

KOROM, FRANK J. *Hosay Trinidad: Muharram Performances in an Indo-Caribbean Diaspora*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. ix + 305 pages. Illustrations, table, glossary, bibliography, index. Cloth US\$65.00/€42,50; ISBN 0-8122-3683-1; paper US\$24.95/€16.50; ISBN 0-8122-1825-6.

Frank Korom's *Hosay Trinidad: Muharram Performances in an Indo-Caribbean Diaspora* is a welcome contribution to scholarship in the history of religion as well as Caribbean Studies. Despite its title, the study is concerned as much with tracing the development of Muharram in Iraq, Iran, and India as it is with the evolution of this tradition in the Caribbean.

Originating as a Shii Muslim practice at least as early as the tenth century in what is now southern Iraq, the rites of Muharram commemorate the martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Husayn. Known as *Ta'ziyeh* in Iran and *Muharram* in India, the ritual cycle came to be known as "Hosay" in the West Indies based on a colloquial rendering of the martyr's namesake.

Caribbean Hosay involves the building of model tombs honoring Husayn and his brother Hasan's martyrdom. These tombs—known as *tadjahs*—are carried through the streets in public procession to the accompaniment of intensive drumming and, in the end, ceremoniously disposed of in the sea, a practice which derives from Hindu festival influences in South Asia.

The author's perspective is unique in several regards. As a former curator at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA, he brings a keen eye for the aesthetics and material culture of festival arts. He is also not a Caribbeanist by training, a position that affords a mix of strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, Korom's perspective reflects his experience as one of the main collaborators in the making of a documentary video on the subject (BISHOP and KOROM 1998). His monograph elaborates upon articles published earlier in connection with the documentary project (KOROM 1994a, b; KOROM

and CHELKOWSKI 1994). Unfortunately, though he tells us that he conducted intermittent participant-observation between 1991 and 1997, Korom never fully clarifies exactly what this involved, nor does he disclose the nature of his impressive archival and historiographical work.

As a study in social history, *Hosay Trinidad* is sweeping and magisterial in scope. Korom synthesizes the earliest evidence of Muharram in Iraq, explicates the “Karbala Paradigm” animating the rite among Arab and Persian Shii Muslims, and usefully reviews the development and efflorescence of Ta’ziyeh traditions in Iran since the sixteenth century.

Muharram did not become established in India until the sixteenth-century Mughal period. Surpassing all other Islamic holidays in scale, Indian Muharram exhibits great regional variation in vernacular form, expanding far beyond its Shia base to include not only Sunni Muslims but also Hindus as well. The term *ta’ziyah* came to be used for the processional cenotaphs, reflecting the public orientation of Indian festivity, the legacy of which is manifest in the Caribbean. As in Iran, a dialectic of public and private forms of observance obtains, but in India the most public activities predominantly involve Sunni Muslims and Hindus, leaving private commemorations as the province of Shias. Indeed, Shii Muslims are a relatively small minority throughout South Asia, and Muharram would not have survived and developed as it headed eastward from Persia had it not become more essentially trans-sectarian and ecumenical in character.

Among the panoply of ritual practices brought by indentured “East Indian” laborers to the West Indies in the wake of nineteenth-century slave emancipation, Hosay eclipsed others in scale and prominence. This is especially significant in light of the fact that Shiism quickly became inoperative in the Caribbean. Muslims reconsolidated their identity in the Americas, where ethnicity initially trumped religion in terms of social adaptation. They never constituted more than fifteen percent of the Indian population in Trinidad, itself never more than forty percent of the total, and Indians were initially looked down upon not only by British and French colonists but also by people of African descent, who increasingly embraced Christianity over time. Thus the initial fate of Indo-Trinidadians took a dramatic turn as a subjugated group in the colonial Americas, and Hindu-Muslim relations were recontextualized in ways distinct from those in South Asia.

As a focal point on the ceremonial calendars of many plantations, Caribbean Muharram took on more of a pan-Indian ethnic identity from the start, yet also attracted Afro- and Sino-Trinidadian participants too. Yet, one of Korom’s greatest contributions is his demonstration that what Caribbeanists have come to call *creolization*—the mixing of heterogeneous traditions and local synthesis of new, hybrid cultural forms—began well before the Caribbean period in the case of Muharram. This does not downplay any of the uniqueness of Hosay in the Americas, but serves to deepen the story and throw the rite’s West Indian dimensions into further relief.

Hosay changed and adapted with the times in Trinidad, becoming a manifest symbol of ethnic identity and a latent symbol of cross-ethnic solidarity. Its popularity in nineteenth-century Trinidad elicited anxiety among the plantocracy and colonial government. Things came to a head in 1884, when the colonial militia clamped down on commemorations, bringing forth death and injury to more than a hundred people at one of its most prominent urban venues (see SINGH 1988). Observation of Hosay subsequently declined except for one area of the rural south and in the urbanized area of St. James, which became part of the capital, Port-of-Spain. Korom’s attention is focused on northern Hosay in St. James, where the rites blossomed over time as a result of urban, polyethnic conditions and—according to the author—due to the stewardship of a small, core group of Shii families who have kept the building traditions of *tadjahs* alive and well.

Korom's curatorial expertise and keen aesthetic eye serve him well in the documentation and analysis of Hosay material culture and festival arts. Caribbean *tadjahs* are colorful, flashy works of labor-intensive folk art and the author examines the materials and techniques utilized in their construction, as well as their structural aesthetics and patterns of design, illuminating the interplay of creativity and continuity. Korom considers how *tadjah* construction in "yards" and the manufacture of carnival masquerades in "camps" have come to mirror one another over time. He details the types of drums used, tracing an historical arc from ancestral cognates in north India to their transformation in the West Indies, and documents the percussive repertoire of "hands" played in Caribbean Hosay, which compensated for the decline of self-flagellatory mourning behavior. Also of special significance in the Caribbean context are its "moons," which do not exist elsewhere within the global sphere of Islam. Respectively representing Husayn and Hasan, Trinidad's Hosay moons are constructed in separate yards that, revealingly, unlike the *tadjah* yards, involve *no* Afro-Trinidadian participation. Korom shows that the moons are most likely innovations upon north Indian and—even more distantly—Persian precedents. Thus, through an impressive bit of art historical sleuthing, the author uncovers a heretofore hidden chain of influences in Muharram festival arts across a wide swath of time and space.

Korom conceptualizes the cultural sociology of Hosay concentrically at three levels of increasing remove. It is most spiritual at the "esoteric" level of the yard, where those who fast and commit themselves to the annual rite construct *tadjahs*. Non-Muslims as well as non-Indians are involved at this level of engagement. Shading into the next level, Hosay involves celebrants who see the event as a prominent expression of South Asian heritage on the island, making it a paramount local symbol of Indian ethnicity. At the widest level of remove are those who emphasize the multi-ethnic, secular character of the rite as part of Trinidad's efflorescent festival culture at large, and therefore an integral piece within the larger mosaic of national culture.

Apprehending Hosay in terms of these concentric rings of symbolic action not only helps one understand the complexity of the event and its meanings for different actors, but also accounts for why Hosay has become subject to so much conflict and debate over time: as straying too far from Sunni orthodoxy, as too much of a fête, as too commercialized, as too Indian or not Indian enough. Thus, Hosay is an overdetermined phenomenon serving multiple interests and identities in relation to a number of overlapping interpretive communities. Moreover, Korom importantly observes that heteroglossia and debate over the rite's status are in fact as characteristic of Muharram in India as well as Iran. This means that many of its local conflicts are not so new or unique to the Americas after all, as many practitioners and commentators take them to be.

This matter brings us to the problem of Shii identity in Trinidad. Korom argues that Shii practice of *taqiyyah*—tactical dissimulation—has been at work throughout the entire global development of Muharram, enabling the rites to expand and transform at the exoteric level while maintaining esoteric fidelity to "the Shii master narrative." He believes the small local community of Shias have adapted to polyethnic Trinidad by conceding ground superficially but always maintaining a strong underlying Shii foundation. Though he does not discuss it, Korom's interpretation of Hosay metaphysics parallels the "camouflage theory" of Afro-Caribbean syncretism, which posits an underlying African-derived core beneath all hybrid forms in the Americas.

Korom's interpretation is problematic, given that he offers little data to support the analysis. Shiism dissipated as a lived practice during the colonial era and he acknowledges that control of Hosay was largely in the hands of *non-Shia* (115, 223–24, 227–28). Moreover, oral histories of those Shia involved in contemporary commemorations are not reflected

in colonial recruitment or ship records (121). Additionally, *tadjah* yards involve a significant degree of not only polyethnic but also ecumenical participation. Thus it is unclear precisely who is “Shia” or what being “Shii” means in the local context other than through association with this popular tradition.

Since the book otherwise sheds so much light, Korom’s analytical license is unfortunate in this regard and also ironic in light of his emphasis on “emergent ethnicity.” Rather than essentializing Shii retention and resistance, the author’s own perspective suggests alternative interpretations, such as the possibility that Hosay became more creolized and reconsolidated among Muslims and non-Muslims throughout the colonial period, but has subsequently become the vehicle of post-colonial identity politics amid a plethora of competing racial and religious dynamics. Since the 1980s there has been “revitalization” of Shii identity in Trinidad vis-à-vis Hosay (MUSTAPHA 2002). With the transition from Afro-creole nationalism to post-colonial multiculturalism and as a result of Afrocentric and Indocentric dialectics on the national stage, many religious formations have been mobilized for varying purposes. Indeed, Korom’s valuable epilogue considers the entry of a Canadian Shii Missionary Organization into the mix in the late 1990s in an effort to further revitalize and “purify” local practice.

The difficulties relating to Shiism and Hosay in this study are compounded by the fact that Korom’s historical narrative stretches from medieval Iraq and Iran to colonial India and the contemporary West Indies, but deals little with the crucial century between the 1880s in colonial Trinidad and the 1990s, when Korom enters the picture. This is precisely the period of time whose details would more fully clarify the development and meanings of Hosay on the island.

Written in lucid and compelling prose, Korom’s *Hosay Trinidad* is an important contribution. His consideration of Arabian, Persian, and Indian precedents provides an epic backdrop to the drama of Hosay in Trinidad. His art historical work is impressive and especially illuminating for those coming from the Caribbeanist side. And his examination of the multivocalic sociology of Hosay in relation to competing interpretive communities is valuable. Despite reservations concerning Korom’s analysis of *taqiyyah* and latent Shii knowledge transmission, his book is nevertheless highly recommended for Asianists, Caribbeanists, Islamologists, and historians of religion or art. It is clearly the most outstanding single piece of scholarship on Trinidadian Hosay to date and will be an essential resource for many years to come.

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