For centuries Islam has provided a set of cultural norms, principles of social organization, legal prescriptions and often instruments of political mobilization for many communities. It has therefore contributed substantially to the articulation of urban environments. However, Islam has not shaped 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. As this notion is representative of an ideal type, it clearly exists in 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 mercantile values and a tradition of cosmopolitanism which throughout history shaped urban systems. In 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 provided by sectarian assumptions or 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 religious and political expression 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 attachment to both political and economic realities. From the late 19th century, the articulation of Shi’i networks which centred upon mut’ams (funeral houses) played a central role in the expansion of a number of Manama’s residential areas. The history of mut’ams 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 mut’am 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. Mut’ams are multi-functional organizations which, similar to the Iranian houmayyems, are the venues for the celebration of Ashura, a close association between which commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Husayn and for the dissemination of Shi’i teachings and traditions. Mut’ams are also informal places of leisure and socialization where non-Shi’i are usually welcome. Until the end of the 19th century, mut’ams were simultaneously a site of ritual performance which commemorated the martyrdom of Imam Husayn and the dissemination of Shi’i teachings and traditions. Mut’ams have become strongly identified with the urban landscape as it seems that no ‘official’ mut’am was established outside Manama before the mid-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 the period, mut’ams became the architectural sign of the Shi’is ‘love for Husayn’. As such, they were particularly inextricable in the consolidation of immi- grant groups within expanding Shi’i neighbour- hoods. For instance, the mut’am 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 Mushtab, 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 mut’am al-Abu’l-‘A’in in 1895 in the Muharraq dis- trict defined a new urban identity for many Shi’i immigrants from al-Hasa, a coastal re- gion located in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia. In this period many mut’ams 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 dif- ferentiated rural areas from expanding urban settlements. The establishment of permanent masonry buildings for mut’am purposes, and indeed their maintenance, required substantial capital. Thus the mut’am boom of the 1890s has been 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’ mut’ams was an indication of religious piety but it increasingly became a sign of wealth and so- cial prestige.

Urban forms and Sunni authority

The spatial distribution of mut’am build- ings in Manama would indicate that Shi’i places of worship gathered the highest density in 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 waqf. Although many Shi’i entrepreneurs who supported mut’ams from 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 waqf for the benefit of specific funerary houses. A useful comparison can be made with many Iranian cities where houmayyems, the local counter- parts of the Bahraini mut’ams, were inte- grated in large-scale projects, such as the mausolea of the Shi’i mercantile community, and for the dissemination of Shi’i teachings and traditions.

Notes

