RITUAL MOVEMENT AND TERRITORIALITY DURING THE REIGN OF HUMAYUN

Introduction

The literature on Mughal culture displays an enduring interest in the essence of “the Mughal garden”, “the Mughal city”, and “the Great Mogol” himself. This search for the essence of Mughal places is part of a much broader fascination with Islamic or Oriental culture. Buildings are regarded as the expression of “archetypes”, or “ideal-types” that distinguish Oriental cultures from all others. Romantic accounts dwell upon the symbolic meaning of Mughal projects. The more scholastic investigations construct elaborate typologies and catalogues to show how objects and places were related to the ideal forms that inspired them.

Preoccupation with the essence and form of Indo-Islamic culture has come under severe criticism in recent years (Said, 1978; Inden, 1986). Indeed, one of the aims of this conference on ritual movement is to recenter the discussion — away from an emphasis on the static forms of Mughal environmental design and toward the dynamic processes through which places were constructed and experienced. The challenge is to set people and places in motion and to thereby gain a more dynamic understanding of how architecture, landscape architecture, and urban design operated in Mughal social history.

This challenge is by no means unique to Indo-Islamic studies of the late twentieth century. It is a perennial problem in Western social thought, expressed quite nicely in Socrates’ challenge to Timaeus after he described the attributes of the ideal city: 

I may now go on to tell you how I feel about the society we have described. I feel rather like a man who has been looking at some noble creatures in a painting, or perhaps some real animals, alive but motionless, and who conceives a desire to watch them in motion and actively exercising the powers promised by their form. This is just what I feel about the city we have described: I should like to hear an account of her putting forth her strength in such contests as a city will engage in against others, going to war in a manner worthy of her, and in that war achieving results befitting her training and education, both in feats of arms and in negotiations with various other states (Timaeus, pp. 5-6).

Interestingly, Plato did not finish the dialogue in which this task was to be fulfilled. The account of the ideal city in motion remains hopelessly founedered upon the mythical shoals of Atlantis (Critias).

Few critics of idealism would be surprised at the failure and the futility of this venture. To set the world in motion one has to privilege process over form, becoming over being, transformation over essence, and indeterminacy over fact. The Timaeus and all subsequent brands of idealism refuse to do this. To focus on “ritual movement” in the Mughal landscape is to take at least one step away from those brands of scholarship that produced such terms as the Islamic garden, the Mughal garden, and the Islamic city. These expressions all revolve around one type of question: What is the Islamic city? What is the Mughal city? What is a Mughal garden? What is a chahar bagh? What is Oriental society? These are the Platonic “what is” questions. They work against a quite different set of questions that are more process-oriented: How were gardens constructed during the early Mughal period? How were cities reconstructed during shifts in power and economic production? How did territorial or social struggles play themselves out in the construction and experience of urban architecture? How did innovations develop? How did places change in their form and meaning over time? Rather than ask what these places were, we want to ask what they did.

I will be arguing here for a processual and open perspective on ritual movement, concentrating on its territorial character in Mughal landscape history. Emphasis will be placed on the reign of Humayun, which left little in the way of enduring architectural or territorial accomplishments, but which nonetheless involved extraordinary processes of ritual experimentation that influenced subsequent architectural and social development. I will begin with some of the theoretical issues bound up in the terms “ritual” and “territoriality” so as to avoid the mistake of simply mapping ritual action onto architectural form or architectural action onto ritual form.

Perspectives on Ritual

Investigation of ritual movement does not necessarily represent a major break with the idealist tradition. It would be fatal to my argument to define ritual as a type of formal routine, unchanging in structure, function, or meaning. For example: in Herbert Spencer’s writings ritual serves a common function, which is to maintain the operating structure of the social organism. In modern ecological
terms, this view of ritual emphasizes its role for "systems maintenance" or "systems control". Emile Durkheim's (1965) investigation of "ritual attitudes", although less ecological, still stressed the social functions of religious rites. Rites for Durkheim are a form of causal reasoning that operate within characteristic social structures and help to reproduce them. Even Levi-Straus (1966) falls into this camp with his distinction between ritual and play. In play, only the rules are specified, but in ritual both the rules and outcomes are known to the participants.

Levi-Straus's distinction between ritual and play underscores the view of ritual as an activity where everything (actors, plot, rules, and outcomes) is "fixed". As Stanley Tambiah put it more recently:

Ritual is a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication. It is constituted of patterned and ordered sequence of words and acts...whose content and arrangement are characterized in varying degree by formality (conventionality), stereotypy (rigidity), condensation (fusion), and redundancy (repetition). [1979]

Conventionality, stereotypy, condensation, and redundancy — this is the language of unchanging forms.

These views of ritual get nowhere close to my aim of showing how ritual can transform people or places; or for showing how ritual operates historically and geographically. To do that we need to pick up a line of social research that begins with Arnold van Gennep's Rites of Passage. Van Gennep argued that ritual punctuates the stages of life — from birth through childhood, initiation, marriage, and ultimately death. Rites of passage through time are closely linked with Van Gennep's notion of a "territorial passage". The territorial passage is an encounter with the external "signs" and "protocols" that guide one through the process of individual and social transformation. Territorial passage involves not an abstract or metric space; but rather a movement between different realms of cultural expectation, constraint, and possibility. The ritual space may be as small and concrete as the rooms of a house, or as vast and abstract as the heavens of the universe. Territorial passage is transforming as well as maintaining. And sometimes the transformations are unpredictable.

Victor Turner took this processual view of ritual several steps forward. Turner argued that ritual does not simply guide movement from one structural state to another. It also guides a community's dialectical encounter with structure and what he termed "anti-structure". While ritual encounter can reproduce social structure, as the functionalists have argued, it can also drive a creative restructuring which may or may not be entirely controlled; and if uncontrolled or fouled up in any way, it can lead to crisis and conflict.

One of the more dramatic examples of ritual gone awry in modern ethnography is found in Clifford Geertz's essay on "Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example". Geertz describes a case in which a young Muslim boy's funeral rites, when disturbed by both local circumstances and broader historical trends, went out of control, or, as Geertz put it in a classic understatement, failed to function properly. He concluded that ritual is a vehicle of cultural systems maintainance, not social systems maintenance, and that we need to view social and cultural systems as quasi-independent. By studying the relationships between social and cultural systems over time, we gain a more dynamic historical understanding of how rituals function. Geertz implies that "dynamic functionalism" can help us better understand the relations between ritual and social change, but neither he nor Tambiah show how ritual processes actually operate in space and time. Tambiah tells us that the task...is to specify the conditions under which rituals...take opposite turnings: to the right when they begin to lose their semantic component and come to serve mainly the pragmatic interests of authority, privilege, and sheer conservativism; and to the left when committed believers, faced with a decline of referential meaning...strive to infuse purified meaning into traditional forms". But Tambiah's idea of ritual as performance offers little insight into the latter process, in large part because his notion of performance remains estranged from history and geography. The transformative character of ritual can only be apperceived in the historical relations between landscape, territory, and social action.

Ritual and Territoriality

An example of ritual gone awry in Mughal history occurred after Humayun's defeat and near drowning at Chausa in 1539 (Humayun-nama, 140). A water carrier (afat) saved the king from drowning, and in reward he was placed upon the throne for a day and offered
whatever he desired. Offering such boons to a menial hero can be seen as an irregular instance of ritual status reversal. The menial is temporarily raised up; the nobles are temporarily brought down. OK in principle; but when the defeated Humayun placed the aftabji on the throne, his nobles were openly disgusted and humiliated, rather than properly grateful to the lowly hero. Under the circumstances, Humayun’s action went far beyond the bounds of proper ritual behavior. By giving the aftabji a place where he did not belong, and by doing so at the wrong time, Humayun reinforced that emerging historical judgement that he was not fit to occupy that special place himself (i.e., the throne) or the territory it represented. The context of the rite helps explain its failure for Humayun.

Before continuing with the analysis of Mughal ritual, we need to get a clearer sense of how the term “territoriality” will be used here. Following Robert Sack, I do not regard human territoriality as in any way an instinct analogous to biological and ethological models of animal behavior. Territory will be defined here “as a strategy, whereby an individual or group attempts to affect, influence, or control people, phenomena, and relationships by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area” (Sack, p. 19). Just as in the case of ritual, we are more interested in what territorially does, than in what it is.

Sack developed an elaborate theoretical framework of the varieties and tendencies of territoriality. The ideas most pertinent to this study are: first, that territoriality involves a process of classification (differentiation) by area; second, that it involves communication through various types of signs and forms; and third, that it involves various processes of enforcement and restructuring (some of which have a ritual character). Territoriality is in this sense a social process which is articulated and experienced through various geographical and architectural rites.

There are special problems involved in studying ritual movement and territoriality during Humayun’s reign. Archeological and graphic evidence is severely limited. Most of the evidence for Humayun’s reign is textual. The texts are royal histories that deal only obliquely with the broader social processes of the times. Aside from several eyewitness accounts, information about Humayun’s reign comes from texts written decades after his death. Detailed description of buildings, landscapes, and gardens is rare in early Mughal texts.

These limitations actually support the approach advocated in this paper (i.e., on historical processes rather than ideal forms). The pattern of extant information is not simply an accident. With the exception of Humayun’s new city of Dinpanah, his building projects were intentionally ephemeral and experimental. His projects had a strong ritual character, but they were also highly experimental and transformative. Building practices were ritualized under Humayun; yet the rituals were fashioned and refashioned with each new project. And it was these “fluid forms” of building under Humayun that introduced a dialectic of experimentation and repetition that took lasting form in the urban and architectural projects of Akbar.

To support this claim, I will concentrate on the territorial character of Humayun’s architectural experience in Agra, Lahore, Herat, and Kabul, with special emphasis on the gardens of those cities. Gardens were important because they served as the spatial rubric for a wide range of both everyday and extraordinary activities; because they had a special relationship with the emergence of Mughal urbanism; and finally, because garden events often served as metaphors for the territorial aspirations of the king.

Part two: Territorial and Ritual Process in the Reign of Humayun

How did Humayun regard the traditions of Timurid environmental design? How did his garden projects help reshape the landscape of Mughal rule? How did his experience in one region influence later building practices in others? And does it make sense to think of these developments as the outcomes of a ritual process? These questions can be addressed in the light set of selected incidents at Agra, Lahore, Herat and Kabul.

Agra

We can begin in Agra, where in frustration Babur reportedly said: “My heart is bowed down by ruling and reigning; I will retire to this garden [Bagh-i Zar Afshan]. As for attendance, Tahir the ever-bearer will suffice. I will make over the kingdom to Humayun”. (HN, p. 193). Gulbaden Begum also quotes her father as saying just prior to his death,
"For years it has been in my heart to make over my throne to Humayun Mirza and to retire to the Gold-Scattering Garden". (HN, p. 108).

These passages present the Bagh-i Zar Afshan as a place of retirement — as a setting for the final territorial passage in the king's reign. Garden retirement is the final political act, and the garden is set in opposition to the affairs of state. Not only was Babur alleged to be seeking refuge; his refuge was accompanied by the transfer of kingship to his son. Given Babur's incredible vigor, as well as his realistic sense of Humayun's capabilities, it would be a mistake to attach much factual significance to these quotations. Nevertheless, they perform the important narrative function of introducing the reign of Humayun and concluding that of Babur.

Gulbaden Begum's comments foreshadow Babur's death and his entombment in the garden. Early Mughal gardens often served as places of refuge and recreation, but rarely as places of final retirement. Only twice does the Baburnama refer to burial or tombs in a garden, and in these cases no garden description are given (BN, pp. 218, 246). Interestingly, Babur's own burial in a garden precedes the succession of monumental tomb gardens built for later Mughal rulers (Hoag, 1968; Lowry, 1982; and Smith, 1909).

Although a minor point, Babur's burial provides at least one clue to the as yet unwritten history of the Mughal tomb garden. Second, this passage affirms the political legitimacy of Humayun. The problem of succession had clearly concerned Babur (BN, p. 108-9), and Gulbaden Begum may have wished to offer an historical apology for the legitimacy of her brother's troubled reign. Such anecdotes about Babur's intentions, including garden retirement, circulated immediately after Babur's death to foster political stability.

Finally, this passage expresses the dual relationship between garden and kingship. On the one hand, the king continues to exercise his longstanding attachment to garden settings. Gardens were the places from which the early kings ruled. Mughal kingship and garden life accompanied one another through the final stages of rule. On the other hand, garden retirement involves an abdica-
tion of kingship—a distinction between the active king from the retired one. The active king constructs, visits, and performs in gardens, while the retired king takes up permanent occupancy in a completed garden. Humayun maintained the ritual associations between gardens and kingship by occupying and ruling from the riverfront gardens in Agra. But he also made several unusual, but still ritually structured, departures from Mughal architectural convention. The first consisted of four barges linked together by four two-storey chahar tags of elegant design, placed at each of the corners (QH, p. 37-41). Although the spatial arrangement of these four structures is ambiguous, they apparently enclosed an octagonal courtyard decorated with cloth and fine objects. Boatmen propelled this craft in various directions along the river. A month-long festival in the chahar tag included music, singing, feasting, and theological discourse. Honorific titles were bestowed with great pomp and celebration.

Another floating set of barges served as a miniature market on the Yamuna. Although disappointing as a commercial venture, the barges succeeded splendidly in conveying the Mughal nobility from Firozabad to Agra. On such festive occasions, "every person could obtain whatever he wanted of various kinds of foods, drinks, dresses, clothes, ammunitions, and weapons of war in the market". (QH, p. 45). Equally remarkable, Humayun ordered gardens to be constructed on the barges so that, "fruit trees and flowering plants, and all kinds of vegetables, tulips, and jasmine were seen growing in the river". (QH, p. 46). Movement down the river, and the representation of a miniature political and economic order on the river were mainstays of ritual action in early Mughal history.

Even the more ordinary riverfront garden affairs in Agra had a ritual character. On Sundays and Tuesdays Humayun would cross the river in the company of female relatives, wives, and court. Pavilions and tents were set up in rows in the garden, with Humayun's mother and sisters camped at the top of the row, followed by his wives. As one might expect, the results of such ceremonies were not entirely "fixed". On one occasion the King's greater attention to his female relatives over his wives provoked a sharp marital complaint, to which Humayun responded with excuses, rebukes, and despondency. Garden festivals occurred throughout Humayun's early reign. A New Year's festival took place in the Agra chahar-bagh that reportedly surpassed both the garden of Eram and Paradise. Religious symbolism and ritual grew in importance, but they were not unchanging. Humayun shifted the date for celebrating the traditional Persian New Year's (nau roz) festival in response to queries about its association with fire-worship (QH, p. 69-70). Honors were conferred in the "tent of the twelve signs" and poetry was recited. Humayun distributed lavish alms in ceremonial fashion during feasts on his birthday.

Gardens also served as the spatial setting for rituals associated with grievance, justice, and reconciliation. After Hindal and Kamran's early disloyalty in Gujarat, Humayun summoned the princes and his nobles to a public court in the stone palace of Babur's garden in Agra. There he demanded to know why Hindal had rebelled (TV, p. 19). Although the administration of justice often occurred in a garden, it was unusual for family conflicts to receive such an open hearing. Forgiveness followed Hindal's excuses and repentance, after which Humayun ordered that the tents be pitched in the Bagh-i Zar Afshan prior to marching against Sher Shah (TV, p. 24).

The New City of Dinpanah at Delhi

Construction of Din-panah along the Yamuna River represents Humayun's boldest architectural endeavor (see Lowry, 1982; Nath, 1982; and Brown, 1959). In contrast with his father, but in keeping with the building traditions of early Timurid rulers, Humayun chose to build a city. Gardens were to surround the city, but the city itself had become the center and focus of design. The selection of a site along the Yamuna conformed with both Mughal and Sultanate practice; but selection of Delhi broke with Babur's commitment to Agra and reverted to the pre-Lodi pattern of Sultanate capitals.

What motivated this geographical shift? Was Din-panah modelled after Tughluqabad or some other capital cities? Was it to be the principal locus of Mughal rule in India, or a ceremonial center that would complement Humayun's buildings in Agra? What social role did Humayun have in mind for Din-panah ("The Asylum of the Faithful")? In what sense was it a city at all? Khwandamir speaks of Din-panah as a refuge for the wise and faith-
ful. Did this mean a city accommodating the diverse activities and functions of an Islamic community; or, in the narrower sense, a specialized courtly, intellectual, or religious center?

As the first planned Mughal city, Din-panah holds important clues to the advent of Mughal urbanism in India, and in particular to Akbar’s accomplishments at Fatehpur Sikri. Unfortunately, Din-panah’s development as a city faltered abruptly with Humayun’s military defeat.

**Lahore**

After the defeats in Bengal, Humayun fled from Agra toward Lahore where he stayed briefly in a residential garden (HN, p. 144, An, p. 355-6). In a reversal of an earlier incident at Agra, he had to meet with his younger brothers in the garden of his most rebellious brother Kamran. Whereas Humayun showed compassion for his rebellious brothers in Agra, Kamran operated in a deceptive and obstructive manner in the gardens of Lahore. When Sher Shah closed on Lahore, the royal party was forced to proceed south along the Indus River to Bhakkar. There, in one of the most common military rituals, Humayun put the river fortress of Rohri under siege while headquartered in the suburban garden of Mirza Shah Husain Samandar.

**Persia — Herat**

The failure of Humayun’s campaign in Sind led eventually to exile in Persia. For the first time in over four years he re-entered a world of imperial authority and courtly ritual. Shah Tahmasp sent a generous invitation that once again brought the Mughals into contact with classical Persian/Timurid garden design. The Shah’s firman included elaborated instructions concerning gifts, feasts, and garden entertainments in Herat (reproduced in AN, pp. 418-31). The reception at Herat by Prince Muhammad Khan befitted a king. People lined the main avenue from the Malan Bridge to Bagh Zaghan (Raven’s Bagh; Abu’l Fazl says Jahanara Bagh). A banquet with entertainments and
celebration took place in the garden. There is an incidental irony in Humayun's visit to the Raven's Bagh, the place where Babur states that Khurasani nobles lost Herat through their inattentiveness and oversophistica-
tion (BN, p. 134).
Notwithstanding the grandeur of the Herat reception, Humayun's position was one of extreme dependence. When confronted by inhospitableness, Babur could and did leave Herat. In Humayun's case, however, the im-
perial milieu of Herat must have seemed far more ironic, humiliating, and imprisoning.

*Kabul*

Eventually, Humayun retook Qandahar and Kabul. The final years of his reign witnessed
the first historical events of Prince Akbar, which also occurred in garden settings.
When Bairam Khan was sent to meet with Kamran, he also visited the captive prince
Akbar in the Bagh-i Maktab (BB, p. 83). The other hostage princes, Suleiman and Ibra-
him, were visited in gardens (AN, p. 462). The Shah-Ara garden became the site for an
auspicious wrestling match in which the in-
fant Akbar defeated an older cousin (AN, p.
454-5).

The victory celebrations of the legitimate
Mughal court took place in the Avartah or Ur-
ta Bagh near Kabul (BB, p. 83). Humayun of-
ten stayed in this garden during his travels to
and from Kabul. In a characteristically Timu-
rid pattern, Bayazid (BB, p. 124) notes that:
"He passed the winter in Kabul. In the
beginning of the spring season he shifted to
Avartah Bagh with all the Begums". Gardens
were places of seasonal occupancy in cooler
climates. Important ceremonial events such as
Akbar's circumcision occurred in the audi-
ence hall (Suret Khane) of this garden (HN,
p. 179). Jauhar (TV, p. 84) describes in detail
how Humayun sat on the throne, with Queens
and nobles arranged in the audience hall
(suret khana) according to rank. Abu'l Fazl
adds that the amirs occupied the chahar
bagh (AN, p. 483). The spatial and social
structure of the Mughal court had begun to
recrystallize.

Excursions to outlying areas often involved
brief visits to gardens such as the chahar-
bagh of Ali Quli Andarab, the Heart-
expanding garden (BB, p. 94), the Violet gar-
den at Kabul (AN, p. 407), orange gardens in
the mountains (HN, p. 196-7), and the garden
of Istalif (HN, p. 191). One trip taken for the

benefit of the begums, ended in great clamor
and annoyance as a begum fell off her horse
while sightseeing in the rhubarb fields (HN,
p. 188). The distinctive flavor of Humayun's
reign had been restored.

During the reign of Humayun, royal gardens
continued to serve as a predominant setting
for religious, administrative, festive, family,
and military affairs. Gardens maintained the
patterns of development established in ear-
lier reigns (e.g., along the banks rivers and
the heads of springs). Activities within gar-
dens also followed in the tradition of Timurid
practices. In all of these ways, garden ritual
under Humayun was repetitive, rigid, and
predictably functional.

There were also differences established by
the building practices of Humayun which did
not use garden construction to physically
mark off his territory or the places he re-
garded as beautiful — a pattern of activity that
had recurrent throughout Babur's reign. In fact,
although Humayun authorized architectural
inscriptions (Fuhrer, 1891), he did not build
anything that was enduring in Agra, Gujarat,
Bengal, Sind, or Kabul. Ritual activity be-
came more elaborate, but its architecture
was short-lived. The impermanence of his
structures at Agra may be partly explained
by their ephemeral ritual and experimental
character, and partly by the decision to build
at Delhi; if so, Din-panah represented a
depth geographically centering of Mughal building
activity that leap far beyond Babur's local
complexes in the Agra area. Humayun's
decision to build a new city diverged strikingly
from the urbana but suburban sensibili-
ties that preceded him. The shift to Delhi
could have been a major shift in Mughal terri-
torial organizations. In any event, the transi-
tion to urban design and life in the citadel
began under Humayun and would be com-
pleted by his son Akbar. I expect that Din-
panah served as the model for Akbar's more
structured experiments at Fatehpur Sikri.

Finally, Humayun pursued precisely those
types of courtly celebration that Babur re-
garded as a weakness in Herat.

These developments indicate the richness
and, more importantly, the power of ritual ac-
tivity in the construction of Mughal culture.
Much that was distinctively Timurid or Mughal
persisted throughout the sixteenth and seven-
teenth centuries. As the reign of Humayun so
dramatically indicates, however, much was
consciously as well as creatively altered. Religious,
political, and domestic rites all churned within

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the context of highly unstable historical and geographical circumstances. The outcomes were often unforeseen—sometimes elevating, and sometimes disgraceful. It is only by closely examining these circumstances, particularly the territorial circumstances of Mughal social history, that we can begin to understand the ritual meanings, transformations, and consequences of Mughal environmental design.

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Abbreviations

AN - Allami Abul-Fazl, Akbarnama, 3 vols, trans. by H. Beveridge, Calcutta, Asiatic Society, 1897-1939.
OH - Khwandamir Muhammad, Qurnun-i-Humayun, Bibliotheca Indica, no. 263, Calcutta, Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1940.