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Fuccaro, N.

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Religious Structures
NELIDA FUCCARO

Islam and Urban Space: Ma'tams in Bahrain before Oil

For centuries Islam has provided a set of cultural norms, principles of social organization, legal prescriptions and often instruments of political mobilization for many urban communities. It has therefore contributed substantially to the articulation of urban environments. However, Islam has not shaped clearly identifiable urban systems, at least in the sense suggested by the notion of the 'Islamic' city which has fuelled much academic debate in the past decades.¹ As this notion is representative of an ideal type, it clearly implies the existence of a somewhat 'monolithic' Islam. In reality Islam has been extremely diverse both in time and space. Furthermore, it is essential to recognize that there is a striking variety of political, social and cultural systems within which its different manifestations have operated as forces of urban development.

In pre-oil Bahrain, the articulation of urban space was primarily the result of the close interaction between tribal solidarities, mercantile values and a tradition of cosmopolitanism which throughout history shaped a multi-cultural social fabric. Tribal solidarities were undoubtedly major forces in defining the political dynamics of the Gulf region. From the late 18th century, the political ascendancy of tribal groups belonging to the 'Utub confederation in the coastal areas of the Gulf led to the imposition of tribal rule over Bahrain. The new tribal elites, and in particular the al-Khalifa family, were able to maintain their political legitimacy by exerting effective control over a mercantile economy which was based in urban areas. In the 19th and early 20th centuries much of the urban expansion that occurred in Bahrain resulted from the economic forces unleashed by the pearl boom. In the city of Manama particularly, a mercantile settlement whose population by 1905 was approximately 60% Shi'i, the economic and political developments of the period actively encouraged urban growth. In the course of the 19th century, Manama became the most important market centre of the island and the focus of British imperial interests in the Gulf region.

The role played by Islam in the expansion of Manama can only be understood in the context of the meaning assumed by sectarian identities within the specific framework of the Bahraini polity. The authority of the new tribal rulers was identified with Sunni Islam which, in the eyes of large sections of the local Shi'i population, became the religion of oppression and of 'unjust' tribal rule. Accordingly, Shi'ism became an instrument of resistance to the political hegemony of the tribal elites, although especially urban communities displayed a remarkable degree of adaptation to new political and economic realities. From the late 19th century, the articulation of Shi'i networks which centred upon *ma'tams* (funeral houses) played a central role in the expansion of a number of Manama's residential areas. The history of *ma'tams* highlights the ways in which religious solidarities, as they structured an urban institution, were major determinants in the shaping of urban space. It also shows the extent to which these solidarities were closely connected to the definition of social relations and power structures in the specific urban milieu of Manama.

Manama's funeral houses

In contemporary Bahrain the word *ma'tam* can refer to a specialized building and to a congregation of people. In both capacities, funeral houses have been central to the definition of Shi'i identity and still represent the privileged relationship which links the local Shi'i community to Imam Husayn. *Ma'tams* are multi-functional organizations

which, similar to the Iranian *hoseyniyyes*, are the venues for the celebration of Ashura, a series of ritual performances which commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Husayn and for the dissemination of Shi'i teachings and traditions. *Ma'tams* are also informal places of leisure and socialization where non-Shi'i are usually welcome. Until the end of the 19th century, *ma'tams* were spontaneous gatherings which met regularly in private houses, both in rural and urban areas. After the 1890s the sudden proliferation of specialized *ma'tam* buildings in many residential areas of Manama allowed many Shi'i communities to acquire new social and political visibility. Since then *ma'tam* buildings have become strongly identified with the urban landscape as it seems that no 'official' *ma'tams* were established outside Manama until the 1950s. The establishment of 'official' funeral houses coincided with the beginning of the public celebration of Ashura, especially with the performance of open air processions which in the following decades became an important outlet for the political grievances of Shi'i urban groups.

Further, and more importantly for the transformations which affected Manama's urban space in this period, *ma'tams* became the architectural sign of the Shi'is' 'love for Husayn'. As such, they were particularly instrumental in the consolidation of immigrant groups within expanding Shi'i neighbourhoods. For instance, the *ma'tam al-Ajam al-Kabir*, established in 1892, functioned as the focal point for the Persian community of Manama, many of whose members had arrived in the city from southern Iran after the 1850s. This funeral house, which was located at the edge of the urban settlement in a sparsely populated area known as Mushbir, functioned as the core for the expansion of what in later years became one of the Persian quarters of Manama. Similarly, the emergence of the *ma'tam al-Ahsa' iyyin* in 1895 in the Mukharaqa district defined a new urban identity for many Shi'i immigrants from al-Hasa, a coastal region located in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia.² In this period many *ma'tam* congregations were made 'official' by the replacement of mud and reed huts, where believers occasionally met, with masonry buildings. In 19th century Bahrain, this use of urban space indicates a transformation of the built environment that increasingly differentiated rural areas from expanding urban settlements. The establishment of permanent masonry buildings for *ma'tam* purposes, and indeed their maintenance, required substantial capital. Thus the *ma'tam* boom of the 1890s has to be considered in the light of the emergence of a powerful Shi'i mercantile elite which benefited from the pearl boom of the late 19th century and from increasing British protection. Their di-

rect association with the 'official' *ma'tams* was an indication of religious piety but it increasingly became a sign of wealth and social prestige.

Urban forms and Sunni authority

The spatial distribution of *ma'tam* buildings in Manama would indicate that Shi'i places of worship remained confined to the residential areas of the city. The suq, which was the political and economic centre of Manama, and the largest area of public utility, was in fact a Sunni-controlled space, as indicated by the fact that the majority of warehouses and commercial premises were either owned by tribal Sunnis or more often endowed as Sunni *waqfs*. Although many Shi'i entrepreneurs who supported *ma'tams* in the residential areas of the city operated from the suq, they were generally unable to acquire property there. Their wealth was usually invested in urban neighbourhoods where houses and shops in particular were often registered as Shi'i *waqfs* for the benefit of specific funeral houses. A useful comparison can be made with many Iranian cities where *hoseyniyyes*, the local counterparts of the Bahraini *ma'tams*, were integrated in large commercial and religious complexes and directly supported by shops located in central bazaars.³ In Manama, the tribal government's concern with the control of revenue from trade clearly affected the development of the suq and determined the peripheral location of Shi'i places of worship in relation to the political and economic cores of the city. Although the rulers made extensive use of the only Sunni religious court of Bahrain, which was strategically located in Manama, they were generally reluctant to enforce an official Sunni tradition. Rather, they extensively relied on tribal custom. In the first decades of the 20th century, the only large Sunni mosque that was visible in the urban texture of Manama was located in a residential area called Jami'. The fact that the quarter was named after the mosque is a clear indication of the extent to which the presence of large places of worship in the city was unusual.

Islam was undoubtedly a very important dimension in the urban development of Manama, a city which was controlled by Sunni rulers but whose socio-religious structure was predominantly Shi'i. However, as the case of the *ma'tams* shows, sectarian identities alone cannot explain the development of specific urban forms unless these are contextualized in the wider political and socio-economic setting. ♦

Dr Nelida Fuccaro is an historian of the modern Middle East and research fellow at the University of Exeter, United Kingdom. The work represented in this article is part of a research project on the urban history of Bahrain.

E-mail: n.fuccaro@exeter.ac.uk

Notes

1. As seminal contributions see: Abu-Lughod, Janet (1987), 'The Islamic City – Historic Myth, Islamic Essence, and Contemporary Relevance', *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, pp.155-176; Eickelman, Dale (1976), 'Is there an Islamic City? The Making of a Quarter in a Moroccan Town', *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, pp. 274-294.
2. Sayf, 'Abdallah (1995), *al-Ma'tam fil Bahrayn*. Manama.
3. As an example see: Bonine, Michael (1987), 'Islam and Commerce: Waqf and the Bazaar of Yazd, Iran', *Erdkunde*, pp.182-196.