This essay examines the ways in which the annual Muharram rituals celebrated in Leh Township have functioned in recent years to mediate communal relations among the Shia, Sunni, and Buddhist populations of the region. I draw on personal observations from fieldwork done in Leh during the Muharram seasons of 1995 through 1997, recording what I witnessed and describing the interviews I had with Leh's residents from among both the Muslim and non-Muslim populations. In particular I investigate how communal tensions (most notably the 'Social Boycott' of 1989-92 and its aftermath) have affected Leh's Muharram observances.

The Shia Muslims of Leh township constitute a minority within a minority. Overall the majority of Leh's population is Buddhist; most of the town's Muslims are Sunni, and the most conspicuous Muslim monument in Leh is the Sunni Jami Masjid that dominates the Main Bazaar. Local Shia informants interviewed estimate there to be no more than 120 Shia households in Leh township, in comparison with a population of 'over 300' Sunni and 'over 1,000' Buddhist families.¹

¹ These estimates were given me by officers of the Anjuman-e Imamia during my visit to Leh in May 1997. For their hospitality and patient help I thank the following organisations and individuals: the members of the Anjuman-e Imamia and Imamia Youth Federation Leh, especially Ghulam Haider, Shaikh Mirza Husain, and Akbar Ali; the members of the Anjuman-e Mu'in-e Islam, especially Muhammad Shafi Vakil and Nasir Muhammad; Abd al-Ghani Sheikh of the International Association for Ladakhi Studies; Tashi Rabgias of the Ladakh Ecological Development Group; Fidai Husain, proprietor of the Yak Tail Hotel; and Shaikh Ghulam Hadi of the Phyang Matam Serai. I also thank the American Philosophical Society and Loyola University of Chicago, both of which generously awarded me research grants that made possible my work in Ladakh.

The battle of Karbala

To understand today's Muharram observances in Ladakh it is necessary to review the historical events associated with the battle of Karbala. In the year AD 680 Husain ibn Ali, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and son of the fourth caliph Ali ibn Abi Talib, engaged in a struggle to wrest the caliphate from Yazid ibn Mu'awiya (reigned 680-683). For years the Shi'at Ali ('partisans/supporters of Ali,' more simply known as the Shia) had claimed that political power in the Islamic community should remain in the immediate family of the Prophet, that is, with the offspring of the Prophet's daughter Fatima and her husband Ali. Claiming that Yazid's family had usurped power, the Shias of Kufa in southern Iraq sent messengers to Husain's residence in Arabia, offering to support him if he would come to Kufa and lead a rebellion against Damascus (where Yazid had his capital). Accepting the Shias' offer, Husain set out for Kufa but en route was besieged by soldiers loyal to Yazid at a site in the Iraqi desert known as Karbala. Together with a handful of bodyguards and the women and children of his household, Husain withstood the enemy forces for several days, all the while suffering torments of thirst under the desert sun.

The siege took place during the initial days of the month of Muharram; finally, on Ashura, the tenth of Muharram, Husain allowed himself to be killed in combat rather than surrender or acknowledge Yazid's caliphate. The surviving women and children of his family were subjected to humiliations...
by their captors and taken as prisoners to Yazid’s court in Damascus. Sunni and Shia alike agree on the sequence of events outlined above. More controversial is the interpretation to which these events have been subjected. In brief, Shia theology can be said to emphasise the following aspects of Karbala: the necessity of Husain’s death as part of the divine economy of salvation; foreknowledge concerning Karbala on the part of Ahl-e bayt (the members of the family of the Prophet); Husain’s voluntary acquiescence in his own death; God’s granting to Husain of the gift of intercession on behalf of sinners, as a reward for his sufferings at Karbala; and the possibility of access to this intercessory grace by those who remember the suffering of the Karbala Martyrs today.

Much of this theology was articulated by the seventeenth-century Shia jurist Muhammad Bagir al-Majlisi (d. 1698). In his multi-volume work Bihar al-anwar (The Oceans of Lights), Majlisi emphasised the predestinarian quality of the events at Karbala. In a chapter entitled ‘The ways in which God informed His prophets of the forthcoming martyrdom of Husain,’ Majlisi relates a hadith to the effect that Umm Salamah, the Prophet Muhammad’s wife, entered her husband’s quarters one day to find him weeping and clasping his infant grandson Husain to his breast. Alarmed, Umm Salamah sought the reason for his distress; and her husband replied that he had just been visited by the angel Gabriel, who had announced to him the future martyrdom of Husain. Umm Salamah suggested, ‘O Prophet of God, ask Him to lift this fate from Husain’. Muhammad replied:

I have already done so. But God has revealed to me that Husain will attain to a spiritual rank never reached by any other created being. Furthermore, He will have a shi’a, a band of followers, who will attach themselves to him in devotion, and who will therefore benefit from his intercession on their behalf. In addition, the Mahdi will be one of his descendants. Blessings on whoever is one of the friends of Husain! His shi’a, his followers, as God is my witness, will be the triumphant ones on the day of Resurrection. (Majlisi 1965: 44/225)

This passage implies that the tragedy of Karbala was part of God’s plan, that Husain’s death was necessary as the means whereby the Islamic community might obtain the benefit of intercession. Majlisi explores this point further in another chapter, ‘What God granted Husain as a reward for his martyrdom’:

God most exalted, as a reward to Husain in exchange for his violent death, granted him that the line of Imams would spring from his descendants, that cures and healing would take place at his tomb, and that prayers offered at his grave would be listened to and answered. (1965: 44/221)

This Shia theodicy argued for the necessity of Karbala: the sorrows undergone by Ahl-e bayt, especially Husain and his descendants the Imams, enabled them to acquire intercessory powers which may be exercised on Judgment Day on behalf of the community of the faithful. Participants gain access to this intercession through the practice of liturgical remembrance during the Muharram season. This act of commemoration focuses on lamentation for the Karbala Martyrs, a lamentation which is to be expressed in the most active physical manner possible: the shedding of tears, groans and loud weeping, repeated breast-beating and other more extreme forms of self-mortification. These lamentation actions are known collectively as matam, ‘gestures of mourning’, and are widely accepted by Shiias as essential to any Muharram liturgy. The sixteenth-century Qur’an commentator Wa’iz al-Kashifi, in the introduction to his Persian-language devotional work Rawdat al-shuhada’ (‘The Garden of the Martyrs’) explains as follows the importance of physically manifested emotional involvement in the communal remembrance of Husain:

Weeping as one performs gestures of mourning pleases God and is the means by which one attains the Gardens of Eternity. As it has been stated in various writings: ‘Paradise is awarded to anyone who weeps for Husain or who laments in company with those who weep for Husain’...

Paradise is awarded: for the following reason, that every year, when the month of Muharram comes, a multitude of the lovers of the Household of the Prophet (jam’i as muhibban-e Ahl-e bayt) renew and make fresh the tragedy of the Martyrs, and they bewail the offspring of the Lord of Prophecy. They enflame their hearts with the fire of sorrowful regret; their eyes stream with tears from the overwhelming extent of their loss. (1979: 12)

This passage reflects a recurrent motif in Shia devotional writings: the promise of the ‘Gardens of Eternity’ in exchange for the practice of communal lamentation in remembrance of the Martyrs. Especially important to note from Kashifi’s text are the words muhibban-e Ahl-e bayt: ‘lovers of the Household of the Prophet.’ Kashifi’s sixteenth-century phrase, I would argue, is vital to an understanding of how Shiasm has differentiated itself from other Islamic denominations: Shia communities have tended to understand
themselves as a people that excels beyond all others in its love for the Prophet’s family and for the descendants of Fatima and Ali. I would also argue that the practice of matam as the means par excellence of expressing this love is very relevant for understanding Shia self-definition in Ladakh today. I will return to this point below.

Suni critics of matam have frequently derided this practice as bid’ah: an innovation for which no warrant exists in either the Qur’an or the hadith describing the actions and sayings of the Prophet. But Shia apologists defend the practice by citing precedents from antiquity. Contemporary Shia scholars such as Ghulam Husain Najafi quote hadith-collections such as Sahih Bukhari, which are acceptable to Sunnis, in an attempt to demonstrate the orthodox quality of matam. Among the traditions cited by Najafi are the following: Adam and Eve lamented their murdered son Abel ‘until (as it is said) there flowed forth from their tears what amounted to a river’; in fact, so great was Adam’s grief that he shed his own blood and slapped his thigh repeatedly (matam-practices performed today by South Asian Shias). The prophet Jacob displayed grief for Joseph; and Joseph, while imprisoned in Egypt, struck himself in anguish when he learned from the angel Gabriel of his father’s sorrow. The Prophet Muhammad, gifted with foreknowledge, wept anticipatory tears when he heard of his grandson’s forthcoming martyrdom; and the Prophet’s wife Ayesha wailed extravagantly when her husband died. The point of such claims is to establish that there exists a sunnah (exemplary practice dating from antiquity) for matam: prophets and other figures from sacred history who are venerated by Sunni and Shia alike, so the argument goes, practiced matam in the past upon learning of the death of those they loved. So it is only natural that those Muslims who love Husain should practice matam yearly on the anniversary of his death.

One final point is worth noting here with regard to the Karbala story and the practice of matam. This concerns Zuljenah (Arabic Dhu’l Janah, ‘the Winged One’), the horse ridden into battle by the Imam Husain. Both Majlisi and Kashifi record traditions to the effect that this horse served as a messenger announcing his death. When the Imam fell on the battlefield, Zuljenah, wounded and blood-stained with the blood of its master, galloped to the encampment of the Imam’s family. When the women saw the riderless horse approach, they knew at once that Husain had died, and they began to weep. Zuljenah, too, was grief-stricken at its master’s death: ‘Its head was downcast,’ states Kashifi, ‘and teardrops fell from its eyes...’ Abu al-Mu’ayyad al-Khwarizmi has recorded a tradition to the effect that this horse beat its head against the earth (in grief) so many times that it died.’ As will be seen in the following discussion, the figure of Zuljenah is of central importance in Leh township’s annual Muharram procession.

Horse of Karbala: a description of the Zuljenah procession in Leh township

Before my first visit to Leh in 1995 I had heard about Muslim-Buddhist tensions in Ladakh and the ‘Social Boycott’ organised by the Ladakh Buddhist Association. Until 1989 outside observers characterised Buddhist-Muslim interactions as harmonious; Janet Rizvi, for example, in her 1983 study of Ladakhi society and culture, stated that ‘with a very few exceptions, communal feeling as experienced often so bitterly in other parts of India, has so far been conspicuous by its absence’. But students of Ladakh are also aware of changes in Ladakhi society over the last twenty years and of the eruption of communal violence between Muslims and Buddhists in Leh in 1989, with continuing tension since then.

The origin of Leh’s communal problems can be traced back as far as the 1830s, when the independent Buddhist kingdom of Ladakh was conquered by the Dogra forces of the Raja of Jammu. Subsequently, during the predominance of the British Raj, Ladakh was made part of the ‘native state’ of Jammu and Kashmir. As Barbara Crossette has pointed out, this has meant that Ladakhi Buddhists have come to be a ‘minority within a minority,’ ruled from Muslim-majority Srinagar, which in turn is administered by Hindu-majority Delhi.

Martijn van Beek and Kristoffer Bertelsen have described the process whereby Ladakhi aspirations for autonomy from Jammu and Kashmir came to be communalised, with the implicit equation: Ladakhi equals Buddhist, thereby leaving out of consideration long-term Muslim residents of Ladakh. According to Crossette and Indian authors Shridhar Kaul and H.N. Kaul, Buddhist resentment against Muslims focused on Kashmiri Muslim new-
comers, entrepreneurs who have played a large role in Leh's tourist industries since the region was first opened to tourism in 1974. In turn, some Buddhists at least have viewed Leh's Muslims as cat's-paws of agent provocateur-fundamentalism operating out of Srinagar.

Matters came to a head in July 1989, when communal riots erupted in Leh. Violence lasted only a month; more long-lasting was a 'Social Boycott' that effectively terminated business and social relations between Leh's Muslims and Buddhists. The boycott lasted until November 1992, when a compromise agreement was reached whereby Muslims and Buddhists agreed to work together to seek the formation of a Leh Autonomous Hill District Council.10

Given this background of lingering communal tension, I wasn't sure what I'd encounter when I first went to Leh to study its Muharram observances. I visited Leh three times, during the Muharram season in 1995, 1996, and 1997. My initial response was very positive; anticipating the worst, I was relieved to see positive interactions among the various communities. Shias and Sunnis each had roles to play in the public procession; and even Buddhists were invited (as will be described below) to take part in at least one aspect of the Ashura ritual. In the first interviews I conducted, both Buddhists and Muslims seemed careful to speak politely of each other. As I became closer to some informants, however, and made friends with them, they in turn became franker with me; and I was able to sense a disjunction between public discourse and private confession in the remarks directed to me. In what follows I will try to analyse this disjunction in terms of Leh's communal reconciliation: for as I understand it this ritual mediates tensions not only between Muslims and Buddhists but also within the town's Muslim population, between Shias and Sunnis. The ritual is performed in such a way that a certain degree of communal reconciliation can be displayed while distinctions among the communities (most notably between Shias and Sunnis) can be maintained and highlighted. In the following paragraphs I will first describe the order of events in Leh's Ashura procession (focusing on the 1997 celebration) and then analyse the significance of what I witnessed.

On the ninth of Muharram some half-dozen men drive from Leh to the nearby village of Chushot to bring a horse that has been designated as the shabih ('likeness' or 'image') of Zuljenah.11 The same horse is used every year in Leh's Ashura procession. Throughout the rest of the year this horse, a white Zanskari stallion, is free from work; no harness ever touches it; I was told: it has been set aside to represent Zuljenah. The horse grazes where it likes and wanders unhindered from field to field. Its maintenance is provided by a waqf (charitable trust) established by the Anjuman-e Imamia, Leh's principal Shia organisation. In 1997 the group that drove to Chushot included Fidai Husain (proprietor of the Yak Tail Hotel on Fort Road near the centre of Leh), whose family has been involved for some years with the procession, Fidai's nephew Amjad Khan, who was to act as mujavir (the 'attendant' who leads Zuljenah by its bridle in the procession), and Ghulam Abbas, an employee at the Government Animal Husbandry Project in Chamspa and incidentally a skilled polo player, who saw to the horse's well-being.

In Chushot the stallion was loaded onto a truck belonging to Fidai Husain and then driven to a site in Shey on the banks of the Indus. Here the horse was led into the river and subjected to a very thorough soap-and-cold-water bath. As he washed the animal Ghulam Abbas murmured a simple Arabic invocation, 'In the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful.' The men described this bath as ghusl, the term used in Islam to describe ritual ablution; they explained to me that this ghusl was necessary because Zuljenah would be bearing the Word of God in the next day's procession.

From the river the truck was driven back to Leh, and the horse was stabled for the night in the courtyard of the Yak Tail Hotel. At nine o'clock on the morning of Ashura, the same group of men returned to the hotel. Amjad lit incense sticks and stuck them in the ground before the horse; then he groomed the horse carefully, tied a votive cloth around its neck, and fitted a finely-stitched embroidered halter over its head. A mixed group of hotel employees — Muslims, Ladakhi Buddhists, and Nepali Hindus — stood about and watched with interest, commenting on the proceedings. Amjad gripped the halter, ready to lead the horse away. At that moment, Nargiss, the elderly mother of the hotel proprietor, pushed through the onlookers, cried out in an anguished wail, and buried her face against the horse's neck. She clung to the horse a moment, stepped back, sprayed it with perfume from a bottle, then wailed again. ('It's the tradition', Fidai Husain


11. This concept of shabih-e Zuljenah ('the likeness of Zuljenah') with regard to annual Muharram observances is discussed by Najafi (1976: 194-95), who offers a carefully articulated argument, backed by Qur'anic citations, in support of the veneration of Zuljenah.
said to me later, ‘for the women of the house to cry when Zuljenah goes out.’ A change had been effected: until then bystanders had been patting the animal playfully, joking with each other, asking me to take photos of themselves with the horse. With the mother’s cry, everyone grew quiet: a kind of consecration had occurred. The horse was now to serve as the likeness of Imam Husain’s riderless mount.

From the Yak Tail Amjad led Zuljenah along Old Fort Road and then through the back streets of the Zangsty Quarter to the Balti Masjid or principal Shia mosque. Here, in a small walled yard beside the mosque, men of the Anjuman-e Imamia readied the horse for the procession. First they streaked its body and mane with red paint, to suggest the wounds inflicted on both Zuljenah and its rider. Then they caparisoned the stallion: a saddle-cloth of Chinese silk; a saddle to which were attached the Imam’s accoutrements: turban, shield, and sword; and a sandalwood rihl or Qur’an-stand, atop which was carefully positioned a copy of the Qur’an, opened to the first page of surat Ya-Sin (chapter 36). Once the stallion had been fully adorned, the men began chanting a nauha (Muharram lamentation-poem) to the accompaniment of hath ka matam (repetitive rhythmic striking of the chest with one’s open hand). Then Zuljenah was led from the mosque to join the crowds awaiting it in the street; now the Ashura procession could begin. The procession was organised by various anjumans, religious associations that were grouped according to place of origin. I will describe these in some detail below.

The route followed by this procession is as follows: from the Balti Masjid to the Jami Masjid via the paved road that leads past the State Bank of India; then from the Jami Masjid down the Main Bazaar to the Shia Matam Serai. Thus the route includes both Sunni and Shia religious sites.

I was particularly impressed to see the procession halt below the Jami Masjid’s main staircase. Zuljenah waited at the foot of the stairs; atop the stairs stood Muhammad Umar, maulvi of this Sunni mosque, beside Shaikh Mirza Husain, prayer-leader of Leh’s Shia community. With them stood officers of the Anjuman-e Imamia and the town’s primary Sunni organisation, the Anjuman-e Mu’in-e Islam (AMI). For nearly thirty minutes Shaikh Mirza addressed the crowd; then the procession headed down the Main Bazaar. At this point one additional group joined the procession: a gathering of young men, all of them Sunnis, I later learned, who had been waiting in front of the Jami Masjid. The order of the procession, then, as it left the Sunni mosque for the final stage of its route through the Main Bazaar, was as follows:

1) Some forty to fifty Sunnis, many of whom were AMI members, at the very head of the procession. They did not perform matam or sing nauhas; instead, at irregular intervals they shouted religious slogans such as Allahu akbar (‘God is great’) and La ilah illa Allah (‘There is no god save Allah’).

2) Boys of the Imamia Mission School, Chushot. Like the other Shia groups, they carried a banner identifying them. Dressed in school uniforms and arranged in columns, they slapped themselves energetically and sang Muharram chants in an impressively tuneful manner. The oldest of them looked to be all of twelve years in age. Later I learned that the Imamia Mission School has on its faculty two Shia maulvis responsible for islamiyat, religious instruction that includes the teaching of nauhas in two languages, Urdu and Balti.

3) The Imamia Youth Federation Leh. This subdivision of the Anjuman-e Imamia comprises men ranging in age from their late teens to their early forties. The Youth Federation includes many of the most active organisers of the procession.

4) Zuljenah, led by its mujavirs and preceded by a dozen or so teenaged boys and young men. Virtually all the Shias in the procession performed matam; but while most participants limited themselves to bare-handed hath ka matam, the young men clustered immediately before the horse frantically scourged themselves in the action of zanjir-zani: striking the back or the forehead with blades attached to a long chain. It was clear that Zuljenah constituted the focal point of sacredness for the entire procession; and these chain-wielding boys had claimed for themselves the area immediately in front of the stallion, facing the horse as they struck themselves, leaving a trail of blood along the bazaar as they marched. Confronted with this tumult, the horse snorted and bucked at times; the attendants kept a firm grip on its halter.

5) Another group from Chushot, the Chushot Goma Association. Chushot, I was told, is one of the oldest and most established Shia localities in Leh District. There are two matam serais in Chushot, including a handsomely decorated shrine completed in 1994.

6) Javanan-e Phyang (‘Youths of Phyang Village’). As I watched, participants engaged in the kind of hath ka matam called Baltistani uslub (‘Balti style’): both hands strike the heart simultaneously, one hand atop the other in a forceful blow. Phyang has two active matam serais, the older of which is decorated...
with appliquéd cloth wall-hangings sewn in the Middle East and brought back from Iraq and Iran by Ladakhi Shia pilgrims who donate the hangings to Phyang’s shrine.

7) The Dasteh-ye Ansar-e Husaini (‘Group of Husaini Friends’), from the village of Thikse, which also has its own matam serai.

8) A third Shia association from Chushot, the so-called ‘Khomeini Dasteh.’

9) The Ittihad al-Muslimin-e Kargil (‘The Union of Muslims of Kargil’). This group is composed of Kargil Shias resident in Leh. Most of them are seasonal workers who come to Leh during the warmest months of the year in search of work. The group’s president is Akhund Mahdi, who told me that some three thousand Kargilis live in Leh, all of whom, he claimed, are members of the Ittihad. According to him, ninety per cent of these migrant workers are illiterate; they do manual labour, as roadworkers, masons, etc. The president is a business contractor who specialises in finding construction work for Kargilis. As head of the Ittihad, Akhund Mahdi arranges three religious celebrations a year: commemoration of the birth of the Imam Ali; Eed al-Ghadir (remembrance of the occasion when the Prophet announced Ali as his successor); and Muharram. He keeps order among the Kargilis during the Ashura march and in general coordinates the Ittihad’s activities with those of Leh’s Anjuman-e Imamia; he also mediates any problems that arise throughout the year between Kargilis and the townspeople of Leh. Thus as president of the Ittihad Akhund Mahdi combines social, business, and spiritual functions.

In surveying Leh’s Ashura procession as a whole, it should be noted that all the marchers are male. Women watch at some distance, whether from streetside or from rooftops lining the route. Women do have an active role, however, in at least one aspect of the Ashura procession, involving Zuljenah. During the march mothers bring their children (usually infants or toddlers) up to the stallion, to press the child against its flank or else pass the child under the horse’s belly. The women will at the same time offer money to Zuljenah’s attendants. Maulvis whom I asked used the term mannat manna (‘making a vow/promise’) to explain the practice: these women offer money and pray to the horse for their children’s health. The practice has generated criticism from non-Shia observers, a point to which I will return later.

I was very impressed by the active cooperative presence of a group of Sunni Muslims in the procession, a practice very different from Muharram observances in localities such as Lucknow or Hyderabad. Sunni participation extends to other areas as well: AMI officers whom I interviewed in 1996 claimed that they help with arrangements to spray rosewater over processionists and to provide first aid for wounded flagellants; and on Ashura the Kashmiri Art Dealers Association — all of whose members are said to be Sunni — sets up a sabil or refreshment stand of fruit juice and tea in the main bazaar for processionists (the tradition of the sabil is linked to the thirst of the Karbala Martyrs: by providing drinks to participants on Ashura, donors show that if they had been present at Karbala, they would have tried to ease the suffering of Husain and his followers). Sunni AMI members told me that they have cooperated with the Shia Anjuman-e Imamia in participating in the Muharram procession ‘fully, ever since the beginning, for the last thirty-five or forty years,’ that is, ever since Leh’s Shia community first began staging the procession in public. This assertion touches on a point of controversy to be discussed more fully below.

Buddhist participation in Leh’s Muharram activities also impressed me. When I first visited Ladakh in 1995 I was invited to a chhauta din ka majlis (a gathering held four nights after Ashura) in Leh’s matam serai. The evening began with a ‘funeral feast’ in honour of the Karbala Martyrs; among the guests were a half-dozen members of the Ladakh Buddhist Association. On Ashura many Buddhists — including a number of monks — line the street to observe the Zuljenah procession; and if they do not participate actively, at least they watch with a quiet solemnity appropriate to the occasion. And Anjuman-e Imamia members noted with approval that Buddhist families in Chushot allow Zuljenah to graze unhindered in their fields throughout the year.

Communal harmony and communal tensions in the Zuljenah procession

This impression of Leh’s Muharram rituals as the locus of communal harmony is accurate only up to a certain point. Over time I learned of tensions that surface during this period as well.

Within the Shia community this tension becomes focused in the issue of zanjiri-matam, the shedding of one’s own blood through the use of knives or chains. Even the most casual observer of the Ashura procession will note this aspect of the ritual: for the teenagers and young men who perform zanjiri-matam are very conspicuous. They take up a great deal of space immediately in front of Husain’s horse, which is the focal point of attention for the crowds on Ashura; they leave a trail of blood and dripping bandages along
the street; and they follow the horse into the matam serai at the end of the procession, where they continue to strike themselves, spilling blood onto the floor of the shrine in the process. Every year some of these flagellants injure themselves so badly as to require hospitalisation or other medical treatment; many times I’ve seen older men try — at the risk of harm to themselves — to restrain flail-swinging teenagers who have gotten carried away by religious enthusiasm. A number of the Shias I interviewed, including maulvis, educated lay-people, and older persons in their fifties and sixties, showed some embarrassment when I questioned them on the topic of zanjir-matam. Their objections to the practice can be summarised as follows:

a) The practice involves both immodesty and loss of self-control, which violate the canon of deportment and public behavior so important in Islam.

b) Self-flagellation, with its attendant risk of serious injury, shows a lack of proper respect for the body.

c) The practice is irrational, illogical: ‘If someone is so eager to shed his blood,’ as one Shia critic told me, ‘he should do something useful with it, donate a transfusion to a blood bank’.

d) Zanjir-zani involves a misplaced use of one’s energy. Instead of devoting themselves to self-scourging, flagellants should emphasise the ‘Five Pillars’ (the testimony of faith, fasting, alms-giving, ritual prayer, and pilgrimage to Mecca), respectable behaviour approved of by all Muslims.

e) Flowing blood is normally najis (ritually polluting); many flagellants are said to be careless about performing prayer and entering shrines while blood-stained.

f) Spilling one’s blood in public gives onlookers a bad impression of Islam in general and Shiism in particular.

In support of this last argument, maulvis I interviewed in Leh, Thikse, and Kargil alike all cited a fatwa issued by Sayyid Ali Khamenei, spiritual leader of the Iranian Islamic Republic. In a pronouncement dated 7 Muharram 1415 (AD 1994), he declared ‘unlawful and forbidden’ acts of matam performed in public involving the use of weapons to shed one’s blood. Ayatollah Khamenei’s primary concern was the harm that might befall the image of Shia Islam if outsiders saw Muharram mourners scourging themselves:

If the action of striking oneself with a weapon were actually carried out in private homes behind closed doors, then the harm coming from support for this practice would be solely a question of bodily injury. But when this action takes place before witnesses and in front of television cameras and the eyes of enemies and foreigners, and even before the eyes of our own young, at this point there is an additional harm that must be measured. It is not a question of individual or physical harm, but of great injuries linked to the reputation of Islam. (Khamenei 1994: 22)

In forbidding the public performance of bloody matam, Khamenei warned that ‘propagandists of the Satan of Imperialism’ might point to this practice in order to ‘present both Islam and Shiism as an institution of superstition’.

Such criticisms have made little headway to date in stemming the practice of flagellation-matam in Ladakh. This controversy can be compared with a somewhat analogous situation in contemporary Taiwan, where young men known as pa-chia chiang (‘spirit guardians’) perform a religious discipline in which they strip to the waist and wound themselves with spikes and metal skewers; then, blood dripping from face and chest, they march in public procession before their neighborhood temple. Some of the pa-chia chiang go on to become dangki (‘divining youths’), spirit-mediums who convey to troubled temple-visitors insights and healing from various deities. In his study of popular Taiwanese religion John A. Grim points out that the pa-chia chiang’s ascetic practices violate Confucian canons and Chinese cultural strictures against self-mutilation. In discussing the apparent paradox linked to such practices Grim makes the following assertion:

The ascetic rites of the pa-chia chiang and the dangki are examples of behaviour that is anti-social but evocative, ultimately, of spiritual power that transforms and

12. Vernon Schubel (1993: 150-51), in his study of the Pakistani Shia communities of Karachi, describes a blood bank that is set up on Ashura in one of Karachi’s Shia neighbourhoods: congregants are encouraged to donate blood for hospital transfusions rather than shed their own blood in self-scourging. The experiment’s success has proved very limited.

13. For a discussion of blood and questions of ritual purity see an anonymous pamphlet entitled Imamjuyah diniyat: darajah davvom (1993: 23). It is part of a series of educational booklets on the Shia faith that is distributed in Ladakh. See also Pinault 1992: 107-8.

orders what is ill and disordered... [T]he power generated by such ascetic practices also generates tolerance in the viewing audience, which holds a normative ethics prohibiting mutilation of one's body. (1995: 19)

By extension one might argue with regard to Ladakh that it is precisely the non-normative and disturbing quality of zanjiri-matam that constitutes one source of its power. The apparent loss of self-control, the 'illogical' shedding of blood, the lack of normal respect for one's body: the very things about which the maulvis complain, serve in fact to announce to onlookers that Ashura is a special day, a day on which special non-normative behaviour is sanctioned, the high point of a holy season. Bloody matam establishes liminality: it helps one cross the threshold to the realm of the sacred. Very appropriate it is, then, that the flagellants perform immediately in front of Zuljenah, the horse whose presence announces the violent death of Husain, the most solemn and tragic of all the events of Karbala. Bloody matam helps identify Zuljenah as the focus of the procession, the horse that attracts vows and donations from women on behalf of their children, the horse that triggers outbursts of grief at its appearance.

Critics of zanjiri-matam seem to be attempting to reduce Shi'ism to a set of antiseptically logical propositions acceptable to all Muslims. I would speculate that such critics have been influenced by political strategies fostered by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeinei since the founding of the Islamic Republic, strategies oriented to the furthering of Sunni-Shia ideological rapprochement and tactical cooperation in the realm of international affairs. But reductionist criticism of matam fails to take into account the fact that ritual is not reducible to purely rational propositions. As Catherine Bell states:

[W]e can speak of the natural logic of ritual, a logic embodied in the physical movements of the body and thereby lodged beyond the grasp of consciousness and articulation. The principles underlying this logic can be made explicit only with great difficulty; they are rarely in themselves the objects of scrutiny or contention. (1992: 99)

15. With regard to the issue of the apparent loss of self-control in Muharram rituals see also Nicola Grist (1995: 68), who mentions 'energetic breast-beating' during an Ashura procession in Kargil. 'As the procession proceeded', observes Grist, 'several men became overcome by emotion and had to be restrained by their companions'.


Bell goes on to describe how ritual contributes to the formation of a comprehensive all-embracing socio-religious environment and to the 'generation of a loosely integrated whole in which each element 'defers' to another in an endlessly circular chain of reference.' The result, she says, is 'the sense of a universal totality, a unified and authoritative coherence informing the whole scheme of things'.

Bell's model of the 'logic embodied in the physical movements of the body' can be applied to help explain the enduring popularity of matam in general and bloody matam in particular. As flagellants strike themselves repeatedly to the accompaniment of rhythmic dirges, the body becomes a percussive instrument that internalises both spiritual experience and cultural values. A 'chain of reference' is established and evoked, even if the references are not consciously articulated at every point in the ritual:

1) The Shias' historical experience of suffering, persecution, and exclusion (evoked by the Muharram commemoration of Husain's death, a death that barred Shias from political dominance), resulting in myths linked to occultation, hiding, and the need for secrecy18 (the motif of secrecy and hiding is particularly relevant to the experience of Leh's Shias, as will be seen below).

2) The Shias' self-definition as muhibban-e Ahl-e bayt, 'lovers of the Household of the Prophet': precisely because of this love, in the Shias' view, they have been subjected to persecution.

3) The Shias' borrowing of motifs from Sufi love-poetry: ecstasy in the presence of the Beloved, behaviour that earns the condemnation of outside observers, defiant disregard for worldly opinion.19

4) Love for Ahl-e bayt, expressed in terms of voluntary self-sacrifice and ritual slaughter, linked to the Shia esotericist equation of Husain with the dhulh
"azim ('great sacrifice')"\(^{20}\) of Qur'an 37.107, the ram whose blood was shed to save Abraham's son from sacrificial death.

5) The prophet Abraham, who is described in the Qur'an (chapter 21.51-71) as having been rejected and persecuted by his own people for his steadfast love of God and his refusal to conform to their norms of worship. Abraham's suffering evokes point no. 1 in this 'chain of reference,' the Shias' own historical experience of persecution.

The above points are by no means exhaustive; they are meant simply to suggest the rich set of associations linked to *matam* for participants in Ashura. *Matam* functions in a somewhat different way, however, with regard to Shia-Sunni relations in Leh township, insofar as it serves to demarcate communal boundaries. As noted above, Sunnis march in the annual Ashura procession; moreover, Sunni AMI officers assured me that they have been active in supporting the procession ever since Leh's Shias began holding Muharram processions in public. Sunni participation in Leh's Muharram activities, they insisted, dates back many years.

But Shias of the Anjuman-e Imamia flatly denied Sunni assertions that the AMI and the Sunni community have been supportive and active participants in Ashura ever since the Shias first began holding a public procession some thirty-five to forty years ago. On the contrary, the Shia caretaker of Leh's matam-serai told me: 'The Sunnis used to treat us badly, as if they were the emperor Aurangzeb'. In the old days, I was told by officers of the Anjuman-e Imamia, Muharram in Leh township had not always been well attended nor ruins, but the Zangsty Matam Serai's cramped quarters and inconspicuous location say much about the marginal position of Leh's Shias until very recent times.

Gradually, however, the Shia population of Leh township grew in the wake of Partition and Independence, with Shias emigrating especially from Kargil and Baltistan ('Northern Areas'). As their numbers increased, the confidence of Leh's Shias grew; and so, some forty years ago (my informants were not in agreement on the exact date, although several offered the date 1951), they began holding a public Muharram procession on Ashura. It was also at that time, in the 1950s, that the matam serai presently in use was built in Leh's Main Bazaar. The new shrine, a proud two stories high, is much larger and much more conspicuous than its predecessor. I estimated there to be some six hundred participants present on the ground floor alone on Ashura eve during the 1996 and 1997 Muharram seasons.\(^{22}\)

My Shia informants insisted that very few Sunnis participated in the Shias' Ashura procession before 1989 and the communal disorders that started that year. According to both the Shias of the Anjuman-e Imamia and to Thupstan Chhewang (former president of the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) and now head of the new Autonomous Hill Council), when the LBA initiated the Social Boycott, they directed it primarily at Leh's resident Sunnis whom the Buddhists described as agents of Kashmiri fundamentalists in Srinagar. At the beginning of the Boycott the Sunnis appealed to the Shias for help; the result was the formation of the Ladakh Muslim Association. 'When the Shias joined hands with the Sunnis', Thupstan Chhewang told me, 'we turned against them both.'

The *liturgical* reflection of this Muslim alliance, according to my Shia

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20. See, for example, a Shia Qur'an commentary by Sayyid Farman Ali (1980: 719), copies of which I saw in the possession of Shia acquaintances both in Kargil and in Leh township. Farman Ali's commentary on Qur'an 37.107 states, 'It seems that by the term *dhibh azim* ('great sacrifice') is intended no other meaning than the martyrdom of the Imam Husain, peace be upon him. For this very reason the sacred vessel of prophethood [i.e., the Prophet Muhammad] used to say, 'Husain proceeds from me and I proceed from Husain'.

21. For a discussion of the low esteem in which Ladakhi Shias have been held by both Sunnis and Buddhists, see Pascale Dollfus (1995: 45-46).

22. In 1997 Leh's Anjuman-e Imamia was busy with plans to re-build and enlarge the Matam Serai in the Main Bazaar; this shrine is no longer big enough, I was told, to accommodate the crowds that come during the Muharram season.
informants, was the fact that Sunnis began participating in Ashura in large
numbers and in a conspicuous fashion. They wanted to send the message
to other communities,' as one Shia told me, 'ham Musulman log sab eik hein:
we Muslim folks are all one.' Nevertheless, even at the height of the boycott,
the liturgically discerning could distinguish one group from another: Sunnis
marched at the front, rather than cluster before Zuljenah; and although they
would cry out Allahu akbar in unison, Sunnis refrained from chanting nahuwas
or performing matam; because matam, as both Sunni and Shia informants
agreed, 'is something only Shias do'.

As of 1997, Sunnis continue to participate in Leh’s Ashura procession
(although their numbers have diminished somewhat since the end of the
Social Boycott), but some of them at least are willing to voice private
misgivings about Shia practices associated with the march. In 1996 Maulvi
Muhammad Umar, the Sunni imam of Leh’s Jami Masjid, was present
outside the mosque to greet the crowds surrounding Zuljenah. He welcomed
participants and spoke briefly but eloquently about qurban-e Hazrat Husain,
the sacrifice of Lord Husain, as a prelude to the chief sermon delivered by
Shaikh Mirza of the Shia Matam Serai. The assembled presence on the
mosque steps of Sunni prayer leader and Shia mullah, of AMI officers and
Anjuman-e Imamia members, certainly presented a convincing picture of
interdenominational harmony for any non-Muslims who might be watching.

But one morning I interviewed the Sunni maulvi in his home. During the
course of a long conversation he commented on the various aspects of bid’ah
(heretical innovation) that have crept into Shia observances over the years.
‘Did you see the men come up to bow before Zuljenah and touch its saddle-
cloth? Did you see the women press their babies against the horse and offer
money? They’re praying to the horse. They’re asking the horse to guard their
children’s health. This is the kind of thing,’ he said forcefully, ‘that Hindus
or Buddhists might be expected to do, but not good Muslims’.

‘Or take the excessive weeping’, I was told, ‘that the Shias engage in
during their majalis: there’s no passage in the Qur’an, the maulvi said,
justifying such extreme displays of emotion. Bid’ah. Likewise matam: no
scriptural warrant for this. Bid’ah.’ Nevertheless, the Sunni maulvi told me,
when he addresses the mixed crowd on Ashura he avoids mentioning
anything controversial, matam, zanjir-zani, veneration of Zuljenah, anything
that might be considered bid’ah. He sticks to qurban-e Hazrat Husain, a topic
that meets with a more nearly universal positive response.

The maulvi’s comments seemed to me one instance among many of a
tendency I noticed again and again in my time in Ladakh: the disjunction
between public and private discourse in talk about Muharram.

In a conversation with Nisar Husain, one of Zuljenah’s custodians, I made
a discreet reference to the Sunni shaikh’s critique. His reply was spirited.
Nisar reminded me first of all that a copy of the Qur’an is mounted atop the
stallion. ‘So when people bow, they’re really bowing to the word of God, not
just to some horse’. He added that during the procession the Qur’an is
opened to the first page of surat Ya-Sin (chapter 36), which according to
Islamic tradition is ‘the heart of the Qur’an’, a summary of all the essential
teachings contained in Muslim scripture. This demonstrates, he said, that
Leh’s Shias have a deep respect for the basics of their faith. Such an
argument constitutes a carefully thought-out apologetics against any charge
of bid’ah.

The disparity between private opinion and public response can also be
noted with regard to Buddhist perceptions of Muharram. Buddhists whom
I saw on the street watching the Ashura procession seemed appropriately
solemn, wearing expressions that bespoke respect if not reverence. Buddhists
with whom I spoke in private, however, showed little understanding of the
history or religious worldview underlying Muharram. ‘They do it to honour
their god, I guess,’ said a hotel clerk whom I interviewed. ‘But why do they
have to spill blood all over the street?’ Another Ladakhi Buddhist, a cook
and trekking guide whom I met in Chamspa village (adjacent to Leh), did a
very skillful mimicry of Shia processionists performing matam, triggering
loud laughter among the other Buddhist porters. He turned and said to me,
‘Why do these Muslims do this to themselves? There’s no reason to beat
yourself’. A German student volunteer living with a Ladakhi Buddhist family
for a home-stay met me on the morning of Ashura and told me that her
hosts had tried to discourage her from coming out to see the procession.
‘They think it’s bad, it’s disgusting, that there’s no sense to it’, she reported.

The Shias I interviewed in Leh seemed very aware of the mental
reservations concerning Muharram held by both Buddhists and Sunni
Muslims. I spoke with officers and members of the Shia Anjuman-e Imamia
on numerous occasions during my time in Leh; and gradually the tone they
took with me changed. In our initial conversations they insisted that the
wounds caused by the Social Boycott had healed completely, and that
communal relations were now as positive as they had been in the old days.
In subsequent conversations, however, they told me tales of what happened
to people who showed disrespect to Zuljenah during the procession. A
Punjabi Hindu came to Leh and burst out into laughter when he saw Shias

23. See, for example, the discussion in Abdullah Yusuf Ali (n.d.: 1168).
venerate the horse; at once divine punishment paralyzed the man's face, and his face remained frozen in a mask of irreverent laughter for the rest of his life. Only recently had this happened, I was told, a few years ago. A true story, they insisted. Another story: a local Buddhist smirked openly watching the procession go by; moments later he dropped dead. Again, I was told, a true story. Stories like this suggest that Leh's Shias are well aware of the attitude of other faith communities; such tales comprise a kind of defensive shield, a storyteller's way of fighting back.

What is the situation today? The Muslim Association disintegrated in 1994; once the Social Boycott ended, the most compelling reason for inter-Muslim cooperation had vanished. Sunnis still participate in Ashura, though in slightly diminished numbers when compared with the crisis days of the boycott. The Sunni AMI prides itself on undertaking preparations to help with the procession, but they do so without coordinating efforts with the Shia anjuman; the result, I noticed, was a certain duplication of effort. Buddhists get invited to the chhauta din ka majlis funeral feast on the fourteenth of Muharram; but I noticed that calls to prayer from the town's minarets very frequently coincided with Buddhist chanting being broadcast from the Shanti Stupa and other gompas: a displeasing cacophony of adhan and droning om, 'a kind of communal competition by loudspeaker', as one Hindu police officer observed with considerable wryness.

But if marks of cooperation are there, one can also pick out signs of competition. While I was in Leh in May of 1996, Shaikh Mirza, mullah of the local matam serai, attended a rally sponsored by the town's Buddhists to protest Chinese repression of Tibetans in connection with the recent Panchen Lama controversy.24 Shaikh Mirza addressed the rally, saying, 'The Chinese are atheists. But Buddhists, like Muslims, are religious people and believe in a god; therefore, we are with you. We are on your side'.

Or take the case of a Shia informant I'll call Reza. Reza and I became — I think I can use the word — friends, during my three visits to Ladakh: he helped arrange interviews, took me to shrines in the hills near Leh, invited me to his home for dinner, and sat with me and laughed as I took turns with his children in singing old hymns and school-songs. Throughout our many talks he insisted on the good quality of Muslim-Buddhist relations today, stating that things were now back to the status quo ante, that communal divisions had been healed.

Then, on the morning of my departure this last season, he insisted on going with me to the airport and talked his way past the security guards so he could keep me company for two and a half hours in the waiting lounge. And it was only then, in our final chat together, in the noise and anonymity of an airport departure hall, that he told me of the anger he had felt back in 1989 when he saw childhood Buddhist friends throwing rocks at Muslim mosques, of the events that led to his personal role in the street-fighting of July and August 1989 in the Main Bazaar, and of how he's glad nowadays to see Buddhists being invited once more to Shia shrines during Muharram, but that he feels so bitter that it's impossible for him to call any of them friends any more. This, to borrow a phrase from Michael Peletz in his recent study of Muslim Malay society,25 is an example of 'confessional venting': the departing fieldworker, essentially a stranger, has lost his temporary status of family member in the life of the village; the host can now feel free to vent all the ambivalence he must otherwise restrain concerning other members of the family.

Does Reza's bitterness mean that the positive communal relations advertised on Ashura are purely fictional? I would say no. As in any family — to continue the metaphor — memories are long, few ruptures are final, few reconciliations definitive. Nevertheless, Leh's Muharram liturgies are important to the community because they allow roles for a number of key players, Shia, Sunni, and Buddhist alike, and because they help keep communal relations going, despite underlying ambivalence, imperfections and all.

Bibliography


24 For a discussion of the Panchen Lama controversy, see Burns (1996: 4).

Kargil: An Introduction to the District and the Youth Voluntary Forum

Mohammed Raza Abassi

Stretching like a lunar landscape high in the remote regions of the Karakoram, the Kargil plateau is situated on the banks of the river Suru at a height of 9,300 ft., midway between Srinagar and Leh. It has always been a distressing fact that in spite of being the second largest town of the Ladakh region, most people only think of Leh when they talk about Ladakh. The government’s attitude has shown the same bias with the result that Leh alone got the maximum share of development and exposure to the outside world, while Kargil and its cultural heritage were ignored completely.

Today a quiet town, Kargil once served as an important trade and transit centre on the Central Asian trade routes. Caravans carrying exotic merchandise, such as silk brocades, carpets, felts, tea, poppies, ivory, etc., would pass through the town on their way to and from China, Tibet, Yarkand, and Kashmir. Caravanserais lined the road passing through the township, and the old bazaar displayed a variety of Central Asian and Tibetan commodities even after the cessation of the trade in 1949 until they were finally exhausted about two decades ago. In spite of its importance, due to political reasons in the name of Ladakhi identity, Kargil has always been overshadowed by Leh and its culture and attractions have remained unknown. Most tourists considered Kargil no more than a place to spend the night on their way to their destination, Leh.

The valley is inhabited by people of Tibeto-Balti and Tibeto-Dard origin, the majority being Purigpa who depend mostly on agriculture and some animal husbandry for their subsistence. The majority of the population is illiterate, by faith they are Muslims, although there is a minority of Buddhists in areas like Zanskar and Mulbekh. Winters in Kargil are harsh, with temperatures routinely dropping down to —30 or —35 degrees Celsius. Drass and Zanskar also receive heavy snowfalls, forcing people to be confined to their own homes for long periods. With the exception of the relatively lower