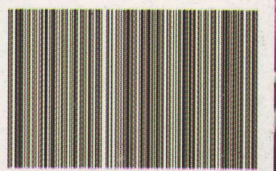


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The Islamic realities of the Muharram Massacre of 1884

By Daurius Figueira

In the aftermath of the massacre of 1884, Shia Islam retreated from the public view, and in fact became an esoteric practice in Trinbago until the 1970s where it resurfaced, prodded by the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran.

The Shia Muslims of India created, via their annual remembrances of the martyrdom of the grandson of Prophet Muhammed (uwbp) during the first month of the Islamic calendar, Muharram, the syncretic processions of Muharram. These processions during the month of Muharram were structured events in which the Shia gave space to non-Muslim participants such as the Hindu women who were childless and the dervishes who were outside the pale of mainstream Islam. What was also noteworthy of the Shia Muharram processions in India was the presence of sections of the procession bent on parodying the colonial Raj and the elements of the Indian comprador elites who were the vassals of English colonial domination.

The decade of the 1880s in the colonial history of Trinidad was one of resistance and armed engagement with the colonial power over the repeated moves to destroy cultural expressions of resistance which were expressed via processions in the streets of the colony of Trinidad. The white colonial power moved to destroy the Camboulay procession in memory of the end of African enslavement in Trinidad. The colonial state in the 1880s moved to destroy the Muharram procession for the clear and present danger that the Muharram procession constituted to the colonial state. East Indian indentured labour unrest especially on specific plantations on the plains of Naparima raised the concern of sections of the society that saw the clear and present danger of East Indian indentured unrest on the plantations and the threat to colonial civilization by less than civilized "Hindoo brutes." Both white planters and Afro-Trinidadian interests sounded the early warning of the clear and present danger of the "Hindoo brutes" running riot. It was then simply a matter of logical progression for these interests to call for the prohibition of the Muharram procession. For it was the premier annual event when indentured labourers of various estates merged into a stream of shouting, jumping, chanting less than civilized "coolies" marching through San Fernando to the sea.

What intensified the fear that was evoked with the procession of semi-civilized brutes through San Fernando to the Gulf of Paria in the minds of the colonials were the lessons the English colonial Raj learned from the Indian Mutiny of 1857. There was then an abiding fear of the Islamic base of the Muharram procession which was worsened by the inclusive syncretic nature of the procession. This morbid abiding fear of Islam would then convince the English colonials of Trinidad that they must

fire upon the Muharram procession of 1884. The very same colonial state refused to fire upon the Camboulay procession instead choosing to engage the people of the Camboulay in hand to hand combat with the bois as the extension of the arm. This colonial strategy was then the most potent indication of the potency of the Muharram procession as presenting the most potent and present danger in the minds of the colonial officials in the colony of Trinidad in the 1880s.

In the lead up to October 1884, the Sunni line of Islam would petition the colonial governor to ban the Muharram procession. The Sunni petitioners insisted to the kafirun (unbelievers) that the Shia and the Muharram procession were outside the pale of Islam and therefore shirk. Moreover the Sunni petitioners insisted that the Shia procession gave decent and law abiding Sunni Muslims subjects of the British Empire a bad name. The Sunni Muslims now joined the kafirun interests in calling for the destruction of the Muharram, which simply legitimised the decision of the colonial state to end once and for all the most concerted and potential threat to the colonial order posed by Indian indentured labour in the history of Indian indentureship in Trinidad 1845-1917.

On that fateful day in October 1884 the main procession heading to the Gulf of Paria through San Fernando was fired upon and scattered. In 1885 and thereafter the colonial power made it abundantly clear that Muharram processions would again be fired upon. In the aftermath of the massacre of 1884, Shia Islam retreated from the public view, and in fact became an esoteric practice in Trinbago until the 1970s where it resurfaced, prodded by the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran. Sunni Islam reaped the benefits of October 1884 settling for a subservient existence vis-a-vis the colonial state and a drive for hegemony over the Indo-Trinbagonian population through their dance with the PNM since 1956. Sunni Islam would since 1884 pursue the elusive holy grail of enmeshing the Hindu population of Trinbago in a danse macabre premised upon Sunni political leadership over the Hindu population of Trinbago clearly seen in the PNM of 1956-1986 and the UNC 1995-2001. It is intensely noteworthy that among the earliest prominent leaders of Sunni Islam in Trinidad were practitioners of Sufi Islam noted for their accommodation with the kafir colonial state and their unrelenting assault on Shia Islam.

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