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**“Hosay in Trinidad and Tobago: History, Cultural Transformations, and Meanings”**

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After praising Allah and asking that His peace and blessings be upon His Messenger Muhammad, I greet you all with the universal greeting of peace—*as-salamu alaykum*.

The Honorable Acting Consul General of the Consulate General of Trinidad and Tobago in New York Ms. Urvashi Ramanarine, Imam Sahib (Ahamad Ali), distinguished guests, friends, brothers and sisters. . . .

**1.0 Introduction to Hosay**

I refer you to the handout that you received which depicts the Hosay Festival in Trinidad and Tobago past and present. My presentation shall begin with a brief description of modern day commemoration of Hosay in Trinidad and Tobago, firstly; trace its genesis in history in 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia, secondly; examine the beginning of its commemorative status in Persia, thirdly; follow its exportation to India and cultural transformation, fourthly; report on its arrival in Trinidad and Tobago in the nineteenth century and its cultural role among the non-whites, fifthly; and sum up its symbolism and social meanings for different peoples.

Here is a contemporary snapshot of Hosay, spanning six days intermittently. On Day One, prayer meetings are held at Hosay sites, where the *tadjahs* (ornate replicas of mosques) are built. On Flag Night, the first procession of Hosay occurs, as devotees and other participants walk through the streets carrying multi-colored flags and beating *Tassa* drums. On Little Hosay Night, another procession occurs, as followers carry replicas of two coffins and small *tadjahs* accompanied by *Tassa* drumming. On the Big Hosay Night, devotees bring out the larger

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*tadjahs*, some of which are as high as six to seven feet, while dancers bear standards in the shapes of two half-moons or crescents with different colors, slowly parading them for full public viewing, as they chant, and beat *Tassa* drums. On Karbala Day, the final parade day of the Hosay, the crescent models are taken out into an open field and simulated to 'fight' with each other, as special prayers for the deceased are offered. On Teejay Day, Day Six, the *tadjahs* are usually taken to the sea in Cocorite, Port of Spain, and elsewhere, broken up, and discarded into the waters; however, nowadays they are disposed of in an environmentally safe manner. Much symbolism are at work in Hosay rituals, which I will point out shortly.

## **2.0 Genesis of Hosay in History**

Hosay has its genesis in early Muslim history in Arabia. In 672 CE (50 AH), the ailing Umayyad caliph Mu'awiyah gave the oath of allegiance (*bay'ah*) to his son Yazeed and ordered that the nation of Islam do the same. Yazeed was the obvious choice, since his brother Abdul Rahman had died in infancy and his other brother, Abdullah, was retarded and therefore mentally incapable of assuming the mantle of leadership. Delegates from all the provinces came to Damascus, headquarters of the Umayyad caliphate, pledging their fealty to Yazeed. Everyone complied with Mu'awiyah's edict—except Abdur-Rahmaan bn Abee Bakr, Ibn 'Abbaas, Ibn 'Umar, Abdullah bn Az-Zubayr, and al-Husayn bn Ali, the Prophet's grandson. They withheld their oath to Yazeed in protest of the hereditary manner in which Mu'awiyah had bequeathed the right to rule the Islamic empire. They preferred a consultative approach to appointing a new caliph as was done in the previous caliphates. This abeyance of the *bay'ah* was essentially a political difference, since the Prophet himself never legislated a clear-cut criterion of successorship, only general attributes like Quraysh lineage, masculinity, puberty, sanity, being Muslim, leaving the election of a political successor as a deliberative process to be worked out by the learned and pious of the community or *Ummah*.

Mu'awiyah died ten years later. On his deathbed, he bequeathed a counsel to be conveyed to his son Yazeed who was absent, advising him on the political culture of people of the Hijaz, Iraq, and Syria and how he should negotiate their interests. More importantly, Mu'awiyah warned his son: "O my son! I have no fear for you from anyone among the Quraysh except three: Husayn bn Ali, Abdullah bn Umar, and Abdullah bn al-Zubayr."

In 682, Yazeed assumed the caliphate. Before he could do so, however, he had to request the *bay'ah* from the people a second time. The precedent set by predecessors was to take the oath anew every time a caliph died and another was appointed. Again, everyone gave Yazeed the *bay'ah* except the same four prominent young men who had previously refused. Worried that this recalcitrance might undermine his authority and credibility in the eyes of the people, Yazeed wrote to his governor in Madinah al-Waleed bn 'Utbah bn Abee Sufyaan, requesting he forcefully take the *bay'ah* from Imam Husayn, Ibn Umar, Ibn 'Abbaas, and Ibn al-Zubayr. The governor summoned the young men and informed him of the contents of Yazeed's letter. Two of them recapitulated—Ibn Umar and Ibn 'Abbaas, but Ibn al-Zubayr departed Madinah for Makkah followed by Imam Husayn with his family.

Displeased by the failure of al-Waleed to take the *bay'ah* from all the four men, Yazeed replaced him with the governor of Makkah, dispatching an army to fight Ibn al-Zubayr who, along with Imam Husayn, was now regarded as an enemy of the caliphate. Al-Zubayr's forces in Makkah, however, repelled Yazeed's army. This was a stinging political and military defeat for Yazeed in the first year of his caliphate. Both sides intended to prevail. On the one hand, Yazeed was determined to have an authoritarian rule without any dissenter, and the two companions remained defiant, on the other hand.

Later in the year, Imam Husayn began receiving a stream of letters from the people of Koofah, Iraq, pledging political support. They expressed dislike for Yazeed's governor, promised Imam Husayn loyalty, and invited him to come to Iraq. A curious Imam Husayn sent his cousin named Muslim to Koofah to ascertain the validity of their support. Muslim alighted in Koofah where 12,000 men pledged their allegiance to him on behalf of Imam Husayn. The news of this pledge spread quickly, prompting Yazeed to remove al-Nu'maan bn Basheer as governor of Koofah, replacing him with the tougher Ubaydullah bn Zayyaad. Muslim then wrote to Imam Husayn to travel to Koofah. But Ubaydullah found out the hiding place of Muslim in Koofah and summoned the host of the dwelling, a man called Haani. After interrogating him on the whereabouts of Muslim, Ubaydullah beat him and imprisoned him. When news reached Muslim of the incarceration of Haani, he mobilized a 14,000-strong contingent from Koofah and headed toward Ubaydallah. The shrewd governor, however, had summoned the notables of Koofah,

persuading the clan leaders to withdraw their support for Muslim. By the time Ubaydullah's forces caught up with Muslim, there was no one left with him. All of them had deserted. Ubaydullah executed both Muslim and his imprisoned host Haani. He decapitated them and sent their heads sent to Yazeed in Damascus.

Unaware of what had befallen his scout, Imam Husayn resolved to travel to Koofah. Many of the learned in the Hijaz, fearful of treachery and mistrust for the Iraqi people, pleaded with Imam Husayn not to proceed to Koofah. Imam Husayn consulted with all who tried to warn him about his trip to Koofah but refused to change his mind. On his way to Koofah, he met someone from Iraq and asked him about its people. The man replied ominously: "Their hearts are with you, their swords with Banee Umayyah (the ruling tribe of Yazeed), and fate is in Allah's hand." These words proved prophetic.

Ubaydullah bn Zayyaad, at the head of 45 horsemen and 100 infantrymen, encountered Imam Husayn's entourage at Karbala, outside of Koofah. Imam Husayn and those with him fought a heroic battle and the fight of warriors the likes of whom are rare. But quantity overcame bravery. Imam Husayn and all his fighters were killed, numbering just over 10 men from his household (Shakir 1985: 4: 141). One of the soldiers severed Imam Husayn's head and placed it before Ubaydullah who then mutilated it with his mace. The women of Imam Husayn's household were spared and sent to Damascus. At the gruesome sight of Imam Husayn's decomposed and disfigured head, Yazeed wept and cried: "If there was any kinship between him and him [i.e. between Imam Husayn and Ubaydullah], this would not have happened" (Shakir 1985: 4: 141). He treated Imam Husayn's women well and returned them to Madinah. Both Sunni and Shiite Muslims consider the martyrdom of Imam Husayn as one of the most tragic moments in Muslim history. It occurred on the Day of 'Aashooraa, 10th Muharram, 683, at Karbala, Iraq. 'Aashooraa is an important day in the Islamic calendar, but more so for Shiite Muslims than Sunni Muslims. Whereas Sunnis consider Imam Husayn's death as one of the great martyrdoms in Islam, Shiites coopted it into a martyrdom cult. To understand it better, we must follow its history in Persia.

### **3.0 Hosay in Persia (Iran)**

Observances commemorating the Muharram 10 incident, the day on which Imam Husayn was martyred, began in 10th century Iraq, according to Arab historians. Around the same period in Persia, Imam Husayn's martyrdom emerged as a mourning ritual with fervor, as Chelkowski recounted:

[F]rom the beginning [in Persia], the annual Muharram mourning ceremonies were observed with great pageantry and emotion. Veneration of deceased heroes had long been an important part of Persian culture; the theme of redemption through sacrifice found parallels in such pre-Islamic legends as the death of Siyavash and in the ancient Mesopotamian ritual of Adonis-Tamuz.

By the tenth century A.D. impressive Muharram processions were well-established. The reliable historian Ibn al-Atheer, tells of great numbers of participants, with black painted faces and disheveled hair circling round and round the city of Baghdad, beating their chests and moaning the mourning songs at the festival of Muharram. It was at this time when the Persian Buyid dynasty ruled from Baghdad (Chelkowski: 1979).

According to Korom (1992):

Mourning rituals, however, did not receive official sanction and royal patronage until the beginning of the Safavid dynasty in 16th century Persia, when Shii [Shiite] Islam was declared the state religion by Shah Ismail I. The annual commemorations developed into ritual dramas known as *taziyah* (the so-called Persian Passion Play) in Iran.

During the Muharram ceremony, Safavid processionists marched in colorful costumes or rode on camels and horses through the streets, as mostly by European envoys, missionaries, merchants and travelers have reported (Chelkowski 1979). We now follow its history in India.

#### **4.0 Hosay in India**

Islam came to India peacefully via Arab trade during the caliphate of 'Umar bn al-Khattaab (d. 645) and later in 712 with the military conquest of Sind. From their base in what is now Afghanistan, the Turkish Muslim conquest of northern India began in the tenth century

with Mahmood al-Ghazni (1024), continued with the Ghorids (1192) and ended with the Timurids or Mugals (1526) who ruled until 1858. The Timurids may have introduced Muharram rituals into India (Sharif 1972: 164). The mourning ceremonies were encouraged by various independent Shiite states as well as by the Moghul dynasty which had strong ties with the Shiite Safavid dynasty of Iran (Momen 1985: 122) (cited in Thaiss 1994: 41). Inevitably, the commemoration of Imam Husayn's martyrdom on the day of 'Aashooraa also underwent a syncretism in North India, incorporating elements of Hindu festivals. Korom (1992) notes that

Curiously, staged dramas of Husayn's martyrdom did not develop in the Indian subcontinent, even though other forms of processional rituals, known collectively as Muharram, did. In South Asia the Persian derived Urdu word of *taziyah* (Trinidadian *tadjah*) came to stand for the model tombs used in these processions.

The Hindu influence of procession in Muharram observances stemmed from the Jagganath festival celebrated at the height of Indian summer in the town of Puri on the Bay of Bengal. Puri is a center of dedication to the Hindu deity or avatar Krishna (known in Puri as Jagganath and depicted as dark skinned, suggesting a south Indian origin) and his elder brother Bala-Rama and his sister Subhadra, with many of their temples located there. At the end of June every year, huge chariots of these entities are draped in distinctly colored cloth with symbols and signs are brought out from the temples and led in a grand procession to a temple located in the fields outside of town.

The Jagganath festival begins with a huge fanfare of conches, trumpets, drums, and cymbals, accompanied by music and dancers. This grand spectacle, in Hindu tradition, represents the move of Krishna and his siblings from their winter home in the town to their summer garden palace, a temple surrounded by fields. Each garlanded chariot is several stories tall, with wheels that measure sixteen feet in diameter and pulled by large numbers of people through the town. In earlier history, several Krishna devotees would fling themselves beneath the great wheels and be crushed to death in order to guarantee a safe passage to a happier heavenly state. It is reported that when the British first saw this grand spectacle in Puri with the gargantuan chariots, they adopted the name Jagganath, which became our English "juggernaut" to describe a huge

advancing force that crushes things in its path. From India, Hosay journey to Trinidad and Tobago and the wider Caribbean via British colonialism, to which we now turn our attention.

### 5.0 Hosay in Colonial Trinidad

The first wave of East Indian indentured laborers came to Trinidad aboard the ship *Fateh Razack* from Calcutta, India, on May 30, 1845. Although the majority of the 213 persons on board were Hindus, some Muslims were definitely among them, as names such as M.M. Causmolle, Khan, Furreed, Emambocus, Faize Buxo, Madar Buxo, Allar, Omrudee, Muhourun, Bahadur, and Faizan confirm. Lowenthal reckoned that nine-tenths of the indentured Indian immigrants were from the Ganges River basin and embarked at Calcutta. The South Asian remainder came from Madras. One in six were Muslims, the rest Hindus, according to another historical report (Quick 1998:51). We also learn that the province of Oudh (Awadh) was at the time of the initial recruitment of the indentured workers in 1845 ruled by a Shiite lineage of Persian descent (Thaiss 1994: 42). Nevertheless, an estimate of how many Muslims were of the Shiite sect is conjecture at best.

During the long journey over the black waters, from Calcutta to Port of Spain, lasting 10 to 18 weeks, social solidarity developed among East Indians, as the British called them. Hindus and Muslims formed a new *communitas* nurtured by the long sea voyage, a former syncretism of the Muslim and Hindu cultures in their motherland, and an anticipated common alien status in a new territory thousands of miles away from India. East Indians have called this liminal camaraderie *jahaji bhai*, meaning “brotherhood of the boat.”

By some missionary accounts (Korom 1994:), Hosay, the death festival, was witnessed within a decade of the arrival of the first group of indentured laborers. The first celebration of Hosay probably occurred in the 1850s, when the first *taziyah* was built on the Philippine Estate near Couva in central Trinidad (Thaiss 1994: 43). Yet it was not until 1863 that Queen Victoria granted permission for Hosay to be officially commemorated, as long as [Trinidad] had Indian residents (Sookdeo 2002:339). Thus, Hosay became widely known as the ‘East Indian Carnival’ or the ‘Coolie Carnival.’ But the white elite viewed this multi-ethnic solidarity among the lower classes centered on festivals with mistrust and attempted to break it up forcefully by law and policing in the 1880s. The white elite in Trinidad during the late nineteenth century comprised

of the minority British ruling class, French, and Spanish Catholic planters and merchants. Below the rank of the elites was an aspiring handful of middle-class free blacks and coloreds.

The Hosay contained elements of cultural retention and persistence as well as elements of creolization. Hosay emerged alongside Canboulay and Carnival, even as it creolized with them, as cultural strategies of survival in a hostile environment. The martyrdom of Imam Husayn assumed immense importance to not only Muslims but to all groups of the lower working class. Hosay provided a historical template by which immigrant laborers consciously and unconsciously paralleled their suffering with the principled sacrifice of Imam Husayn who stood up against tyranny, remained steadfast to his convictions, and died rather than succumb to an unjust cause. As long as the colonial authorities continued to repress the working class, the greater was the relevance of the Prophet Muhammad's martyred grandson to Trinidad.

Hosay, as a ceremony of incorporation, offered a new cultural space for blacks, Chinese, coloreds, and indentured laborers to indulge their leisure time without a sense of inferiority. It also served as a positive medium through which they contributed their artistic talents in intense ceremonial estate rivalry. With the aesthetic inputs of non-Indian laborers into the Coolie Carnival, Hosay underwent another transcultural phase in the Caribbean, attracting a new ethnic assortment of followers and cultural features of dancing, feasts, and the use of *hakka* sticks in simulated fence fighting in the streets—the latter, I believe, was probably a Chinese contribution to the creolization of Hosay.

The Hosay was undoubtedly a multivalent festival. For devout Shiites, it represented a ceremony of continuity that extended their melancholic cult of sacrifice against evil through time and space, a spiritually redemptive ritual that guaranteed Imam Husayn's intercession for faithful on the Day of Judgment. For Sunnis, it was a reprehensible religious innovation (*bid'ah*), which Islamic Law or *Sharia* condemned. For Hindus, Indian Hosay was as much a Hindu as it was a Shiite festival accompanied by *tassa* drums and procession. Notwithstanding the Sunni religious edict (*fatwa*) against Hosay, active participation by non-Indian laborers in it included fasting, building castle-like *tadjahs* to which they donated money and fenced with *hakka* sticks. My working assumption is that since the crown colony government did not place social transitions for the lower class as a whole to assimilate into the mainstream culture, they came together as a distinct liminal group through labor and festivals that formed part of the local discourse on power.

Riots during Hosay celebrations were not unheard of but were infrequent. In 1882, the Legislative Council passed an ordinance entitled “Regulating the Festivals of the Immigrants.” This ordinance was patterned after the 1871 British Guiana (Guyana) ordinance that banned the Hosay from entering the cities of Georgetown and New Amsterdam following a spate of disturbances there. To my Guyanese brothers and sisters and friends in the audience, this report is proof that Hosay was also commemorated in Guyana but was banned by the colonial authorities there in the nineteenth century, which explains why modern Guyanese collective memory do not recall knowledge of Hosay.

### **6.0 Hosay Challenges British Colonial Authority**

Why did the British colonial authorities seek to destroy Hosay in Trinidad and not co-opt it like Carnival? Several social and political explosives mined the cultural space in which the elite and East Indians in particular negotiated power. Four factors led to the adoption of harsher measures by the state to curb the expansive Hosay influence on the masses:

1. The dire economic straits of the West Indian sugar industry in the 1880s. The British plantocracy was concerned that emancipation would have deleterious effects on the sugar industry and, equally important, jeopardize their lifestyle.
2. A paranoid perception of the cultural significance of the symbols of Hosay and the strength of the East Indians prevalent among the elites.
3. Frustrated efforts of Christian missionaries to penetrate the Eastern religions of the indenteds coupled with the concerted media campaign to disparage them.
4. A ‘crusade-jihad’ dichotomy that had found a new battlefield in the British West Indies, for many East Indian Muslims still perceived British colonial authorities as the old enemy, which had displaced Muslim Mogul rule in India. But I do not have the luxury of time here to elaborate on these conflictual cultural forces.

In 1881, on the heels of the first Carnival riot that year and the killing of an East Indian named Harach Singh at the Hosay, Rev. Grant of the Canadian Mission persuaded a group comprising of 107 Indian and Arab Muslims to petition the colonial government to ban the

Hosay—the first sign of internecine fracture in the Indian body politic in Trinidad and Tobago. Here is the full text of the Sunni Muslim petition:

*To Sir Sanford Freeling, Governor-General of Trinidad.*

*May God bless your Excellency, the protector of the poor, &c., &c.*

*We are the Mussulmans [Muslims] of Trinidad. We believe in one God. We abhor all idol worship. This Taziya is one form of idol worship and is no part of our religion. When people drink rum and like vain fellows swing their sticks and shout Hasan and Husain before Taziya we get much shame because gentlemen think that this is the Mahomedan religion. Neither in the Koran nor in any Sacred Book of ours are we told to make Taziya. In this play quarrels arise, injuries are inflicted, bones are broken, men are killed, and it is our good name that gets reproach, hence we are in distress. Our religion arose in Arabia, and we have amongst us many Arab people all faithful Mussulmans and none of them ever heard of Taziya.*

*On account of our distress we entreat your Excellency to issue an order for the discontinuance of this play, and whilst we live we will remember your kindness, and praise your name for having judged so wisely.*

*We are your Excellency's very humble Servants,*

*BAHADUR ALI, Shopkeeper, San Fernando.*

*YAKUB, San Fernando*

*KURBAN ALI,*

*SAIKH DULAR, Shopkeeper,*

*SUKHOUWAT ALI,*

*SAYAD MOHAMMAED ISA, Couva*

*Followed by 101 other signatures*

In 1884, the British colonial authority in Trinidad banned the Shiite Muslim death festival called Hosay. That same year thousands of people, predominantly East Indians rallied behind the Hosay procession in defiance of the ban. In the bloody confrontation that ensued, more than a dozen people were shot to death and hundreds were wounded by gunfire from the state police. This conflictual incident is known in Trinidad and Tobago's history as the infamous 'Muharram Massacre' or 'Hosay Massacre.' The horror of the massacre of innocent civilians by the state festered in the crown colony. A raging debate ensued in the newspapers at home and abroad. I

have an unpublished manuscript, which I wrote a decade ago, giving a detailed narrative of the so-called Hosay Massacre, which I have procrastinated in getting it printed.

## 7.0 Conclusion

Hosay left India in the hearts of East Indians and arrived in the West Indies as a hybrid Muslim-Hindu observance. In spite of restrictive legislation and state violence against it, the ancient death festival survived in Trinidad, as did Carnival. But unlike Carnival, Hosay was reduced to smaller and smaller observances over the years. After the Hosay Massacre in 1884, the main focus of celebration shifted to the St. James area, west of Port of Spain, which had a Muslim Indian concentration. Both Carnival and Hosay are today major national cultural festivals and tourist attractions in Trinidad and Tobago. Every year, small Shiite communities observe Hosay with two major parades full of colorful *tadjahs*, *tassa*, prayers, sometimes mixed with local rhythms of soca, calypso, and chutney music along the way in St. James, and Cedros in the south.

Still a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-cultural ornate and musical procession, Hosay draws thousands of local and foreign spectators every year, even though in recent times Shiite fundamentalists influenced by Iran oppose it, while the majority Sunni Muslims continue to spurn and reject it as an un-Islamic festival. As recent as 2005, the largest Muslim organization in Trinidad and Tobago, the Anjuman Sunnat-ul-Jamaat Association (ASJA), distanced itself from the 140th annual observance of Hosay. The *Trinidad Guardian* reported that ASJA's public relations officer, Kamal Hosein, announced that the occasion had become a desecration of Islam and that the St James event misrepresented the occasion with revelry and gay abandon in carnival-type fashion. Hosein said, Hosay, was started by the early Muslims as a solemn funeral service procession depicting the martyrdom of Hazrat Imam Hussain, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad. But (the observance) is neither a festival nor an item of culture to be celebrated. That said, promoter of the St James event, Mohammed Emamalie, said he would proceed with his plan despite ASJA's disapproval, because of the significance of Hosay. He said, "ASJA members are Sunni Muslims, we are Shiite Muslims. They do not believe in Hosay. People say so many things about Hosay, but it is not a festival...it is the procession of a death" (02/17/2005). This intra-Muslim opposition is not surprising and is over 130 years old, almost as old as the celebration of Hosay itself in the Caribbean.

Modern Hosay in Trinidad fascinates scholars too. Korom (1994) sees Hosay as an occasion during which both the maintenance and change of ethnic identity can be documented as a process of creolization. Thaiss (1994: 55) considers the cultural ownership of Hosay: the symbolism associated with the Hosay in Trinidadian commemorations is multivocal and polysemic, i.e. it is open to numerous interpretations depending on one's cultural and historically conditioned predispositions. Mohapatra posits Hosay within the framework of the Indentureship and colonialism: To the extent then that Moharram symbolically expressed community aspirations of the emigrants it was necessarily refracted through their experience within the labour regime and with the colonial state. The relationship no doubt is not a simple unilinear one, it was multiplex. Sookdeo evaluates the ritualistic resilience—that Carnival and Hosay survive in Trinidad today testify to the resilience of meaningful rituals in the lives of human beings. This also suggests that the world of the plantation and its brand of divide-and-conquer ethnic politics did not succeed at every level (203).

From solemn mourning and plays in Persia where it originated, to the Muharram gaiety in India, its carnivalesque variant in Trinidad and Tobago known as Hosay, to self-flagellation in modern Iran, Lebanon, and other Shiite strongholds in the Middle East and South Asia, 'Aashooraa Day, 10th of Muharram persists as a transcultural realm wherein the perpetual struggle against injustice has meaning and validity for the lives of many. Beyond the Sunni-Shiite Muslim divide on the religious significance and interpretation of Hosay, at a subliminal level, amidst the gaiety, *tadjahs*, procession, prayers, *tassa* drums, perhaps Hosay still symbolizes for some a perennial quest then and now for a new *jhaji bhai* or just social order in which every creed and race find an equal place. . . . .