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6. New York City's Muslim World Day Parade

The fifth annual Muslim World Day Parade of New York City took place on Sunday, September 23, 1990, and the sixth annual parade one year later on Sunday, September 22. The parade route laid claim to the prominent New York City midtown public space of Lexington Avenue from Thirty-third Street to Twenty-third Street, a stretch that has come to be identified with South Asian commercial establishments such as South Asian food stores, travel bureaus, restaurants, and sari stores.

Muslims in New York City are not closely associated with a specific neighborhood (the way African Americans are identified with Harlem, Greeks with Astoria, and Italians with Bensonhurst); rather, they are scattered throughout several urban areas. Although South Asians, regardless of religious affiliation, have concentrated in certain areas of the borough of Queens, notably Jackson Heights, they are more diffusely visible in the urban environment: in the city's scattered newspaper kiosks, in South Asian stores along part of the parade route, and in the row of "Indian" (Bangladeshi) restaurants along East Sixth Street on Manhattan's Lower East Side.

Demographically, it is still difficult to determine the shape of both the immigrant Muslim and the native, largely African American Muslim population. The United States census provides no data on religion. The category of "Asian-Indian" first appeared in the 1980 census and "Arab" only in the 1990 census; the Muslim component of these groups is therefore unknown. Another problem is that the census lists the *legal* Asian-Indian immigrants from countries such as Guyana, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh — 94,500 in 1990. The New York Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities each claim 50,000 immigrants, making a total of 100,000 Muslims from these countries alone. These communities count both legal and illegal residents and believe that all official figures should be doubled for a realistic representation.

According to Francis P. Vardy, New York City's demographer at the Department of City Planning, the Catholic archdiocese of New York tabu-

lates Catholics, the New York Council of Churches counts Protestants, the organized Jewish community supports a demographer, but no umbrella association exists to count Muslims.¹ As a coauthor of *The Newest New Yorkers* (Salvo et al. 1993), Vardy lists figures provided by the Immigration and Naturalization Service for legal immigrants (green card recipients) by country of origin. There is no information on their religion; for example the approximately 1,000 Israeli citizens who receive green cards every year in New York City include Jews, Arab Christians, and Arab Muslims.

City newspapers routinely estimate the Muslim population at between 500,000 and 850,000 legal and illegal, native and immigrant Muslims. These figures apply only to the population within the boundaries of New York City and disregard the South Asian spillover into adjacent Long Island suburbs and the growing Middle Eastern population across the Hudson River in New Jersey. In short, population figures are scattered, inconsistent, and open to challenge. In addition, the Pakistani organizers of the Muslim World Day Parade resisted my attempts to classify participants by ethnicity, insisting that the only worthy category was adherence to Islam. For these reasons, my account of the Muslim World Day Parade in New York City does not attempt to assess the representation of different ethnic groups in the parade. Instead, I investigate first the relationship between a street drama and the social context in which it is performed. I discuss second the connection between public enactments (a civic parade) and an additional event that transforms the nature of the Muslim World Day Parade, namely the evocation of the more private social life of the mosque. How do Muslim city dwellers in New York use public gatherings and vernacular dramatic techniques to propose ideas about social relations? More specifically, why have South Asian Muslims in New York City, a religious minority within a variety of ethnic minorities, brought together the disparate performative activities of procession and prayer to speak for the larger Muslim community to other New Yorkers? Why have they chosen the form of a parade?²

According to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Brooks McNamara, a parade is a subset term of "civic procession," which in turn belongs to the larger category of "processional performance." These authors descriptively characterize the parade as movement from one place to another that is symbolically and ceremonially resonant. The event consists of distinctive elements (costumes, music, floats, and so on) that distinguish it from everyday movement but are presented in ways comprehensible to spectators; it is functional and referential as well as religious, political, and social; and it may combine procession (movement) and station (significant stop-

ping).³ According to this definition, all parades have a performative character because they are about *spectacle* and how to present an impressive perambulatory event for display and entertainment to the public. Other students of civic parades refer to a Durkheimian paradigm in which parades, like great religious festivals, function as a social unifier. New York City's Puerto Rican Day Parade, for example, presents "a unity that masks internal political differences under a visible leadership" (Kasinitz and Freidenberg-Herbst 1987: 346) and it does so in order to mark out the place for Puerto Rican ascendancy in New York City's ethnically based political system. Parades can thus be seen as reinforcements of the ideologies that legitimize the inequalities of ethnic participation in the wider society. Other analysts of parades maintain that while presenting an imaginary unified ethnicity to the public, many ethnic parades also insist that Americanness resides in dual identification: to be a member of a specific ethnic subgroup is to be an American (Schneider 1990: 41).

In contrast, Susan Davis stresses the potential of parades for confrontation:

Parades do more than reflect society. Such public enactments, in their multiplicitous and varied forms, are not only patterned by social forces—they have been part of the very building and challenging of social relations. As dramatic representations, parades and public ceremonies are political acts: They have pragmatic objectives, and concrete material results. . . . As political acts, parades and ceremonies take place in a context of contest and confrontation. (1986: 5–6)

An extreme instance of contest and confrontation is the parade as a ceremony of subversion. In its annual Greenwich Village Halloween Parade, the lesbian and gay constituency promotes its vision of a Bakhtinian carnival that questions the legitimacy of the heterosexual and homophobic social and cultural order (Kugelmass 1991: 444). In California, Pasadena's century-old New Year's Day Rose Parade is currently mimicked and mocked by a consciously oppositional, "alternative" Doo Dah Parade established in 1977 (Lawrence 1982: 155).

It is likely that the Muslim World Day Parade, the self-assertion of a religious grouping, is nonetheless perceived by New Yorkers as yet another manifestation of ethnic pride. Such an impression may be encouraged by the visible presence of South Asian Muslims among the organizers and participants. There are no Catholic or Jewish parades (a Sikh parade is a recent addition to the New York City calendar), although the Catholic

church and archdiocese are given particular prominence during the Saint Patrick's Day Parade and Jewish religious institutions figure prominently in the Israel Day Parade. Though a parade reflects the religious, economic, and social bases of its primary support group, New Yorkers more readily perceive festive behavior as a manifestation of ethnic culture. It is possible to conjecture that Muslims in New York City, in order to gain political and economic power, are reconfiguring religion into ethnicity to take advantage of the discourse of ethnicity. Their parade may be a symbol of this effort. Ethnicity in America means that new immigrants are defined, as were the white ethnics of previous generations, as the latest wave of successful and potentially assimilable citizens. It seems that the parade organizers, as South Asian Muslims, must negotiate the paradoxical task of reconciling their pan-Islamic aspirations, which would lead them to include their African American coreligionists, and the need to distance themselves from the stigmatized race of African Americans. In interviews, parade organizers were not forthcoming about their relations with African American Muslims.

South Asians will undoubtedly succeed in inserting themselves into the New York political arena as white and ethnic new Americans. My own ethnographic fieldwork on urban mosques, for example, documents how a white, middle-class New York section of the Bronx readily accepted immigrant Muslim mosques in their neighborhood but rejected the presence of African American Muslim places of worship (Slyomovics n.d.).

The principal organizer of the Muslim World Day Parade is Naveed Anwar, a Pakistani businessman who is currently director of the Board of Trustees of the Muslim Foundation of America, an organization founded in 1984 as a cultural, nonprofit institution to promote better understanding between Islam and other religions and ethnic communities in the tristate area. Another prime mover is Muhammad Abdul Munim, publisher and journalist of the *Minaret*, an English-language newspaper established in 1974 to serve the Muslim community in New York City.

Why a parade? The organizers told me: "New York City is a city of parades. We saw other parades show their communities' strength, so we thought we have to do this too." The principle evoked is one of ceremonial copying. Participants reproduce parades and civic pageants, thereby offering their interpretation of the history of the city. It is a history constructed by the organizers and participants of each event, and the Muslim World Day Parade moving from Thirty-third Street to Twenty-third Street unfolds in ceremonially and symbolically distinctive ways.⁴

The familiar accoutrements of the New York City ethnic parade are present both in the Muslim World Day Parade and in another allied festive national event, the Pakistan Independence Day Parade, which takes place on the last Sunday in August and moves along approximately the same route down Lexington Avenue from Forty-seventh Street to Twenty-third Street. It is noteworthy that many of the South Asian organizers and participants of the Muslim World Day Parade are also involved in their own Pakistan national day celebration. They also participate in the Ashura Day Parade, another strictly Muslim religious event in Manhattan. Ashura Day was originally organized by the Chicago-based Jafria Association of North America in 1973; the first New York City march was held in 1986. Ashura commemorates the death of Imam Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and the son of the fourth Caliph Ali, who fell in 680 A.D. at the battle of Kerbela. The date is marked as a day of mourning by Shiite Muslims, who regard the (Sunni) caliphs who succeeded Ali as heretical and illegitimate. The Ashura procession moves from East Fiftieth Street through Manhattan's chic Upper East Side to the Pakistani consulate at East Sixty-fifth Street. The constellation of three parades with their overlapping constituencies has provided South Asian Muslims with three ceremonial occasions to advertise their presence in the city's social mosaic.

An important indicator of the power of an ethnic group in the city is the route to which the parade is assigned. In the hierarchy of New York City ethnic parades, Fifth Avenue, the most coveted venue, is reserved by provisions of the City Charter for older and now powerful ethnic groups: the Irish, Jews, Italians, Germans, Poles, Greeks, and Hispanics. Latecomers, such as the Koreans, Pakistanis, Sikhs, Indians, Dominicans, Cubans, and Muslims are relegated to Lexington, Sixth Avenue, Broadway, or, lowest on the urban grid, Battery Park, the southern tip of Manhattan.⁵ In contrast, subversive or carnivalesque parades take place far from the customary routes of civic pageantry. Their organizers deliberately choose the artistic, bohemian, or urban counterculture neighborhoods, such as Pasadena's Old Town and New York City's Greenwich Village.

New York City is so famous for its numerous and annually proliferating parades that in 1991 the cost to the city—in overtime police fees alone—to oversee about 760 parades (168 in Manhattan, 200 in the Bronx, 142 in Queens, 171 in Brooklyn, and 83 on Staten Island) and 3,000 street events was estimated at nine million dollars by Mayor David Dinkins, who hoped to issue fewer parade permits. A *New York Times* article analyzing the ethnic rivalries that would ensue from such a cost-cutting measure quoted

Capt. William Strizl of the Police Department's parade permits division: "For decades the city has had a policy of issuing street event permits to any group that applied for one, providing that the event could be accommodated. 'We've looked upon it, having a parade, as an exercise in people's rights'" (Sims 1992b: B3). Provisionally, a limit of sixty parades per year was imposed for the city's major artery, Fifth Avenue.

The 1990 Muslim World Day Parade

New York City civic and ethnic parades are paradigmatically patterned on the oldest and most famous one, namely the 230-year-old Saint Patrick's Day Parade, which belongs to all Americans and has become an American national holiday (Kelton 1985: 104). Much parade grammar has already been established by the Irish example: forward movement in solemn military march formation, groups or institutions marching together with identifying signs, floats, accompanying marching bands, ethnic costumes, high school and student organizations, and a civic and military presence. The Muslim World Day Parade, like other ethnic parades, represents both continuity with the archetypal New York City parade and innovative departures from that mold. The Saint Patrick's Day Parade might, for example, partially account for why the Pakistan Independence Day Parade included a marching band, in fact the Irish-American Shamrock Marching Band playing "Yankee Doodle." A Pakistani bystander pointed out to me, perhaps facetiously, that the Irish-American band musicians were also wearing the Islamic color green, thereby underscoring not only the polysemic nature of symbols but also that cooptation is a two-way street.

Two bands figured in the Muslim World Day Parade. The first lead group was the Edgewater Park Fife and Drum Corps, an Irish marching band from the Bronx dressed in American Revolutionary War costumes. They too played "Yankee Doodle." They marched alongside the Sufi Tariqa of the Shazliyya-Burhaniyya confraternity, a Sufi brotherhood whose leadership is based in Sudan. The Sufi followers provided an expressive musical and performative counterpoint as they repetitively and rhythmically chanted, "La-illaha-illa-llah" (There is no God but Allah). This particular Sufi group holds its *zikr* (a Sufi form of prayer) every Saturday night in the Bronx, and each year they are the only group to provide song and movement somewhat rooted in the culture of the marchers. There was also a New Orleans-style African American jazz band that played "When the

Saints Go Marching In” throughout the march. The desire to incorporate some of the elements that define a New York City civic parade, but with distinctive touches, accounts for the simultaneous presence of Irish bands and Sufi adepts. It was the Sufis, however, who were continuously reproached by various parade marshals for breaching decorum with their overly ecstatic dances. They also tended to march sideways, backwards, or in circles, in contrast to the Irish marching band, whose forward movements in solemn military formation were deemed entirely appropriate.

The choice of bands was negotiated between the organizers of the parade and the major band broker for New York City, Joe Heineman. In an interview, Heineman described his duties during the Muslim World Day Parade: he coordinates the parade, deals with setup and takedown, and acts as a liaison with the various municipal offices. Heineman takes credit for advising the Muslim Day Parade committee to hire bands from different Irish-American and African American backgrounds, “to give it a little flair,” he said, “a little showmanship for the people on the street.” The Sufi musicians were not an official band but a recognized group of marchers in the community represented by the parade. Their ecstatic style challenged not only the canons of presenting a religious identity in a civic parade but also the nature of orthodox Islam as it may have been understood by the parade organizers.

The Muslim World Day Parade began at 2:00 P.M. First, the marchers transformed the intersection of Lexington Avenue and Thirty-third Street into a communal praying space or outdoor mosque. Transparent plastic strips placed on a diagonal axis oriented the worshippers to the true east, thereby imposing geographical as well as religious correctness on what appears to be the true north-south and east-west axes of the Manhattan street grid (which in fact are false axes). For the non-Muslim spectator there is a clash of perceptions when an everyday locale of Lexington Avenue is inscribed by a new group with its own interpretation of the city as a transient sacred location. On one Sunday in each year, Muslim ritual space and time invest a civic location with alternative, albeit ephemeral, meanings. An area of Lexington Avenue, prosaically commercial during the weekday, is remapped first into Muslim praying space and then into a trajectory of processional movement. The creation of an ephemeral mosque praying space on the ground competes with the surrounding built environment of skyscrapers and secular advertising. As Yi-Fu Tuan notes, it is clear that the city is a place of highly visible symbols, but that “the city itself is a symbol . . . achieving power and eminence through the scale and solemnity

of its rites and festivals" (1977: 173). It is not merely a stage on which to enact inherited cultural repertoires; urban life is an "urban frontier," an arena in which to invent festival sites and behavior (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1983: 180).

Worshippers bowing to the true geographical east must turn toward a northeast Manhattan street corner. A mass of diagonal axes is created as hundreds of worshippers line up to pray in unison (see Figures 6.1 and 6.2). The result is that parade leaders and worshippers performing their religious duties directly face marchers and floats prepared to perform their civic duties, as well as groups gathered at the northeast corner. Each year the parade is significantly delayed as it reorients participants from the direction toward Mecca (due northeast) to the customary parade route southward down Lexington Avenue. The clash between two modes of gathering creates distinctive rhythms and a dramatic structure that segregates the majority of participant-believers from a minority of secular onlookers. The parade begins by realigning categories of participation and viewing: Muslim prayer segregates Muslim believers from non-Muslims but at the same time intermingles Muslim onlookers and parade participants. Mounted New York City police facing southward in a single row of four to six set the tempo and direction for any ethnic parade. If the ethnic group is politically powerful, they are followed by a limousine carrying the current mayor of New York. The police establish norms necessary to conduct a parade: forward directional movement, an ordering of participants, and obedience to the urban street grid. In the case of the Muslim World Day Parade, the police reestablish these norms after the period of prayer. The parade announces its start with a prominent symbol of national authority, the line of all-male mounted police followed by a phalanx of all-male parade flagbearers displaying flags of countries with Muslim populations. Each year the head of the Afghan community, an unusually tall, imposing figure, leads the lines of dignitaries and parade organizers (see Figure 6.3). It is an ecumenical day, uniting three religions with representatives from the Catholic archdiocese and the New York Board of Rabbis. A rare female presence in the line of dignitaries was Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger.

Despite the presence of non-Muslim politicians and Irish and New Orleans-style bands, what we are seeing is the temporary creation of Muslim space on a New York City avenue. This is achieved, I claim, by combining two seemingly disparate forms: on the one hand, there is the evanescent format of a civic procession, resembling that of an ethnic or



Figures 6.1 and 6.2. The Muslim World Day Parade: Lexington Avenue and Thirty-third Street transformed into an outdoor mosque. (Photo: Susan Slyomovics)



Figure 6.3. The Muslim World Day Parade: Opening parade of flags headed by the Afghan community leader. (Photo: Susan Slyomovics)

national day parade; and on the other hand, there are representations of mosques, those solid architectural structures that usually signify permanently occupied places. The mosques are cardboard and papier-mâché representations of Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock and the Black Stone, or Kaaba, of Mecca; they float down Lexington Avenue as emblems of the New York City Muslim community. I recall that the floating Kaaba provoked an exclamation of wonder from a bystander who was unknown to me. He exclaimed, "Only in America," and then said there is an Islamic tradition that only at the end of days would the Kaaba become unmoored from Mecca and float freely.

In the next section, I elaborate on the significance of mosque floats as spectacle and the relationship of parade participants to sacred writing.

Writing and Signs

What characterizes the Muslim World Day Parade and sets it apart from other parades is not so much the fact that it is a civic procession organized

by a religious group, but the singularly important role of signs, which frame the event. Parading banners or carrying the word becomes the main feature if not the point of the parade. This emphasis is underlined by the paucity or absence of other classic parade attractions, such as scantily clad females — in fact, the general lack of women on display on floats is noteworthy. The only exception to this rule is a single float in the Pakistan Independence Day Parade. Because there is a significant overlap between executive committees of that event and the Muslim World Day Parade, however, it is worth mentioning the presence of a possibly idolatrous representation of the human female form that appeared on one of the parade floats. It was the iconic figure of the woman who guards New York harbor and welcomes new immigrants, the Statue of Liberty. Here, she was backed by a map of Pakistan. The Pakistan Independence Day Parade organizers thus expressed their idea of the parade as a day to educate the younger generation born in the United States about the history of their parents' immigration to a nation of immigrants and to inculcate pride in their two countries. America's most recognizable icon superimposed on a map of the old country was the symbol of pride in a dual national and cultural heritage.

In the Muslim World Day Parade there is no Statue of Liberty, no costumed dancing troupes, parade queens, beauty pageant princesses, performers, acrobats, stilt-walkers, or giant balloons. The unifying characteristic of the marchers is Islamic dress, defined to me as clothing that covers the body. According to the New York City police captain in charge, the Muslim parade never has an alcohol problem, unlike many parades, including the infamous Saint Patrick's Day Parade, which has in recent years been forced to institute stringent alcohol consumption regulation. In the 1989 Saint Patrick's Day Parade, 3,237 police were called out to maintain order at a cost to the city of \$473,000 in overtime pay, and the Sanitation Department estimated an extra \$30,000 per event to clean up (Sims 1992a: 6).

For the pleasure and education of the viewers, Muslim marchers were colorful ethnic dress and, most significant, carry signs. They do so for two main purposes, one of which is to identify themselves as members of a specific Islamic organization. Identification by means of signs contributes to the spectators' gaining knowledge through the presentation of an unfolding, written narrative about the breadth of Islam in the world or about its presence on the local scene. Banners proclaim the existence of the Islamic Society of Staten Island, the Chinese Muslim organization, and PIEDAD, the acronym for the emerging Hispanic Muslim community (see Figure 6.4). In the last case, the juxtaposition of Islam with New York's Hispanic



Figures 6.4 and 6.5. The Muslim World Day Parade: Texts and organizations. (Photo: Susan Slyomovics)

community is only made manifest by the message of the banner, which is legible and knowable in immediate, informative ways not evidenced by the banner's carriers: the marchers' distinctive combination of Hispanic ethnicity and Muslim religious identification were remarked upon by the spectators only after they read the sign — without the scorecard you cannot identify the players.

A second way Muslim marchers carry their message is by means of signs quoting sayings or Koranic verses explaining Islam. To help the onlookers, signs are mainly in English so that we can read the ambulating sacred texts. There are parallels here to the language of cinema, in which overtitles are used to identify speakers to the viewers, or the very words of the speakers are translated in subtitles. In some ways, signs enable participants to identify themselves and to bring forth complex utterances about religious faith. For example, the Muslim credo, "There is no God but Allah the One, the Absolute, the Almighty, One Creator, One Humanity," appears on a large white banner followed in marching succession by the names of Jewish and Christian prophets recognized by Islam and ending with Muhammad, the last seal of prophecy: Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad (see Figure 6.5). Many signs emphasize Islam's inclusive embrace of figures identified with Judeo-Christian religions, all of whom are honored by Islam.

A sign is an act of reading and writing on a two-dimensional surface. With their banners, marchers are mapping onto three-dimensional real space analogues of a two-dimensional text. A different kind of literacy is being learned, one in which sacred Muslim texts are aligned with images of parading South Asian men and women. Islamic religious meanings are nonuniversal for New Yorkers and must be made explicit. The result is that the Koranic texts and sayings cannot be unmediated copies of the actual book. The information that is conveyed is the outcome of a culturally determined relationship in which Muslim New Yorkers choose appropriate messages to translate. They are embedded in a complex political argument about the influx of new immigrants, their shared but dissimilar heritage, and what their place is in the city. To convey these ideas, Muslims represent their community through image making and calligraphy, spectacle and artifice.

A float that appeared at the fifth (but not the sixth) annual Muslim World Day Parade layered yet another level of representation by means of architectural three-dimensionality. This float was an immense, magnified Koran, in the shape of an open book awaiting readers on its stand. It too

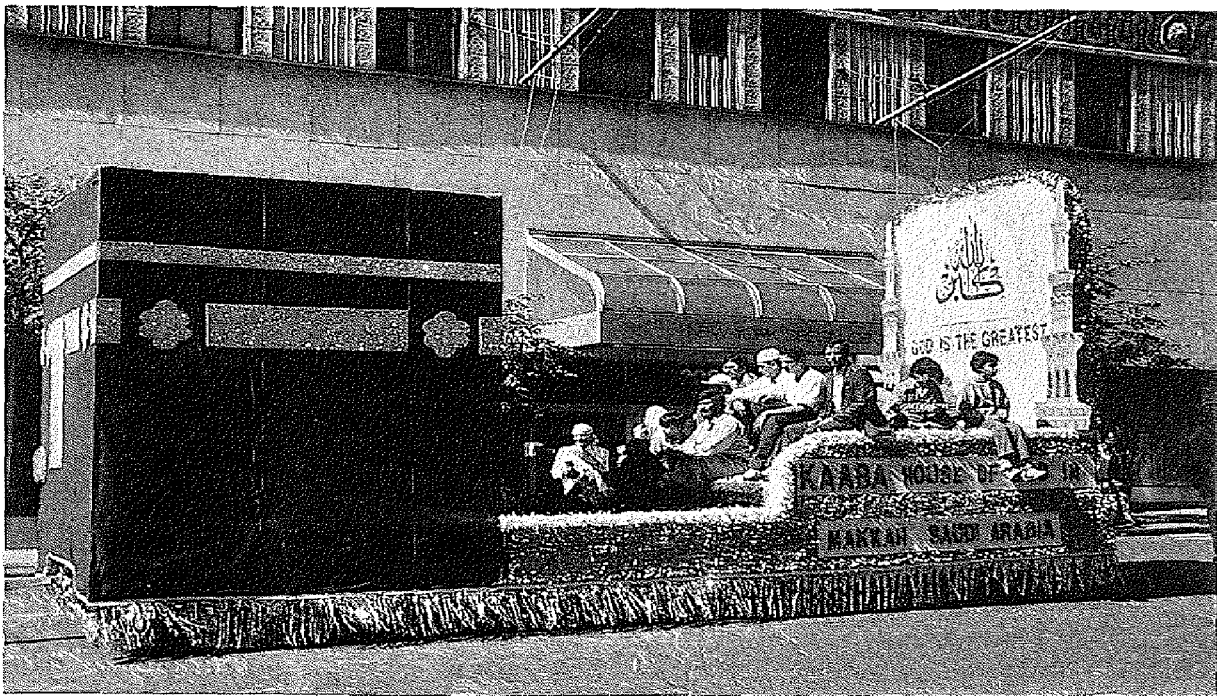


Figure 6.6. The Muslim World Day Parade: The Kaaba of Mecca as a float. (Photo: Susan Slyomovics)

rested on a large platform, around which could be read a caption quoting a verse that serendipitously described both the religious path of scripture and the secular pathway that is Lexington Avenue: “Verily this Koran guides unto that path which is the straightest.” Sacred writing achieved a transcendent three-dimensional power enhanced by its slow and stately motion through space. The image of the floating Koran became a more complex statement than its well-known words inscribed along the sides of the float: the image subsumed the words. This particular image functioned as a metaphorical representation of creative communal responses to the demands of New York City parades and the strictures within Islam against figurative representation.

Other parade floats represented a more familiar three-dimensionality. For these floats, the organizers chose three additional cultural symbols for their educational and religious value. The first float was the Kaaba, the Black Stone of Mecca and the holiest shrine in Islam, a tradition going back to the time of Abraham (see Figure 6.6). The Kaaba was a center to which all the Arab tribes returned for trade, poetic contests, and worship. It is still sacred territory, an inviolable sanctuary of refuge. Between the fifth and

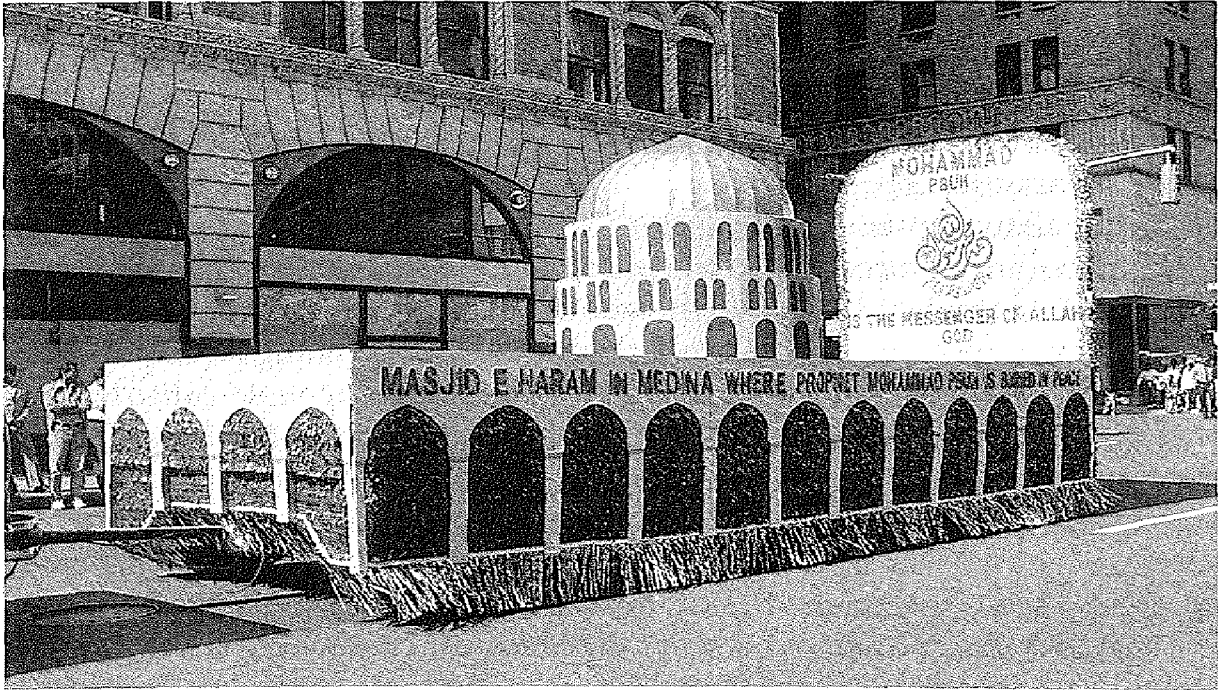


Figure 6.7. The Muslim World Day Parade: The Masjid al-Haram of Medina as a float. (Photo: Susan Slyomovics)

sixth annual parade, an explanatory title, “Mecca,” was added to the floating Kaaba to give the reader-spectator a location marker. Similarly, the second float, a replica of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, exhibited increased signs from one year to the next. The third float, the Masjid al-Haram of Medina, was the third of the three sacred sites of Islam (see Figure 6.7).

According to Robert DeVito, who owns the Bond Parade Float Company and who designs and builds most of New York City’s parade floats (with the exception of the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade), it costs approximately twenty-five hundred dollars to construct a float such as the Dome of the Rock mosque of Jerusalem. (Compare this to the replica of Columbus’s boat, the *Santa Maria*, which was built for the Italian-American Columbus Day Parade at a cost of twenty-five thousand dollars). Floats are owned by the various ethnic parade committees but stored and refurbished at the Bond Company premises in Clifton, New Jersey. This system means that among groups with shared cultural symbols—such as the Greeks and the Turks, who both present a float of Saint Sofia of Constantinople or Istanbul—each group must own and pay for its own replica, because both the American system of individually duplicated own-

ership of product and the political enmity between Greeks and Turks ensure that neither group would ever agree to split the high costs of their shared symbol.

A fourth mosque float in the Muslim World Day Parade represented a local construction project, the new Muslim Center of Queens, which exists, as of the sixth annual parade (1991), only as a float. When the reality it represents, an architecturally purposeful mosque and Muslim center in Queens, is completed in 1995, it will house a library, a mosque, a gymnasium, a school, and a meeting center for the growing community of South Asian Muslims in the borough of Queens.

As the floats and participants turned westward from Madison Avenue toward the parade's end and entered the square at Broadway and Twenty-third Street, they passed a reviewing stand. Local dignitaries, representatives of the mayor's office, and heads of New York City mosques made speeches about brotherhood, community, and the "gorgeous mosaic" that is New York. Beginning at the viewing section and stretching southward for a few blocks were food stands, book stalls, and tables with literature from the various Muslim organizations. The parade marchers melted into the crowd, picnicking and browsing, or gathered at the far end of the square where a large platform had been erected for speakers and musicians. The procession ended by 4:30 P.M. and the speakers and stands disappeared at sunset.

Meaning and Community

Theoreticians of parades claim that in this particular civic pageant Muslims produce parallel versions of ceremonies and events to reassure the larger society that even Muslims accept and join in American pluralism. New immigrants may alter details of civic festive behavior but the result still recognizably replicates the host population's institutions, now common to the immigrants. I would emphasize, however, that at the same time Muslims are actors in a history that differs from that of their onlookers.

In the context of the opening prayer held on the street, the attempt to represent oneself to an outside world is much less marked than the obvious self-representation of the march which then culminates in the Muslim organizers' hospitably hosting a food fair. The parade is framed by, and must be seen in relation to, both the activity of communal prayer that precedes it and the communal feast that ends it. For example, the parade's

beginning with a mass prayer shows that Islamic ritual practice is portable, it can be established anywhere, and it secures meaning and community for participants.

The organizers also believed that the event would be an all-day affair for most of the participants. Surely, they told me when I asked about the food fair, with people marching and moving from morning to evening, you must give them a chance to rest, to freshen up, to meet each other, to eat, and to pray. They maintained that the Muslim World Day Parade was not solely a parade, a matter of showing who they were to themselves and to non-Muslim New Yorkers; rather, the parade was an American setting for an exchange, for everybody to spend time together. Therefore what was needed was prayer, food, and a stationary gathering (not a moving procession) in which participants eat at the same time as they listen to speeches or music.

The day is temporally segmented, but the segments are not necessarily differentiated in terms of Durkheim's classic formulation of the segregation of the sacred from the profane. Instead two spheres of life are marked: one in which Islamic ritual is clearly practiced as the opening prayer sequence, and a second one, in which a composite construction is forged from acquired practices, inherited traditions, and new solutions to the urban experience.

For example, Abdul Munim, one of the parade's organizers, shares the views of Edward Said. They both believe that to speak of Islam in America today is to mean only unpleasant things: "Americans have only the opportunity to view the Islamic world reductively, coercively, and oppositionally" (Said 1981: 9, 51). According to Abdul Munim, Americans judge Islam by television images showing mobs burning Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses* or chanting, "Death to America." To illustrate the concerns of the Muslim World Day Parade organizers, Munim told me of the opinions of a Catholic priest who participated in the parade. The priest objected to the constant loud call and response of the *takbir*: any marcher can cry out "takbir" (say God is great), which is inevitably followed by the shouted mass response, "Allahu akbar" (God is great). The priest counseled that for Americans the *takbir* formula acoustically resonates with memories of anti-American demonstrations in Teheran that were shown daily on television newscasts during the years of the Iran hostage crisis. In order to avoid offending American sensibilities, he felt, they should eliminate this feature of ritual behavior. The organizers debated at length among themselves whether to eliminate the identifying cry; they were concerned with the

image of Muslims in a Christian (albeit secularized) American culture. They intuitively recognized that crowds of Muslims may spell danger to the American public.⁶ Nonetheless, they concluded that the *takbir* must be kept in the parade but that the parade participants must take care to act in such a manner as to ensure that the phrase *Allahu akbar* could never be perceived by New Yorkers as an expression of Islamic anger.

By retaining a traditional practice, open to misunderstanding, and by contextualizing it in the familiar, the parade could glide over the meanings of social acts and words derived solely from religion: Muslim rituals could operate simultaneously with secular parade rituals.⁷ The result was that the parade does not always keep events apart. Sometimes the two worlds of foreign religion and urban secular American culture clashed, confusing not only Catholic priests but also Sufi musicians who, for varying reasons, resist mixing the two domains. An ethnic parade should exclude frightening religious practices, but a Muslim procession should include Sufi ecstatic dance.

One way the domains mix is through the use of space. Although time may be a way to differentiate the separate moments of prayer, procession, and food fair, the shared space in which these events take place effectively counterbalances any attempt at sustaining mutually exclusive spheres. It is the city and its streets that give prominence to the events and encourage attendance at all three. In temporal terms, the Muslim moment in New York City is ephemeral; spatially the city's linear street grid works to blend together the disparate elements of competing symbolic realms. For one day each year, a religious collectivity within a larger society is recognized by outsiders as an ethnic group. For the occasion, its architectural symbol is the mosque, which has also become a social center for the Muslim immigrant community in the city.

New York City is a center for cultural production and it plays a prominent part in a process Hobsbawm has called "the invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). In Europe, modern nation-states making their transition from monarchy to republic consolidate their power by constructing modes of communication and edification, ceremonies and rituals that are designed to help citizens understand relationships between government and the people and history. In the United States this process has been somewhat different from that in Europe because the creation of traditions such as the ethnic parade has been more *laissez-faire*, a recourse for those who want to use spectacles and performances for their own purposes.

One purpose of the parade is to introduce non-Muslims to pan-Islamic visual symbols. Arabic writing is generally considered to be a uniquely coherent and consistent vehicle with a wide range of meanings.⁸ Perhaps the Muslim World Day Parade is part of a development in which calligraphy — the embellishment of writing, a basic element of Islamic art — is used in new ways that are adapted to the American setting. For Muslims, writing remains a culturally constant, discrete, and clearly identifiable form. Nonetheless, radical changes in its language, alphabet, dimensionality, function, and context have taken place in response to the particularity of a New York City civic pageant and the aesthetic demands of such an occasion.

Parades are public and publicly dramatize social relations. Participants define who can be a social actor and what subjects and ideas should be accommodated and presented. When the parade organizers imagined and proposed new images for Islam, they not only defined images of Muslim identity but were in turn shaped by their actions. Their images of mosques riding on floats, of the Koran itself as a parade float, and calligraphic enhancement of writing by motion through space point to the dynamic processes by which immigrants invent a new vocabulary for putting on public celebrations.

A Muslim civic parade highlights issues with its innovative use of signs, the claims on secular space for prayer and the call to prayer, the creation of images, the orientation to the traditional east, and the presentation of the Muslim self to the American public. In regard to the issue of the *takbir*, the call and response of “God is great,” however, it should be noted that Muslims occupying public space in New York City must for the time being lower the volume. They must modulate the passion of the *takbir* and Sufi brotherhoods; likewise, they must obey city noise codes that prohibit the amplified call to prayer five times a day. What Muslims in America articulate ritually about Islam in public should be heard as friendly, accommodating, and familiar, it should not be overheard, and at best it should still be heard only among their own.

Notes

1. The American Muslim Council, a nonprofit organization established in 1990 in Washington, D.C., to serve the interests of the Muslim community in the United States, lists as one of its goals to prepare the first-ever comprehensive demographic study of United States Muslims. The group claims five to six million resident Muslims.

2. For an overview of urban folklore and its historical and methodological concerns with the city, see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1983.

3. See the special issue on processional performance in *The Drama Review* (1985), and the introduction by Brooks McNamara and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett.

4. The principle of ceremonial copying also applies to another venerable New York City institution: suspension of alternate-side-of-the-street parking for religious feast days. Muslim leaders lobbying City Hall for *Id al-Fitr* at the end of Ramadan and *Id al-Adha* were quoted: "It would mean when we look at the overall picture of America itself, we would see equity with Christianity and Judaism in terms of being honored and respected" (Liff 1992: 8).

5. In some cases—for example, the Greenwich Village Halloween Parade—parades take place on home territory; the West Indian Carnival procession on Labor Day marches down Eastern Parkway, a largely West Indian area of Brooklyn. In contrast, the Lesbian and Gay Parade, a more public and civic declaration, marches south from Central Park down Broadway.

6. See also Dorman and Farhang 1987, Ghareeb 1983, and Shaheen 1984.

7. See Bodnar 1991, which emphasizes not only the contested nature of commemoration but that public memory will always alter the past to fit the politics of the present.

8. See, for example, the writings of historians and art historians such as Oleg Grabar, Annemarie Schimmel, and Franz Rosenthal.

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