “creolization” as a model for global culture, which can be applied to the continuities and ruptures in material practices associated with *ta’ziya* as it has traveled from South Asia to the Caribbean (and beyond) (107).

A concluding essay weaving together themes and issues recurrent through this collection would have strengthened the volume considerably. How do we make sense of the popularity of Muharram among diverse religious communities in the subcontinent with their processional traditions, practices of auspicious gazing, and immersion of enlivened images; or the appeal of practices of ‘Alid devotion in the subcontinent and

diaspora; the tension between Muharram as a cultural rather than a religious event, so evocatively exemplified in Korom's essay by the declaration, "It ain't religion; it's just culture, man!" (91); and finally the role of Muharram as the annual event that provided a social outlet for indentured laborers of diverse religious backgrounds across the Indian Ocean World and the Caribbean? Each essay should have included a reference list at the end of the chapter, which would have made it easier for the interested reader to follow up sources and for individual essays to be assigned for classroom use.

Sohoni and Tschascher's *Non-Shia Practices of Muḥarram in South Asia and the Diaspora* provides compelling material, ritual, and documentary evidence of how the Muharram ritual complex has taken "on new shapes and guises" (4) outside of South Asia and has become an integral part of non-Shi'i ritual calendars in the subcontinent.

REFERENCES

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