



Urban Margins, a Refuge for Muharram Processions in Bombay: Towards an Idea of Cultural Resilience¹

REZA MASOUDI NEJAD
r.masoudi@soas.ac.uk

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Although the Taboot procession, that is one of the most impressive features of the great Mahomedan festival of Mohurram, is forbidden in the City of Bombay, owing to the violent disturbances that in variably marred the peace of Bombay when it was allowed in former years, the prohibition does extend to Bandra, one of the city's suburbs, where it is held annually. Thousands participate in the processions at Bandra, which are viewed by crowds Hindus and Christians.

("Taboot Procession in a Bombay Suburb" June 21, 1929: p. 10)

Fast-growing cities like Bombay (Mumbai)² have always produced suburbs and urban-villages. Bandra, a northern suburb of the city, was officially outside of Bombay and not under the Bombay governor in the early twentieth century. There are reports indicating that Muharram was observed in Bandra since the late nineteenth century. However, the historical reports show that when the processions were suppressed in Bombay in the 1910s, Bandra became the home of the processions since at least 1923. Moreover, we learn that since 1933 there was also a procession held in Andhari, another Muslim locality in the suburb of Bombay. This shows that the urban fringes of Bombay created a refuge space that preserved the ritual until it was gradually revived in the city during the 1940s. Today, the Muharram processions are still practised in Bandra, but it is Dongri, located in the heart of old Bombay, that is known as the arena of Muharram processions.

This paper is generally aimed at exploring how urban society and colonial authorities negotiate through religious practices, a negotiation that can be considered to be one of the principles of the urbanisation process. The process of urbanisation is not only about the migration of



people to a city; it is intrinsically about negotiations by which urban society is constantly shaped and re-shaped. It is about encountering diverse ethnic, religious, and political groups who co-habit in a place and negotiate social and political relations through different practices, including rituals. Therefore the urbanisation is about 'urban negotiations', not just moving into cities. As Green explains, in the nineteenth century Bombay emerged as "the cosmopolis of the Indian Ocean" (Green 2011: 3); the city brought together religiously, linguistically and ethnically diverse groups to an unprecedented degree. This was an extremely heterogeneous context that increased the complexity of the social structure. The significance of the Muharram ritual in urban negotiation was due to the fact that the ritual was the most important and the biggest festival in Bombay until the early twentieth century. As Peter van der Veer (2015: 12) has noted in an introduction to one of my works:

Before the rise of Ganpati processions, Mumbai was better known for its Muharram processions' in which not only the Shi'i Muslims, but also the Sunni Muslims as well as the Hindus participated. In this landscape, the Muharram ritual constituted an intensive interaction and tension between diverse ethnic and religious groups encountering each other and the colonial authorities in Bombay.

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This paper is particularly about the role of 'urban margins' in constituting a 'cultural resilience mechanism' that is one of the foundations of urbanisation processes. The idea of urban margins in this paper is by no means limited to the notion of spatial margins, i.e. urban suburbs. The paper will articulate how 'the spatial margin of the city' is coupled with 'the social margin of the ritual' to constitute a resilience mechanism that maintains 'urban negotiation' through cultural practice. The idea is to explore the role of urban margins as resources for maintaining both the ritual and the ability of communities to claim their right to the city when the landscape of urban negotiation underwent a major shift due to imposed policies. In other words, the notion of resilience is used in a framework that is shaped by juxtaposing cultural geography, urban governance, and ritual studies. This subject will be explored by looking at the dynamics of Muharram processions in Bombay from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. This study particularly highlights the changes that have unfolded since the imposition of the 1912 Muharram Regulation in Bombay. The regulation was the follow up of a series of regulations that were first issued after the 1893 riot in Bombay.



Cultural Resilience

The concept of resilience has roots in physics and mathematics, where it refers to the capacity of a system or material to recover its shape following a displacement or disturbance. For example, when a resilience material is stressed, it absorbs forces by bending and bouncing instead of breaking (MacKinnon and Derickson 2013: 255; Norris et al. 2007: 127; also see Bodin and Wiman 2004). In other words, resilience is the ability of a system to absorb the magnitude of a disturbance or force before the structure of the system changes or it is forcefully transfigured (Holling et al. 1997; Adger 2000: 349). The idea of 'resilience' has migrated from the natural and physical sciences into the social sciences and public policy.³ Social resilience was previously defined as the ability and capacity of social groups to recover from ecological disasters;⁴ the definition has since broadened. For example, Adger defines social resilience as: 'the ability of groups or communities to cope with external stresses and disturbances as a result of social, political and environmental changes' (Adger 2000: 347). More recently this idea has stretched to also include the study of social responses to financial and security crises.

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This paper attempts to broaden the notion of resilience into exploring 'cultural resilience'. This idea addresses the capacity of societies and communities to maintain urban negotiations through cultural practices, e.g. rituals, in response to disruptive forces, such as the regulations imposed by the colonial authorities in our case study. In other words, 'cultural resilience' addresses the cultural capacity of societies to maintain urban negotiation when an external or imposed force denies or interrupts their right to negotiate.

Resilience is defined as the ability of a system to restore its structure/shape after a disturbance and return to the pre-existing equilibrium. This is most simply described as the ability to 'bounce back'. However, resilience is also defined as the ability of a system to reinvent itself in response to a shock. This understanding of resilience is often applied in the study of social phenomena. While the first definition attends to the ability of a system to preserve its pre-existing shape, the latter definition mainly addresses the capacity of a system to recover from a shock and return to normal functioning (Pickett, Cadenasso & Grove 2004; Pike, Dawley & Tomaney 2010; MacKinnon & Derickson 2013). As will be discussed, the rituals are neither fixed practices (Kreinath, Hartunge, and Deschner 2004) nor socio-political relations in urban society; they are constantly changing and re-invent-



ing, especially in a city as dynamic as Bombay. Therefore cultural resilience, here, does not address the ability to preserve neither the pre-existing form of Muharram processions in Bombay nor the social structure of the city. The cultural resilience is about maintaining the ability of communities to negotiate with others through cultural practices; in other words, sustaining 'urban negotiations'.

The landscape of the Bombay Muharram in the nineteenth century

The Muharram ritual is aimed at commemorating Ashura day, the 10th day of Muharram, during the first month of the Islamic lunar calendar. Ashura day is associated with a number of myths in the history of the Middle East, including the day when Noah's Ark rested on dry land, and God split the Red Sea for the children of Israel (Ayoub 1978; 1987; also see Rizvi 1986). The day is also observed as the day of the martyrdom of Hussein ibn Ali, a grandson of the Prophet Mohammad in the tragic battle of Karbala in the late seventh century. The tragedy was the outcome of a dispute over the legitimacy of the Umayyad Caliphate. This political dispute had a significant role in the process of establishing the Muslims division into Shi'i and Sunni sects. The frequently noted Shi'i phrase: Every day is Ashura, and everywhere is Karbala, signifies the battle of Karbala as an eternal battle between justice and injustice, wrongness and rightness. As such and from the Shi'i point of view, the battle of Karbala is more than a historic battle over a political dispute and it has since transcended into 'meta-history' (Chelkowski 1988: 263). Shi'i Muslims regard the battle of Karbala 'as a cosmic event around which the entire history of the world, prior as well as subsequent to it, revolves' (Ayoub 1978: 141). The Shi'i narrate complex mythical accounts of the tragedy that have played an acute role in constituting Shi'i creed and rituals.

Shi'i Muslims developed numerous rituals throughout history to observe the tragedy of Ashura. The rituals mostly originated in their Arab environment in Iraq, were highly enriched in Iran mainly during the Safavid era (1501-1772), then were dispersed and diffused on the Indian subcontinent (Nakash 1993; Calmard 1996; Ayoub 1988; Hussain 2005). During colonial times, Indians expanded the geography of Muharram rituals as they spread the commemoration as far as East Africa and the Caribbean islands of Trinidad (Korom 1994; 2003). As Nigel Thrift argues, "no social process unfold[s] in the same way across different places, raising the significance of context in explan-



ation to a central position" (Warf 2004: 298). In India, the Muharram ritual constituted its own social meaning and function. Therefore, the Ashura observance in India has been strikingly different in comparison to its Middle Eastern origins. The Muharram commemoration is essentially a Shi'i ritual in the Middle East; however the ritual has metamorphosed into a non-Shi'i festival in India.

A large number of reports published in the Times of India (TOI)⁵ remark that not only Sunnis but also Hindus of lower orders participated in the Muharram processions in Bombay (e.g. see "Bandra Muharram Precautions" April 02, 1936) (also see Masoudi Nejad 2015; Kidambi 2007; 2004; Korom 2003). In fact, as Masselos (1982) explains, the Sunni community of Konkoni not only dominated the Muslim community, but also claimed authority over the Muharram ritual of Bombay in the nineteenth century. It is often argued that the inter-community remembrance of Ashura has historically been a mechanism for creating communal harmony in India. For example, Hasnain (1988) has mentioned that some of the Hindu rulers of Gwalior and Jalpur were patrons of Muharram rituals for the purposes of encouraging harmony between their Muslim and Hindu subjects. Adding to that, I would like to resituate the engagement of non-Shi'i communities in the Muharram rituals as the result of the cultural possibility of absorbing a ritual.

Among many other scholars, Scott and Simpson-Housley (1991: xi) explain that the historicity of the Religions of the Book (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) is the crucial factor in differentiating them from Asian religions, i.e. Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Shinto, which are predominantly constituted by the mythical myriad of arbitrary divinities. The Shi'i myth of Ashura, which is a complex meta-historical narrative, has been well received and absorbed in the Indian subcontinent where religious culture is predominantly constituted by myths. However, the ritual, i.e. the performative manifestation of the myth, plays the leading role in the process of accepting and absorbing a ritual-myth system. The ritual is often reinvented based on local culture, and then pushed to the background so much that it may hardly be remembered. For example, the Muharram processions are a symbolic funeral and are all about grief in the Middle East.

On one hand, the Bombay Muharram processions were a joyful festival, and in nineteenth century Bombay they involved dancing and drinking. On the other hand, this festival-funeral procession was directed towards a seafront where the taboots and ta'zyehs were



immersed, appropriating the symbolic funeral with the Hindu idea of funeral. Taboot means coffin and is a symbolic coffin that is carried through the processions. The most noticeable Indian invention in Muharram rituals is the ta'zyeh,⁶ the replica of Hussein's dome, which is also carried through the Muharram processions.

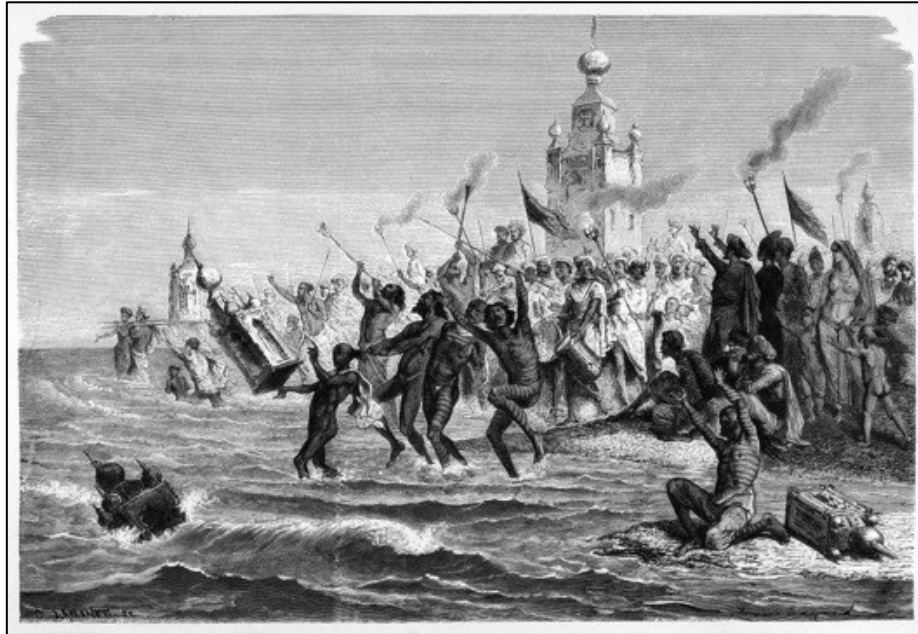


Figure 1: The immersion:
A Muharram procession arriving
at the shore of the Back Bay at Bombay, 1878⁷

As historical reports indicate, there were two types of processions in Bombay: the taboot procession and tolis processions. The tolis (or street-bands) processions took place for three to five nights usually during the fifth-tenth day of Muharram. Each moholla, or residential quarter, had its own band parade through the various quarters of the city and were ready to fight with the bands of rival streets.⁸ The tolis processions were predominantly practised by Sunni Muslims and accompanied by Hindus. However, the main procession was the taboot procession (also written as tabut) on the afternoon of Ashura day. The procession was named after the taboot since participants carried symbolic coffins of Karbala martyrs throughout the procession. This procession was the greatest festival of Bombay during the nineteenth century and Birdwood (1915) described it as the most picturesque event of South Asia during the late nineteenth century. As mentioned, the predominant atmosphere of the processions was not about expressing sorrow, it was a rather light-hearted and joyful festival. The following narration well depicts the atmosphere of the processions:



The streets in Native Town became gradually filled with a miscellaneous influx of human being of all kinds, and denominations. Brilliant cavalcades and corteges, bands of merry dancers, groups of counterfeit Ethiopians, knots of clowns-embellished with the conical cap and countless little bells, which tinkled at every step-saints, faqueers, dervishes, and itinerant preachers enacting absurd pantomimes, men painted to resemble the tiger, with long bushy tails, engaged in mime battles, fictitious riders, seated on imitation horses and camels, prancing and dancing around you, and ragamuffin mobs, under the especial eye of our picturesque Mounted Police – the whole a vast and animated masquerade, passed and repassed athwart the bewildered gaze of the spectator, and innumerable illuminated shows and pageants completed his confusion ("Article 19" August 25, 1858: 6).

The historical reports during the 1840s and 1850s show that the Muharram commemoration was generally peaceful. Nonetheless the tolis and taboot processions caused a major disturbance for everyday life of the city. As the processions gradually became more popular and increased in size, a tendency appears in official announcements for regulation of the festival of 'half-naked people like tiger, beating drums and tom-tom' ("Spirit of the Indian Press" Jan 25, 1845: 64; see figure 2). The taboot procession, i.e. the main procession, was carried throughout certain routes towards a seafront only on Ashura day (see Masoudi Nejad 2015, 94–96). However, the tolis processions went to any part of the city. Therefore by the late 1860s, there was a significant drive to limit the tolis processions within the native town and keep them out of the Fort, which was the European and administrative part of the city. The first Muharram regulation was announced by the Brigadier General Commander of the city in 1871 that "banned entering of taboots into the Fort" ("The Mohurram in Bombay" Mar 31, 1871: 3). This spatial regulation was aimed at keeping "public peace" in the Fort during the ritual. The regulation was not limiting the ritual, but excluding the Fort from the ritual arena.

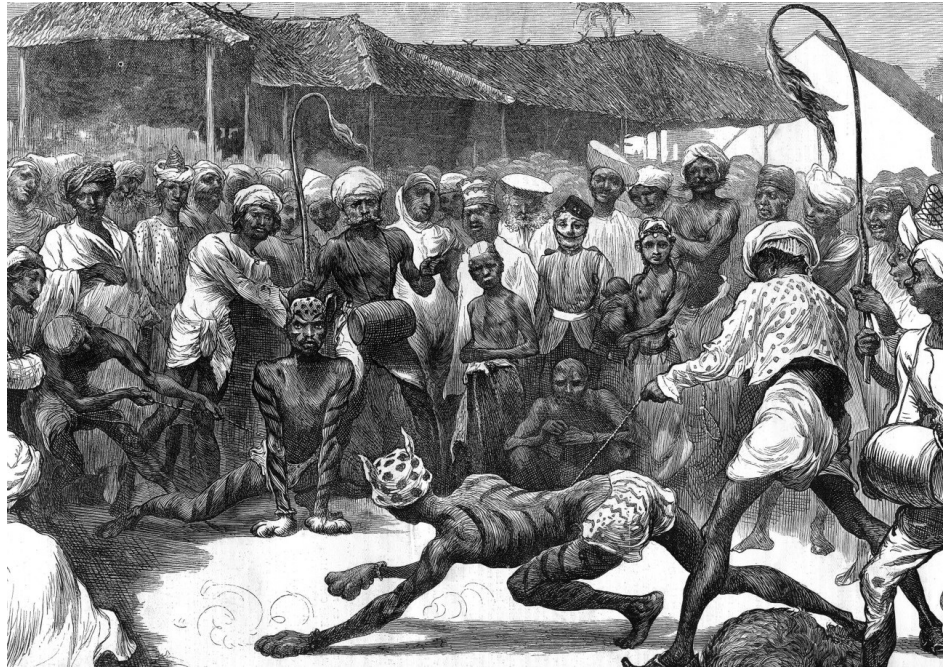


Figure 2: Human Tigers at the Muharram Festival, street performers in a wood engraving.⁹

The social margin of Muharram ritual

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The Shi'i communities of Bombay during the mid-nineteenth century were comprised mainly of Iranians (often called Mughols), the Bohras, and the Khojas (Masoudi Nejad (2012)). The commemoration of Ashura during the 1870s and 1880s was clearly based on three segments: (1) the processions dominated by Sunni communities in which Hindus also participated, (2) the Shi'i majlis (mourning service session), that was particularly held in Iranian places and where the passion play also took place, and (3) Aga Khan's passion play and majlis at his residency. While the processions resembled a vibrant festival, the Shi'i communities' events exhibited their grief over the tragedy of Ashura. An article ("Spirit of the Indian Press" January 25, 1845: 64) describes an Iranian community's passion play in an open space adjacent to their mosque. This article shortly describes the play and explains that, in contrast to the taboot procession, the Iranian ritual is about grief. Another report vividly describes the passion play at an Iranian gathering in 1874:

On the morning of the rite of Muharram they resort to the open court of the Imambara [a religious community place dedicated to Shi'i rituals]. A Mulla [clergyman] reads the story of the martyrdom, and as he becomes eloquent the auditors beat their bared breasts and weep aloud, every now and then giving utterance to



cries of lamentation – "Wai! Wai Hussain Kush ta Shudl". A kind of ring is meanwhile cleared among the devotees for the passage of a procession, and then, amid intense excitement, three horses are led in. Little children, representing the children of Husain, with blood-stained cloths, are mounted on these horses, surrounded by a large number of mourners, wailing and chanting, and as the procession moves forward headed by six banners—among which is the green standard of Ali – the riders of the horses throw ashes over their heads. A figure borne on a bier, representing the decapitated body of Husain covered with blood and wounds, is brought in, from which broken arrows stick out, with a white dove hovering above it. The profoundest grief is now exhibited by spectators. ("The Mohurrum" February 20, 1874: 3A)

As mentioned, Sunni communities dominated the taboot and tolis processions and claimed the authority over the ritual. They even suppressed Iranians' street passion play, known as the horse procession, away from public streets through a legal campaign in the court (Masselos 1982, 51–2). Moreover the Khoja (followers of Aga Khan) were not allowed to carry their taboots beyond their private grounds ("The Mohurrum in Bombay" April 14, 1871: 3). The Bohra community, another ethnic Shi'i group, were also treated with hostility by Sunni communities, especially during Muharram commemoration. There are a large number of reports about tension between the Bohra community and the Memons, a Sunni community, during the 1870s ("Mohurrum Disturbances" March 20, 1872). In other words, the Shi'i communities were not the most influential social sector in the ritual; they were pushed to the social margins of the ritual. This social position was established during constant socio-religious and legal negotiations among the diverse ethnic communities (Masoudi Nejad 2012); this was part of a practice by which different communities constantly negotiated their position not only in the ritual, but also in the city.

In this landscape, tension between Sunni and Shi'a communities gradually built up in the city. In 1872, tensions sparked between the Memons and the Iranians and Bohras in a number of street fights in the Bhendi Bazaar area (e.g. "Mohurrum Disturbances" March 20, 1872: 2; "The Mohurrum" March 21, 1872: 3; "The Mohurrum" March 22, 1872: 2; "The Mohurrum Disturbances" March 23, 1872: 2; "The Mohurrum Disturbances" March 25, 1872: 3). It seems that the tension reappeared again in 1873; then all processions were banned in 1874. Souter, the Governor, announced:



[...] it has become necessary for the preservation of the public peace to prohibit all religious processions until the public tranquillity is restored. [...] No assemblies or procession is allowed, [...] and all licenses that have been granted are hereby cancelled ("Prohibition of Proclamation" Feb 18, 1874: 2).

The governor received some objections, however he imposed the order (Masoudi Nejad 2015, 93-4). Since the 1870s, the police regulations for Muharram were announced every year and the policing discourse gradually came to dominate the language of newspaper articles. Nonetheless, there are still enough articles or letters demonstrating that the negative language exaggerated the level of tension and violence during Muharram. For example, an article published in 1879 argued that the taboot procession passed peacefully in Bombay with "smaller number of casualty than happen in London at every Lord Mayor's Show" ("The Mohurram" Jan 1879, republished on Jan 6, 1979: 8). Although there was no serious tension during the late 1870s and 1880s,¹⁰ the primary interest of the police was to enforce the Muharram regulations, to keep the so-called public order. In doing so, the police started segregating communities from each other during Muharram. For example, the police were present in greater force near the assembly places of the Shi'i or Iranians sects in the native town for the purposes of rigidly excluding the Sunnis from those places ("The Mohurram" Jan 15, 1878: 2). The marginalisation policy was unfolded in other ways as well, when Hindus were excluded from the ritual.

Many reports describe the participation of Hindus of lower orders who acted as man-tigers, fools, and hordes that created a striking contrast between them and Muslim participants (Figure 2). Gradually, some letters and articles argued for excluding Hindus from the processions to keep this noisy ritual quiet. They usually argued that the most mischief was caused by "these classes of people who play the part of tigers, pretend [...] who] give the greatest amount of trouble both to our over-worked energetic police and the public" ("The Mohorrum Festival" Aug 27, 1889: 4; also see "Mohurram and and Gunputtee" Aug 31, 1889: 5).

The explosive growth of Bombay during the late nineteenth century generated a constant change in the socio-religious and political landscape of the city. The peaceful commemoration of Ashura during the 1880s ended with the riot of 1893, a riot between Hindus and Muslims that sparked during Muharram. The riot was the most serious riot of Bombay during the nineteenth century and it has been extensively documented by numerous official reports. Edwardes, who was the



Bombay Commissioner of Police, argued that the riot was a consequence of the Hindu nationalist movement led by the press owner, publicist and early Hindu nationalist Bal Gangadhar Tilak. Edwardes, the then Commissioner of Police, argued that the movement was initially anti-British, but Tilak widened his movement to be against Muslims as well (Edwardes 1923: 104-5). The 1893 riot did not interrupt the Muharram processions; however the riot caused a shift in the regulations. In 1895, the Commissioner of Police announced: 'The license will be granted to Mahomedans only' ("The Police and the Mohurram" June 25, 1895: 3), and refused to grant the license to the Hindus.¹¹

The 1912 Muharram regulation and its consequences

The fast-growing Bombay intensified the negotiation between the ever-increasing diverse groups. During the second half of the first decade of the twentieth century, tension gradually developed between some Sunni and Shi'i communities, especially in 1908. The Governor of Bombay initiated a conciliation committee that included 50 influential members of Muslim communities; this unique committee was able to control the tension during Muharram in 1909. Despite the successful initiative in 1909, the conciliation committee was not called in following years. Instead, Edwardes introduced new borders for the tolis processions in January 1910 (see Masoudi Nejad 2015, 97-98). He particularly wanted to close Doctor Street, the heart of the Bohra area, to the processions. The other mohollas (residential quarters) were angry at this policy and refused to bring out their taboots. Their alleged grievance was the fact "that the Bohras had been openly boasting that they had got Doctor Street closed and that they had won a victory over the Sunnis" ("Mohurram Riots" March 9, 1911: 7). Eventually, the regulation caused anger and a riot erupted; the police killed forty-two people in an attempt to control the riot.

The tension between different socio-ethnic groups during Muharram was mostly natural, not out of control, and it can be seen as a part of urban negotiation. As Durkheim argued, one of the primary functions of rituals is to channel and control social tension (Durkheim 1965; also Bell 1992: 171-81). However the harsh imposition of official regulations forced the engagement of more police forces with the Muharram commemoration, which often inflamed tensions and brought on rioting; this is evident in the case of the 1909 incidents. While the tension between the Memons and the Bohras caused few casualties,



the engagement of the police force triggered a riot that was only controlled when the police force killed over forty people. Generally, the Muharram regulations were imposed without any negotiation that caused or triggered serious violence in the city. Nonetheless, the imposed policies can be seen as a form of negotiation by which the colonial authority fulfilled their absolute power over their subjects.

Prior to the Muharram of 1912, Edwardes introduced yet another regulation. This regulation included a long list of conditions including that the number of persons accompanying a procession should not exceed 30; all *tolis* processions were totally prohibited; and "the lifting and circulation of tabuts and tazias on tenth night shall be strictly confined to the limits of the respective mohollas in which each tabut or tazia is standing" ("The Bombay Muharram" Oct 23, 1911: 7). There were objections against the new regulations. For example, in a long letter Badruddin Abdulla Koor argued that the new regulation had a number of conditions which were "undesirable and unworkable" such as the limitation of 30 people for a procession in a city like Bombay ("Mohurram in Bombay" Oct 22, 1913: 4). Despite all campaigns against the regulation, it was imposed. While the 1912 regulation did not officially ban the processions, nobody could meet its long list of conditions and people refused to apply for licenses.

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The day after the Ashura of 1912, a short report in Times of India narrates that "Friday was the last day of the Mohurram festival and it passed off in Bombay without any hitch whatsoever. No tabut procession took place, as there was no tabut to be taken out so far as the Mahomedan [Muslims] localities of native town were concerned" ("Mohurram in Bombay" Dec 21, 1912: 9). Generally, all reports indicate that the commemoration was limited to the religious service sessions (*majlises*) in Shi'i-Muslim places. The regulation (1912) did not officially prohibit the processions, but the *tolis* and *taboot* processions actually stopped for good in the south of Bombay. The situation was such that even some reports later assumed the ritual was outlawed (e.g. the report that is quoted at the beginning of this paper). Although the Muharram commemoration has constantly changed over the last two centuries, the most important changes have unfolded after 1912. These changes are demonstrated by two important cases: the Bandra processions, a suburb of Bombay, and the revival of the procession as a Shi'i ritual in the old city of Bombay.



Bandra, a refuge for the Muharram procession

Bandra is positioned in the north of the old city of Bombay at Mahim Bay; it was officially outside of Bombay and not under the administration of the Bombay governor. Bandra had its own municipality until 1950, when the jurisdiction of the Bombay Municipal Corporation was extended to the suburbs ("Bombay Municipal Corporation Jurisdiction Extended" Mar 23, 1950: 9). This area was initially a Christian locality until some Muslims, including the Khojas and the Iranians (the Mughols) settled there in the early twentieth century. The Khoja Ithna-Asharis Jamme Masjid built in 1901 in Bandra highlights the background of this Shi'i community in Bandra.

There are reports (e.g. "The Mohurram Disturbance at Bandra" June 2, 1898: 5; "The Taboot Disturb at Bandra." June 25, 1898: 5) indicating that Muharram was observed in Bandra since the late nineteenth century. The TOI reported that four licenses had been permitted to erect taboots that were taken in processions, one of which was a procession of about five hundred Muslims through Navpada Street ("The Mohurram Disturbance at Bandra" June 2, 1898: 5). When the Muharram processions were pushed out of Bombay, Bandra gradually became the main place for the ritual, which attracted large crowds of Muslims in the early 1920s ("A Quiet Muharram Celebration in Bombay" Aug 25, 1923: 13). The first photograph of a crowded Muharram procession in Bandra was published in 1926 ("Scenes at Bombay and Poona" Jul 24, 1926: 16). The caption of another photo published in 1929 reads:

Although the Taboo procession, that is one of the most impressive features of the great Mahomedan festival of Mohurram, is forbidden in the City of Bombay owing to the violent disturbances that in variably marred the peace of Bombay when it was allowed in former years, the prohibition does not extend to Bandra, one of the city's suburbs, where is held annually. Thousands participate in the processions at Bandra, which are viewed by crowds Hindus and Christians. The picture shows a procession in Bandra on Wednesday, taking a 'taboot ' for immersion ("Taboot Procession in a Bombay Suburb" Jun 21, 1929: 10).

There were three major processions in Bandra in the 1930s ("Bandra Muharram Precautions" April 02, 1936) and 'every suburban train leaving for Bandra carried crowds of devotees from the City' ("Moharram in Bombay" March 03, 1939: 5). Since 1933 there was also a procession in Andhari, another Muslim locality in the suburb of Bombay ("Moharram in Bombay" May 6, 1933: 12; "Peaceful at



Bandra" April 16, 1935: 6). The scale of the procession in Bandra gradually led to traffic concerns in the Mahim area that was/ is an immediate major traffic junction next to the Bandra area. In the early 1940s, even "special arrangements were made by the police for regulating the traffic at Mahim" during Muharram ("Moharram in Bombay" January 18, 1943: 4).

Fast growing cities like Bombay have always produced suburbs and urban-villages; however, it is a particularly interesting phenomenon to see suburbs function as a ritual refugee. Here, the suburb appeared as part of a spatial mechanism to preserve the Muharram procession, until the ritual was gradually revived in Bombay. As has been extensively discussed elsewhere (Masoudi Nejad 2012, 111-13; 2015: 101-4), the Iranians gradually established a short procession in Dongri, the old Shi'i Muslim quarter of Bombay, during the 1940s. This procession was a silent procession between the locations where the Iranians' Muharram service sessions were held. Then the silent procession was turned into a more typical procession. Dr. Jafar Najafi and Sayyed Safar-Ali Husseini have extensively discussed the process of reviving the procession in Dongri in several interview sessions held during 2010-2011 (Masoudi Nejad 2015, 101-2). One of the reasons that the Iranian community was able to revive the procession in public spaces was due to the fact that they were a small social group whose manifestations in public spaces were well-tolerated by the colonial authorities. Or, in Safar-Ali's words, "the British were nice to the Iranians" (S. Safar-Ali Hussini, interviewed April 2010, Mumbai).

The short Iranian procession has been a core around which Muharram processions were revived and expanded again in the old city of Bombay, especially during the 1960s and 1970s. Although the Iranians re-initiated the procession in Dongri, it was new Ithna-Ashari Shi'i immigrants who expanded Muharram processions around the Iranian places. These new Shi'i groups mainly came to Bombay in the 1960s from Lakhnau in Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar. The procession of Ashura day, i.e. the taboot procession, was an inter-community festival directed toward seafronts in the eighteenth century. However, the revived procession in the afternoon of Ashura day goes toward Rahmetabad Cemetery in Mazgan and it is practised as a Shi'i ritual. In fact, this applies not only to the procession of Ashura day, as all other processions held today in the south of Mumbai are Shi'i rituals. Therefore, the ritual has not only been revived, but also socially reinvented.



Figure 3: The Bohras' Muharram:
Bohra Mohalla, Bendhi Bazaar, Mumbai,
December 2010. © Author



The process of reviving the Muharram processions not only brought back the processions from the margins of the city, i.e. Bandra, to the heart of the city, but also fulfils the social position of the Iranians among the Shi'i communities of Bombay. As discussed, the Iranian 'Moghol' community, was at the social margins of Muharram rituals until the early twentieth century. However, as this small community was able to act as the mediator to re-establish the processions, they are no longer at the social margins of the ritual. Today they are considered to be a rather important community in the Muharram ritual. In fact, re-invention of the Muharram ritual in the old city of Bombay/Mumbai as a Shi'i event has changed the social position of all Shi'i communities in the city, including the Bohras, as these small communities now claim the heart of this megacity during Muharram time. Therefore, the revived Muharram processions have changed the social position of the Shi'i communities, since they are on the frontlines of negotiation with other communities and authorities to organise the commemoration of the Ashura tragedy in public spaces.

Conclusion

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The commemoration of the Ashura tragedy is a religious practice; however, the dynamics of this observance have a great deal to do with the socio-political dynamics of the city. The rituals have created a space for an intensive social negotiation and tension among the ever-increasing number of segments of the complex urban society of Bombay/Mumbai. Throughout the last two centuries, not only the diverse ethno-religious groups have negotiated their social position through the ritual, but also the colonial authorities were actively fulfilling their authority by regulating the ritual. As the Muharram commemoration has a great deal to do with 'urban negotiation', it should be identified as an 'urban ritual' rather than just a 'religious ritual'.

Generally, the announced regulations by colonial authorities were aimed at maintaining the so-called public peace through regulating the territory of ritual and which social groups who would be permitted to practise the ritual. In other words, the colonial authorities used social and spatial techniques to maintain their governance over public spaces and the city. Most of the announced regulations can be understood as a way of negotiation between colonial authorities and local people (or their subjects). However, the 1912 regulation abolished any form of negotiation; rather it imposed the absolute power of a Bombay Police



that was either not willing or able to negotiate with people. This can be interpreted as the consequence of what Kidambi highlights: the institutional weaknesses of the police and an obtrusive presence of police in the social relations of the street and the urban neighbourhoods since the 1900s (Kidambi 2004: 3). The 1912 regulation not only targeted a religious-cultural practice claimed as a threat to public order, but more fundamentally it challenged the possibility of 'urban negotiation'.

Over time, the police regulations and social negotiations together reduced the diversity of social groups engaged in the ritual. The social centre and periphery of the ritual have constantly changed. Sunni communities had been at the forefront of negotiation with colonial authorities to organise the Muharram rituals in the nineteenth century. When they lost ground and the ritual was suppressed out of public spaces, it was the marginalised Shi'i communities who preserved and then revived the ritual in the old city of Bombay. As discussed elsewhere, "throughout the past two centuries, the socio-religious groups at the heart of these Muharram events have constantly changed: they were the Konkonis, then the Memons, then the Iranians, and nowadays the Shi'as from UP" (Masoudi Nejad 2015: 105).

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As reviewed, the 'spatial margin of the city' and 'the social margin of the ritual' were two resources by which urban communities maintained their capability for 'urban negotiation' against an imposed force that denied their right to the city. The urban margin of Bombay, i.e. Bandra, was a spatial refuge that helped to preserve the ritual until the Iranian community, previously at the social margins of the ritual, revived it. As discussed in the beginning of this paper, cultural resilience is not a mechanism to preserve the pre-existing form of a ritual. In fact, "the [Muharram] ritual not only has been part of the process of urbanism in an ever-changing city but has also itself metamorphosed over time" (ibid.). Cultural resilience appears as a mechanism to maintain 'urban negotiation' through a socio-cultural practice. In other words, the cultural reliance mechanism is aimed at preserving the function of an urban ritual, not the pre-existing form of a religious ritual.

Endnotes

¹ This paper was written when I was an Alexander von Humboldt Fellow at the Centre of Modern Oriental Studies (ZMO, Berlin). However, it is the result of my research project at the Max Planck Institute (MPI-MMG, Göttingen).



² Bombay was renamed Mumbai in the 1990s; I mainly refer to the city as Bombay as the discussion is about subjects and events prior to the 90s.

³ Hill, Edward, Howard Wial & Harold Wolman. 2008. Exploring Regional Economic Resilience. 2008, 04. Berkeley, Ca: Working Paper, Institute of Urban and Regional Development. <http://www.econstor.eu/handle/10419/59420> [retrieved 18.10.2015].

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⁴ For example, see Bhandari et al. (2011) who investigate how rituals contribute to the social capacity of a community to cope with natural disasters, earthquakes in their case, in order to revive a normal social life.

⁵ The publications about Muharram in the TOI during the nineteenth century were mainly the governmental or police reports and regulations. They are totally different from articles on the same subject that are published nowadays in the TOI.

⁶ As the Muharram rituals were developed in different linguistic territories, some terms or names may have different meanings across the geography of the ritual. The Arabic term *ta'zyeh* literally means mourning, so it refers to the mourning ceremonies among Arab-speaking communities. In Iran, *ta'zyeh* refers to the passion play of Ashura by which a part of the Karbala tragedy is performed. However, in this case, the *ta'zyeh* refers to the symbolic Hussein's dome.

⁷ A wood engraving by Émile Bayard from a sketch by M. Louis Rousselet, from 'Le tour du monde'. (Ref: www.columbia.edu, the image is in public domain).

⁸ This is based on a large number of reports and articles published in the *Times of India* (TOI) during the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. For example TOI reported: 'Each street has its own band ready to parade the various quarters of the city and fight with the bands of rival streets. [... this] the rivalry between the various "mohollas" recalls the free-fighting which used once to take place between the various quarters of Gujarat and Kathiawar towns during the Holi festival' (TOI, Feb 17, 1908: 6).

⁹ Reference: The Graphic, 1872. The image is in public domain.

¹⁰ As the commemoration during the late 1870s-1880s was relatively free from serious violence, the author of an article who called the Muharram ritual 'the noisiest Indian festival' also mentioned: 'Happily we are free from the unseemly riot between Hindoos and Mohamedans [Muslims], which so frequently occur in the Northern districts...' ('The Mohurram' Oct 11, 1886: 3).

¹¹ The rise of Hindu nationalism and new regulations sharply reduced the number of granted licenses (based on police reports published in TOI July 4, 1895: 5 and TOI, June 12, 1897: 3), indicating the participation scale of the Hindus in the ritual.

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