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MUHARRAM IN SOUTH TRINIDAD

In the year 680 C.E., Hussein, the grandson of the prophet Muhammad, was brutally murdered along with his sons and followers on the plains of Karbala in what is present-day Iraq. For the Shi'is, Hussein's death is not only considered the greatest suffering in history, but is also seen as a symbolic act of redemption. His passion and death have been remembered annually for the last 1300 years in the form of the annual observance in the month of Muharram. The manifestation of this ritual varies according to its location (i.e., distance from Karbala) and to the degree of influence exerted on it by local religions, culture and rituals. From Karbala, the observances spread in both directions — west to what is today South Lebanon, east to Iran, northeast to the Caucasus and southeast to India. In the 19th century, it was transported to the Caribbean basin and eventually during the last two decades it moved north from Trinidad to New York and Toronto.

For the Shi'is, Karbala and Hussein's tomb remain central points during the Muharram observances and throughout the year. The land around Hussein's tomb itself contains one of the largest cemeteries in the world as every Shi'i would like to be buried there. In regions near Karbala, like Iran, Muharram participants carry a symbolic bier representing the one in which Hussein's body was carried from the battlefield to his final resting place. Among several forms and modes of ritual, the bier-carrying has become the central point of the Muharram procession in Central Iran. It is known as *nakhl*, meaning date palm in south Iraqi dialect for according to tradition, the original bier was made of branches of this tree.

The bier can be an enormous, teardrop-shaped structure up to three stories tall that is carried by more than 150 people. It is draped in the symbolic colors of green for the prophet's family, and black for mourning. On the front exterior, it is covered with mirrors so that participants and bystanders alike can see their own reflections in the bier and, therefore, identify with the suffering and death of Hussein.

In places further from Karbala, like the Caucasus and India, it is the interpretive representation of Hussein's tomb that is carried in procession. Since the people of the Caucasus and especially the Indian subcontinent are far-removed from Karbala itself, pilgrimages were too difficult and transportation of the dead (to the cemetery around Hussein's tomb) too problematic.

Local people in India, therefore, transformed the processional bier into a representation of Hussein's mausoleum itself. This structure then came to represent both the bier and the tomb. In addition, local karbalas were established in India to serve as burial grounds for those who could not make the journey to the actual Karbala site. These local karbalas were created by bringing a bit of soil from the original Karbala and sprinkling it on the future site in order to sanctify the new cemetery.

During the last few centuries, creative representations of Hussein's tomb, called *ta'ziyah*¹, have been built for the annual Muharram observances. Even in today's age of photography and international travel where artists would have an opportunity to see the original tomb at Karbala, they do not use the original in any form whatsoever to base their fanciful creations. It is thought that the act of artistic expression itself is a form of piety glorifying Hussein, and this creativity supersedes any need to remain true to the original design². The size and shape of the *ta'ziyah* vary greatly from small cenotaph-like structures built of paper mache, colored paper and bamboo, to huge structures which must be either carried by many people or moved on wheels. The manifestation of the Muharram observances are in direct correlation to their distance from Karbala. Those closer to Karbala remain truer to the "original" whereas those farther away have been influenced by indigenous cultures, religions and rituals. The center-periphery evolution of Muharram rituals could be compared with the evolution and development of the Christian holy week observances from Jerusalem to southern Germany, southern Italy, Spain, and Guatemala.

In India, for instance, the Hindu religion, rituals and festivals have had great impact on the Muharram observances. An example of this would be the immersion of the *ta'ziyah* in water at the end of the Muharram ceremony. India, in fact, has proven very fertile for the transformation of many Hussein-related rituals. In India, Shi'is as well as Sunnis and Hindus participate in these rituals. In 1985, I had the opportunity to observe a perfect example of this religious syncretism in Hyderabad when I observed a group of Hindu women bringing an offering of coconuts and bananas to a standard of Ali (Hussein's father), which was covered with garlands of flowers.

From 1845 to 1917, East Indians were brought as indentured laborers to the Caribbean basin and brought the Muharram ritual with them. In 1834, the British liberated their African slaves on the sugar cane plantations of their Caribbean colonies. At that time, before the introduction of the sugar beet on a commercial scale, sugar was still a precious commodity and its manufacture an important source of income. As the former slaves identified working on the cane plantations with slavery, they refused to work as free laborers and migrated to cities and towns. Plantation owners, in order to avert financial ruin, brought many indentured laborers from India (especially from what is today's state of Uttar Pradesh). These laborers were given free passage and a five-year contract to work for wages and, upon completion, a free return ticket to India. The majority of East Indians, however, stayed on and came to influence the local culture through the preservation of their own religion and

culture. Among all the cultural relics brought by the East Indians, it was the Muharram ritual which came to eclipse all others.

A very short time after the East Indians landed on Caribbean soil, this ritual, which is known in the Caribbean as *Hosay*, became a symbol of unity and often an act of defiance against the colonial rule for the indentured immigrants³. It continues to this day as a ritual identifying the East Indians of Trinidad with the homeland of India. This identification is due to its combination of both Hindu and Muslim (the dominant) components. Despite the fact that it has been infused with Creole, Christian and African practices, in Trinidad, many of those today who build the *tadjah*⁴ are not Muslim, but Hindu and Christian who are of all races and shades of skin color. It was particularly in British Guyana that the *tadjah* became a symbol of defiance of sugar cane plantation laborers against their British masters. In Trinidad that defiance brought about a catastrophe:

On October 30, 1884, there occurred on the British Caribbean island of Trinidad one of the most traumatic episodes in the history of the Indian sector of its population. This was the shooting by the colonial police, supported by a detachment of British soldiers, of a number of participants in the Shia Muslim celebration of Muharram, better known in the island as the 'Hosein' or 'Hosay' festival. In terms of the island's historical experience, the casualties were relatively high — at least sixteen killed and over a hundred wounded.

The causes of the tragedy must be sought in a number of interrelated economic, cultural and political factors⁵

The *Hosay* observances in the Caribbean basin, particularly in Trinidad, were also influenced by some African rituals and, in turn, the *Hosay* had an impact on the Carnival, one of the most spectacular events held in Trinidad for which it has become famous.

Thus, the development, evolution, and transformation of the Muharram observances from its origins in Iraq to its current day manifestations in the Caribbean is the result of inter-multicultural factors making it a multi-dimensional tradition. As is the case with Christian pageantry observing the passion of the death of Christ, the further one moves from the center to the periphery, the more spectacular the staging becomes. In the case of the Trinidadian form, however, the most interesting aspect of the evolution is the fact that the mourning dimension has been transformed into a kind of celebration. What follows is a detailed account of current Muharram rituals in southern Trinidad as I observed them in 1991.

Today, there are two major centers of Muharram observance in Trinidad. One is in the town of St. James in the north and the other is in the Cedros district in the south-south-west of the island. The major differences between the two centers are as follows: (1) In St. James, three out of four camps organizing the Muharram are family-based operations, while in the south, the Muharram camps have loose family associations and are primarily based on the community network. In St. James, in addition to construction and

parading of the *tadjahs*, two huge moons are constructed and paraded. The Moons represent Hasan and Hussein, the grandsons of the prophet Muhammad. (2) In the north, the core of the observance is drawn from the Muslim community, especially from the Shi'ite Muslims (it must, however, be underlined that the sectarian distinctions in Trinidad are diluted). Among the Muslims, those who belong to the *Jami'at-i Muslimin* stand apart from the others, regarding themselves as staunch Sunnis, defenders of the purity of Islam. This group is highly political and very critical of the Muharram observances in Trinidad. As a result, those who organize Muharram, particularly the Muslim organizers, must be on their guard against being criticized by the Muslim Brothers (*Jami'at*).

In the south, the number of Muslims is minuscule, and the Muharram celebrations are mainly organized by the Hindus and the Christians. This is not a new development; rather, it seems that it has been a persistent tradition in that part of the country. When I asked one of the main organizers of the Muharram in the south, whether he sees a contradiction that he, being a Hindu, organizes, participates in and believes in the power of the Muslim ritual, his retorted quite simply: "I presume I am Muslim one month each year." And although the Muharram observance in Trinidad on the whole must be regarded as an East Indian festival (and I stress above all not a mourning observance), the festival in the Cedros area in the south should particularly serve as an example *par excellence* of cultural syncretism. Despite today's festival being an amalgam of many different cultural influences, those Trinidadians who are passive participants (and bystanders I have interviewed) regard this as an East Indian festival.

Another aspect of the observance of *Hosay* is that the south is less commercialized. The St. James *Hosay* is an urban ritual celebration whereas the one in Cedros is more rural and closer to nature. All villages in the Cedros area are (or were) the sugar cane and coconut plantations along the seashore.

In both areas the *Hosay* consists of (a) the building of a replica of Hussein's tomb, which in reality is not a replica but rather an artist's imaginative rendering of the tomb (like those of India). This is called the *tadjah*⁶, although these days its use is less current, and *Hosay* has come to mean both the ritual and the edifice itself. (b) In addition, there is the building of a small *tadjah* which is devoted to Hasan, the brother of Hussein. What is curious about this is that the majority of the active participants believe that Hasan died together with Hussein at Karbala. In reality, Hasan died twelve years earlier, probably poisoned by his wife. Although Hasan and Hussein are known by the Arabic dual form, *Hasanayn*, and in many Muslim countries Hasan is also remembered during the Muharram, the coalescence of these two brothers could be the result of the influence of the Hindu epics and Indian lore regarding the myth of twin brother gods. (c) There is the preparation of flags to be carried in the procession, (d) the preparation of ritual food, and (e) the preparation of new Tassa and base drums, the re-skinning of some of the old ones, and the practice of the drum-beat⁷.

The process of building the large *tadjah* used to take forty days, but now,

due to labor shortages and modern construction methods and materials (e.g., styrofoam), the time has been radically shortened. The minimum required, however, is to start on the first day of Muharram, with a team of at least eight people working almost around the clock. The difference between north and south in this regard is that the north is more traditional when it comes to the internal frame, which is primarily made of *Roseao*⁸. Otherwise they have departed quite a way from tradition in the scheme of color, shape, and external decor. In the south, the frame is now made of wood. However, the exterior is more traditional. The structure of the *tadjah* is angular, the color predominantly white, and the external decoration based on white paper flowers (called "knot rose")⁹. In both north and south the height of the *tadjah* is limited to 15.5 feet due to the height of electrical and telephone wires in the streets. In both areas, each *Imambarah/camp*¹⁰ has three headmen who are responsible for arrangements, permits from the police, and the orderly behavior of the crowd during the ritual. There are also the master-builder, the builders themselves, and the men in charge of drums and drummers.

The ritual period commences on the first of Muharram. Those who are involved in *tadjah* preparation abstain from the intake of meat, fried foods, alcohol, and from sexual intercourse. Shoes must be removed while working in the *Imambarah*, technically off-limits to women, but in reality, they may work inside as well as long as they are not menstruating. Whoever works on the *tadjah* must be ritually clean as described above, which in the past was for approximately 40 days. Today, however, although a few start the ritual cleanliness from the outset of the project as an act of piety, most only enter the ritual period on the first of Muharram.

In both places the actual ritual follows the same basic pattern (although there are a few major differences). In Cedros, the ritual starts with the flag day on the seventh of Muharram. Each camp has its own *chowk* which is usually a square area and is considered sacred ground during the three-day ritual. The *chowk* is usually not far from the shack in which the *tadjah* is being constructed.

On the flag day, the *mojawir*¹¹ comes to camp to offer prayers, which must be done before noon. Currently, in Cedros, the *mojawir* is Mr. Qasim Ayatollah, a corporal in the police force. His father used to be a *mojawir* for the Cedros area until he was incapacitated by a stroke two years ago. Mr. Ayatollah is a Sunni, and he received his religious education at a mosque in St. James.

In the middle of the *chowk* there is a heap of sand in the form of a miniature volcanic crater. Inside this pit, there are two oil lamps, representing Hasan and Hussein. On the side of the sand pit there is an incense burner and a glass of *sharbat*-water. The *mojawir* adds incense to the coals and starts the prayers (in Arabic) which last for a couple of minutes varying from loud to soft. These are verses from the Qu'ran, usually beginning with the *Fatihah*, or opening *surah* of the Qu'ran. After the prayer is performed, the red and green flags are erected around the *chowk*. On the left-hand side of the *chowk* is the red flag for Hussein and on the right, a green flag for Hasan. The symbolism of

these colors: red for blood and green for poison. On top of the standards is a *panjah*¹² made of beaten metal. There is a multitude of flags erected, most in red, but a few in green (in St. James, in fact, there is a plethora of colors) around the *chowk*. The cloth for the flags is brought by the villagers before the ceremony as a votive offering. The standard poles of *roseao* are provided by the camp (usually freshly cut that same day) while the cloth for the flags brought by the villagers is placed on a tray along with *shirini*, *halwa*, *malidah*¹³, and other offerings. While sweets are offered to participants after the prayer, the cloth is being hoisted on the standard poles. The *tassa* and bass drums are beaten both before and after the ceremony. There are very few participants in this ceremony, since everybody is busy working on the *tadjahs*. The crowd assembles in the evening around the *chowk*, the *mojawir* comes to perform a prayer, and then a special tray is prepared. On the tray, there is a bottle of milk or *sharbat-water*, and essences of perfumes (which contain no alcohol). A clean, unused white cloth, leaves of *pann* (a plant chewed in India), a branch of *Mehendi*¹⁴ and two pebble stones. The tray is tightly covered with another white cloth. After the prayer, the procession starts. The tray is being carried on the head of a tall man. Drums are beaten while flags are carried (mostly by women) from the *chowk*¹⁵. The crowd sways with the flags according to the beat of the drums. During the night, five people with a tray sneak out of the procession and head for the *karbala*. Each camp has its own *karbala* on the beach. It is a designated space, but it is not guarded as a holy place throughout the year, rather only during the ritual.

I was accorded the privilege of participating in the following ritual. Using flashlights, we found ourselves at the beach, and reached the *karbala* which was marked by a tree. Everyone in this particular community carries a machete as they are farmers and fisherman, so an area of about four feet square was cleared and we all squatted down as the *mojawir* said his prayer. A hole was dug with a machete and the *mojawir* poured milk and perfume essence into the hole. The prayer was said again, and using the *pann* leaves and dirt from the hole, small effigies, about eight inches in length, were fashioned. The white cloth was divided into two large pieces and four narrow strips (one large piece and two strips for each effigy). The large pieces of cloth, representing a burial shroud, were stuffed with *pann* and *mehendi* leaves and dirt. Then, a pebble stone was placed in each of the two wrappings representing the head of each martyr (Hasan and Hussein). Now they are wrapped in the large cloth and then bound with the two narrow strips until they appear to be miniature versions of corpses prepared for muslim burial. Since in Muslim tradition bodies are simply buried in shrouds and not in coffins, these two effigies were put down into the hole, then up again onto the tray seven times. Finally, they come to rest back on the tray and are sprinkled with perfume essence as a prayer is said. The *mojawir* sprinkles some dirt from the hole onto the tray, a red flag is planted in the hole, and the hole is refilled with sand. As the prayer continues, we leave the site to join the procession. As we do, the *marsiye*¹⁶ (eulogy) is being sung. At the end of the flag night, the contents of the tray are placed in the pit in middle of the *chowk*.

The next day (the eighth of Muharram) is the "small *tadjah*" night. This *tadjah* is only about two to three feet high. Both in St. James and in Cedros this year they were made of styrofoam. This *tadjah* is built on the same day, and in the evening is placed in the *chowk*. The drums are beaten and the *mojawir* arrives. The effigies are now placed in a little *turbat* (cenotaph) which in turn is place in the small *tadjah*. Two small oil lamps are then placed in the pit. The *mojawir* sprinkles the interior of the *tadjah* and the exterior with perfume essences. Meanwhile, incense sticks in threes, fives or sevens are planted in front of the pit. The *mojawir* leaves to service the other camps. The small *tadjah* is raised onto the head of a man, and, lead by another man with a lantern, the *tadjah* is circumambulated around the *chowk* seven times in a counterclockwise direction as drums are played. The *tadjah* is now joined by women and teenage girls made up in their finest, carrying flags. In the Bonasse village area there are four camps, and therefore four *tadjahs* join in the procession. The route is 1.1 kilometers long, and it skirts the sea, on the southern main road. The culminating point of the night is when the Ganpat camp *tadjah* meets with the one from Bamboo camp coming from the opposite direction. This touching of the *tadjahs* symbolizes the kissing of the two brothers, Hasan and Hussein. The point on the route where they "kiss" is said to be where a mosque once stood, although this information has not been verified. Thousands of people participate in this celebration, and many of the bystanders join in the beating of the drums. The excitement builds up in anticipation of the following night, which is the night of the "big *tadjah*". By 11:00 p.m. each small *tadjah* has been returned to its own *chowk*, and by midnight the *mojawir* has removed the *turbat* and placed it in the pit of the *chowk*.

Since there are frequent rains in the tropics, in order to protect the *turbat* against the elements, it is wrapped in a plastic sheet before it is placed in the pit which is then covered with a wooden plank. After midnight, five men secretly remove the small *tadjah* (now empty, and called "dead" in the local parlance) from the *chowk* and head for the sea. Nobody, even those in the camp, should see it. That night I spent in Mr. Ganpat's camp, and we placed the *tadjah* in his van and drove to the beach (I was one of the five). A very short prayer was said by the *mojawir*, and one of the men carried the small *tadjah* into the sea to let it drift away while the rest of us stood facing away. We returned in complete silence. No one could explain the significance of this ritual, but I believe it is connected with the tradition that the night before the day of Ashura (Hussein's death at Karbala), Hussein ordered the lights in the camp to be put out so that those who were afraid of dying with him could desert camp without embarrassment. Upon return to the Ganpat camp, everyone set to work on the big *tadjah*, even though it was already three in the morning of the ninth of Muharram.

It is now the last day before the big *tadjah* night, and it must be completed in time. All the ornaments have to be put in place and everyone is racing against the clock. At around 6:00 p.m., the removable side of the shack is taken away, and the base and core part of the *tadjah* are moved out to the yard

and the "crowning" takes place (the upper part, usually in the form of a cupola, is put in place). The drums are heard, while the upper part is being put in place, with the help of ladders. The last touches of beautification are applied to the *tadjah* and two thick and long bamboo poles, freshly cut in the morning, are placed projecting from the base so that it can more easily be carried.

Later, when the *tadjah* is put on wheels so that it can be wheeled in the procession, the bamboo poles help to steer it through the crowds. The base is now skirted in the white cloth, and two flags, one red and one green, topped with *panjah*, are attached to both sides of the front of the *tadjah*, sticking out in front at a 45 degree angle. The *tadjah* is carried by twelve men, on their shoulders, onto the *chowk*, to the accompaniment of drums. Now they circumambulate the *chowk* seven times in a counterclockwise direction (no doubt influenced by the circling of the *Ka'bah* during the *Hajj*). Finally, the *tadjah* is placed on the *chowk*, the *mojawir* says his prayers, sprinkles the inside of the *tadjah* (there is a small opening for the *turbat*, which by this time has been removed from the pit and placed inside the big *tadjah*). Now he sprinkles the exterior of the *tadjah*, and the headman sprinkles the participants causing everyone and everything to be permeated with its sweet odor.

Now sweets are offered. The *tadjah* rests on the *chowk* and everybody who worked on the *tadjah*, including myself, are invited for a meal. This is the first meal with meat, and it is served in what used to be the *imambarah* shack which has lost its sanctity since the removal of the big *tadjah*.

Around 9:00 p.m., the procession starts. The *tadjah* is again circumambulated around the *chowk*, preceded by the drummers, and followed by the flag-bearers, after which it is placed on wheels. On the main road we join the other *tadjahs*, two moving from west to east and two in the opposite direction. The multitude of the people is overwhelming, and the excitement is akin to a great festival. The spectators openly admire and comment on the shape and decoration of the *tadjahs* as well as enjoying the sight of well-dressed, beautifully made-up teenage girls who follow the procession. The competition among the various camps as to who built the finest *tadjah* (which were until this moment hidden from view) is openly discussed by the rows of spectators. There is a competition among the drummers as well, but for all of this, there are no judges and no awarding of prizes for the "best." The crescendo comes around 11:30 when the Ganpat *tadjah* "kisses" the Bamboo *tadjah*. At this point, it is very difficult to contain the crowd, which, according to Trinidadian custom, is more interested in the carnival atmosphere of the event.

Frequent drinking of rum and beer by spectators increases with the beat of the drums. Between two and three o'clock in the morning (of the day of Ashura), the *turbats* from each of the *tadjahs* are removed by the *mojawir* one by one and the contents are reburied in the local *karbala* by the sea. According to the local saying "the *tadjah* is now dead." Each *tadjah* is finally moved to the yard of each camp (not to the *chowk*), where it rests until the late morning.

After a rest, the *tadjahs* are moved again in procession but without any prearranged plan. The crowd is again feasting on beer and rum. Around six

o'clock the *tadjahs* are moved to their appointed places on the beach. The *mojawir* says a short prayer, a farewell *marsiyyeh* is sung, and finally the *tadjah* is lifted on the shoulders of twelve men and carried to the sea as the sun sets over the horizon. It floats for a brief time, but is soon toppled by the waves and then is pushed in an easterly direction as darkness falls.

The next day, when the *tadjah*, or parts of it, wash up on shore, the people of the camp gather the remains and bury them. A few parts, like the base, they carry back to the camp (for re-use). So what was the labor of many days and the artistic creation of many artisans is annihilated by its makers within twenty-four hours of its completion. It is a sad moment, no doubt a catharsis for many, and there are more than a few damp eyes in the crowd. Even though the original meaning has been lost, the ceremony's final moments hint at its somber beginnings and the crowd unknowingly reacts with appropriate solemnity. Next year, new *tadjahs* will be built, and after their very short lifespan, will also meet their end in the tranquil waters of the Caribbean far-removed from harsh desert plains of Karbala.

NOTES

¹ *Ta'ziyach* (also *taziah*) in Iran means a passion play. See P.J. Chelkowski: *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, New York, 1979.

² A parallel exists in southern Poland known as the *szopka* of Kraków. A *szopka* represents the stable and the manger where Jesus was born. Krakowian artists have taken to building huge, colorful, elaborate palace-like structures that bear no resemblance to the original manger. Most of these structures take their inspiration from the design of St. Marie's cathedral in Kraków. Likewise, the Indian *taziyah* resembles more the architecture of an Indian mosque than Hussein's mausoleum.

³ *Hosay* is derived from Hussein which is often spelled "Hosayin".

⁴ *Ta'ziyah*, which comes from the Arabic 'aza' "to mourn or express grief", went through a phonetic transformation from Urdu to Hindi and became *tadjah*. Today the *tadjah* is often called *Hosay* which means that the ritual and the ritual object have now been combined into one concept.

⁵ Kelvin Singh, *Bloodstained Tombs: The Muharram Massacre 1884*, Macmillan, 1988, p. 1.

⁶ For purposes of clarity, this paper will refer to the edifice in the procession as *tadjah* and the ritual as *Hosay*.

⁷ The base of the *Tassa* drum is ceramic and has a conical shape covered with goat skin and is beaten with two wooden mallets. The average diameter of the top of the drum is 1.25 feet. The base drums are the hollowed out tree stumps covered with goat skin on both ends. They are usually three feet high and two feet in diameter. Many of the drums must be re-skinned every year as the skins break due to intense beating, humidity and change of temperature.

⁸ Roseao is commonly called "Giant Reed" grass known as *Arundo donax L.*

⁹ One of the *tadjahs* this year (1991) in Cedros was covered with 24,000 knot roses made by hand.

¹⁰ The *imambarah* is a roofed shack with three permanent walls and one wall that is easily removed so that *tadjah* segments can be easily removed and assembled in the adjacent yard. Note that in St. James, use of the word "camp" is discouraged.

¹¹ The *Mojawir* is the caretaker of the mosque. The word is derived from the Arabic "mojawir" which means adjacent, in this case, one who is adjacent to the mosque.

¹² A *panjah* is literally "palm of a hand" but has the symbolic meaning of the five members of the holy family of the prophet Muhammad: the prophet, his daughter Fatemeh, his cousin and son-in-law Ali, and two grandsons, Hasan and Hussein.

¹³ These are a variety of sweets made of sugar and flower and prepared by women.

¹⁴ *Mehendi* is a shrub with leaves that do not wither easily.

¹⁵ No effort is made to carry a flag made of the material offered by the same person.

¹⁶ Arabic *marthiyah*: lyrics of deep lamentation and devotion based on threnodies and dirges for the martyrs of Karbala. See Karrar Husain, "The Social and Spiritual Significance of Urdu Marthiya" in "Alserat", vol. 12, London, 1986, pp. 265-274.

TERESA CIECIERSKA-CHŁAPOWA

TABLE DE L'ONOMASTIQUE ORIENTALE
DANS LES MÉMOIRES DE R. S. PILSZTYN NÉE RUSIECKA (XVIII^e s.)

Les mémoires de Régine Salomé Pilsztyn, femme médecin et ophtalmologue, intitulés *Proceder podróży i życia mego awantur*¹ (*Procédé des voyages et des aventures de ma vie*) présentent la vie et les aventures de l'auteur aussi bien en Pologne que pendant ses intéressants voyages à travers la Turquie, l'Autriche et la Russie. Pour un chercheur dans le domaine de la culture et des mœurs turques les parties des mémoires dédiées à la Turquie sont particulièrement précieuses. Salomé Pilsztyn y a séjourné deux fois, s'arrêtant dans différentes villes de l'empire ottoman de l'époque. Toutefois elle a séjourné le plus longtemps à Istanbul, où enfin elle s'est établie définitivement et vers 1760 elle a écrit ses mémoires².

Sa profession de médecin lui ouvrait les portes des maisons et des palais turcs (jusqu'à obtenir la charge honorable de médecin dans le harem de sultan) et le fait de surmonter la barrière de la langue et de maîtriser — au moins dans une certaine mesure — la langue parlée, a donné à l'auteur la possibilité de communiquer avec les personnes rencontrées et de connaître le pays avec toutes ses particularités. Il a aussi laissé la trace ineffaçable dans les mémoires en rendant pittoresque non seulement le contenu mais aussi sa langue pleine de mots et de tournures orientaux.

Les mémoires de R. S. Pilsztyn ont été édités tard, seulement en 1957, sous la rédaction et avec l'introduction de Roman Pollak, avec les annotations de Marian Pełczyński³. Pourtant, en lisant les chapitres des mémoires concernant la Turquie, le plus exotique et le plus éloigné des pays décrits, il est impossible de résister à l'impression qu'ils devraient être complétés par les notes et les explications encore plus scrupuleuses, aussi du point de vue philologique.

Les mots orientaux rencontrés dans le texte, indépendamment de leur origine, l'auteur les a connus et assimilés de la langue turque de l'époque et ils sont bien cités par les dictionnaires turcs. Le turc doit donc constituer le point de départ d'abord pour l'identification, ensuite pour donner la signification et enfin, quand c'est possible, l'origine de ces mots.

Tel est le but du présent travail: établir à l'usage du chercheur scrupuleux, pas nécessairement orientaliste, un tel index des mots orientaux où à côté de l'inscription originale, souvent déformée, de Salomé Pilsztyn on trouverait le même mot lu et écrit correctement en turc selon les règles de l'orthographe