

# La transmission du savoir dans le monde musulman périphérique

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## VILLAGE SUFISM IN SRI LANKA: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC REPORT

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### Introduction

While Islamic influences upon culture and society have received relatively less attention in south Indian, as compared with north Indian, studies, they have received practically no attention at all in Sri Lanka, where the Muslim contribution has in fact been largely ignored. Constituting 7.4 percent of the total population of the island, the Tamil-speaking Sri Lankan Muslims, or "Ceylon Moors" as they are traditionally known, together with a small community of Malay Muslims, represent a distinctive and often influential ethnic and religious bloc whose political power is sometimes magnified in specific areas of the island. The most well-known centers of Moorish settlement are in various urban precincts of Colombo, Galle, and Kandy, as well as in smaller but nonetheless quite affluent towns such as Beruwala, Gampola, and Weligama in the southwestern quarter of the island, where the Moors have established a strong presence in retail commerce, in the export-import business, and in the gem trade.

### The Eastern Moors of Sri Lanka

Less well known, however, are the Moors of the Batticaloa region along the eastern coastal plain, where I have conducted anthropological fieldwork. In this part of Sri Lanka, the Moors constitute roughly 50 percent of the population, while the remaining half are largely Saivite Hindu Tamils, augmented by some Christian Tamils and Portuguese creole-speaking Eurasian Burghers (McGilvray 1982a). Among the features which make the Batticaloa region interesting and distinctive is a Hindu caste system traditionally dominated by Mukkuvars and Vēlālars, with the priestly function in the hands of Viracāiva (Lingāyat) Kurukkals in the absence of indigenous Brahmans (McGilvray 1981, 1982b). The Moors, evidently subjected to a considerable degree of Hindu Tamil political domination before the European colonial era, have nevertheless maintained a distinct identity, eschewing any formal involvement in the caste hierarchies of the Tamils. However, in many respects the Moors share a common culture with the Tamils, apparently arising from local Muslim conversions and intermarriage with Tamil women at some time in the past. Despite enormous divergences between Hindu and Muslim theology, the Tamils and the Moors accept many common assumptions about the world, including beliefs about health, medicine, and sexuality (McGilvray 1982c). However, this common culture is nowhere more apparent than in the uniform patterns of Dravidian kinship, matrilineal descent, and matri-uxorilocal domestic organization which Tamils and Moors share throughout the Batticaloa region (McGilvray n.d.).

The Moors of Batticaloa, as of Sri Lanka generally (apart from the more cosmopolitan trading communities in Colombo and some schismatic Qadianis or Ahmadiyyas), are Sunni Muslims of the Shāfi legal school. One thing which distinguishes them from other Sri Lankan Muslims is their predominant reliance upon agriculture for their livelihood. While there are many Moorish merchants in the towns and villages of the region, the majority of the Moors here are peasants, tilling large tracts of wet-rice in the same fashion as the neighboring Tamils. Both groups tend to live in large

peasant-towns clustered near the sea, often commuting quite some distance each day to cultivate their paddy fields, which are located farther inland. In the towns, Tamils and Moors tend to occupy adjacent but strictly segregated neighborhoods and urban wards, residential districts which sometimes seem noticeably more closely-packed in the case of the Moors. Still, the major livelihood is farming, and the Moors, just like the Tamils, transmit practically all of their paddy land as well as their residential property and other wealth to their daughters through dowry, which thereby functions as a de facto form of pre-mortem matrilineal inheritance (Goody & Tambiah 1973). The principles of orthodox Islamic inheritance law are known, but there is seldom a need for them to be invoked.

### **The Moorish Community in Akkaraipattu**

The ethnographic fieldwork upon which this paper is based was largely carried out in the town of Akkaraipattu (population ca. 35,000), about 65 km south of the regional capital, Batticaloa. My research involved a comparison of a wide range of Moorish and Tamil cultural patterns, and I therefore tried to divide my time between both of these major groups, living in 1969-71 in a Moorish neighborhood and in 1975 and 1978 in a Tamil neighborhood. The Tamils live on the southern side of the town in a number of physically contiguous, but socially distinct, caste neighborhoods. The Moors, who are a definite majority of the town's inhabitants, occupy the northern side, in six wards laid out in an orderly rectilinear grid of streets and lanes. In addition to some scattered neighborhood shrines, there are three major mosques: Periyapalli ("Big Mosque"), Sinnapalli ("Little Mosque") and Putuppalli ("New Mosque"). Each is governed by a committee of senior men representing the major matriclans (kutis) in the mosque congregation. These mosque trustees are called Maraikkārs, and they have been known to defend with some vehemence the hereditary status and ritual prerogatives of their specific matriclans in mosque affairs. Each mosque employs an official leader of prayers (lebbe), a man who utters the call to prayer (muezzin), and a janitor (atikāri). Women do not come to pray at the mosque; it is a place for men only, and the major focus of activity is the Friday Jumma prayers. Beyond the professional staff of each mosque, there are various maulavis or ālims, local religious experts, nowadays often salaried teachers of Islam in the government schools, who represent the closest thing Akkaraipattu has to a group of Islamic scholars, or ulamā.

### **Saints and Circumcisers**

The Moors take overt communal pride in the claim that they, unlike the hierarchical Hindu Tamils, are an egalitarian community free of caste divisions, united as one in their devotion to Allah. Aside from a significant degree of socio-economic stratification which exists among both the Moors and the Tamils, particularly in settlements close to the richest paddy-growing districts, there is considerable truth to this assertion, but it also masks a few interesting exceptions. For one, there are certain Moorish families who carry the patrilineal title of Maulānā (Arabic, "our lord"), marking their hereditary religious authority as descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. Finer distinctions between different lines of descent from the Prophet (e.g., Sheikhs versus Seyyids) are known to matter elsewhere, but not here. Local Maulānās often make a sideline of inscribing protective copper talismans and reciting curative prayers for members of the ordinary Moorish public, and it is widely remarked how fastidious Maulānā families are when contracting suitable marriages for their children.

If the Maulānā borders on being a member of a Moorish religious nobility, then the Ostā (Arabic, ustādh, "master"), or hereditary Moorish barber-circumciser, resembles something of a stigmatized caste servant. The Ostā community is endogamous, residentially segregated, and of low rank relative to the Moorish population at large. It is also extremely small, in keeping with the highly specialized services it renders: circumcision of pre-adolescent boys, minor clitoral scarification of newborn girls (performed by the circumciser's wife), and occasional shaving of men's heads and armpits. The Ostā receives food from the Moorish families he serves, but they do not accept food from him. In all of these respects the Ostā community resembles a low-ranking Hindu caste, but the absence of a coherent caste system among the Moors makes it impossible to consider the Ostās a true caste in the Dumontian sense of the term.

### The Bāwās: A Local Sufi Chapter

Just beyond the northernmost edge of town, adjacent to the Moorish cemetery, is a small roadside mosque which shelters the remains of a Muslim holy man named Fakir Miskin Ali Shah Mabooth, and scattered in the immediate vicinity are perhaps ten houses which belong to a local group of modern Sufi mystics, known in this region as Bāwās (Turkish, bābā, "missionary preacher") or occasionally as Pakīrs (Arabic, faqīr, "poor one"). They venerate the soul of the departed Miskin Ali Ahah, and one might reasonably suppose them to trace their spiritual descent from him, but things are seldom that simple. He was a member of the Sufi order (Arabic, tarīqa) of Tabakāttiyā, a saintly man who had taken vows of celibacy and who wore his uncut hair tangled and matted in conformity to the rules of his order (hence this order's colloquial name, cataippakīr, from Tamil catai, entangled locks of hair), but he left no initiated disciples in Akkaraipattu to perpetuate his spiritual lineage. The present Bawas mainly belong to the Rifā'i order, which originated in the delta of the Tigris and Euphrates in Iraq in the 12th century A.D. and which is renowned for its ecstatic and self-mortifying practices (Trimingham 1971). The shrine which is the locus of their activities in Akkaraipattu is used chiefly as a place of individual and small group devotional meetings; public daily prayers are not conducted there. Hence it is called a taikyā or chapel (Turkish, tekke), rather than a pallivācal or mosque, and the cluster of homes around it has been rather extravagantly named Taikyā Nagar (Tamil, nakar, metropolis).

Not all of the local Bawas actually live at Taikyā Nagar. In accordance with the prevailing system of matrilocal residence, some of them live in or near their wives' natal homes. At least five Bawas live in residential wards of Akkaraipattu town itself, while another four are known to live just north of the Taikyā in the adjacent village of Addalachenai. However, eight Bawas, including their spiritual leader, live in houses situated within sight of the Taikyā, and all of the local Bawas regard the location as their holy ground. The Bawas are part-time religious medics who periodically leave their wives and families and travel to other major centers of Moorish settlement in the island, beating tambourines at each door and offering devotional songs and prayers in return for a few coins or other alms. They wear turbans and rosary beads and carry a begging bowl in their sacks. Although they avowedly travel widely, the greatest number of Bawas is said to reside in the Batticaloa region, with lesser numbers living in places like Kekirawa or Colombo.

It is difficult for me to judge the structure and composition of the entire Bawa community in Sri Lanka on the basis of the few local settlements with which I am familiar, but it appears that some form of over-all titular leadership is vested in a chief Kalifā chosen by the entire community of Bawas, who are thus taken to constitute

a religious corporation or jamāt. In fact, although I am unable to verify this independently, the leader (Kalifā) of the local Bawas at Taikyā Nagar in the late 1970s, a man known as Cader Mohideen Bawa, was said to be the acknowledged head of all the Bawas in Sri Lanka at that time. The number of practicing Bawas in the island is said to be around 150, according to the chief Kalifā, but it had been twice that number before the government repatriated all the Bawas with Indian citizenship in 1963. In the Moorish areas south of the town of Batticaloa, at least four local Kalifās are recognized. Followers of each Kalifā are said to fill the following offices in each chapter: Kottuvāl (chief assistant), Nakīban (secretary), Ijini (messenger), and Pantāri (commissary).

### Festivals and Ecstatic Practices

There are three shrines maintained by the Bawas in the region south of Batticaloa: at Akkaraipattu (Taikyā Nagar), at Karativu, and at Kalmunaikudy. Only the latter is of major size. At the Kalmunaikudy mosque, known colloquially as the "Seashore Mosque" (Katarkkaraippalli), a colorful annual flag-raising festival (kotiyeṛram) is held, with the hoisting of new embroidered banners from the tops of two minaret-like towers. Like the taikyā near Akkaraipattu, the "Seashore Mosque" is located adjacent to a Moorish cemetery, reflecting the self-conscious indifference to death espoused in the Bawa theosophy. The flag-raising festival at the "Seashore Mosque" is the concluding event in an annual cycle of flag-raising celebrations at different Moorish shrines around the island, including also Weligama, Daftar Jailani (near Balangoda), and Kataragama. It also coincides with the annual festival of the Sufi saint Shahul Hameed at his renowned dargah at Nagoor on the Tamilnadu coast east of Thanjavur, south India (Nambiar & Narayana Kurup 1968).

At all such flag-raising festivals, as well as at many of the larger kantūri charitable feasts, it is the custom for Bawas to publicly exhibit their mystical faith by performing ecstatic acts of self-mortification. Indeed, it is common to see Bawas walking from village to village carrying, among other things, the implements of torture used in such demonstrations. While Hindu Tamil and Buddhist Sinhalese religious devotees often favor fire-walking as their supreme test of faith, the Moorish Bawas shun fire-walking ("too simple," said one) and choose to focus instead on perforating their flesh with various kinds of steel needles, spikes, and daggers. Some Bawas appear to take a greater interest than others in this "cutting and stabbing work" (vettukkuttu vēlai), but at public exhibitions every Bawa will join the circle to support the individual performers with singing, beating of tambourines, and recitation of zhikr. Perhaps the most dramatic gesture I witnessed during these sessions was the pounding of a heavy steel spike (tavus) into the top of one Bawa's skull sufficiently deep for it to remain upright while he danced around the enclosure. Other acts include the piercing of both cheeks with a single long steel needle and the perforation of the skin of the back with hooks and barbs.

### Spiritual Segmentation

The Bawas of Sri Lanka are definitely associated with one or more of the Sufi orders found in India and Pakistan, and a few local members in the Akkaraipattu area even claimed to know how to speak a bit of Urdu. However, none acknowledged the higher authority of any specific Indian Pīrs or Sārgurus. When questioned regarding their precise spiritual lineage, many Bawas showed confusion and ambiguity over the relation between the Rifā'i order (to which they generally claimed to belong) and the

Qādiri order (with which they also wished to claim a connection). This tendency seems to reflect the generally high status of the Qādiri order in many parts of the Islamic world and the myth of Rifā'i as an offshoot of Qādiri, neither of which can be justified by the historical evidence, according to Trimingham (1971). I collected a jumble of additional Sufi classifications mentioned by various Bawa informants, including Tabakkātiya, Jalāliya, Naqshabandiya, Ahmadiya, and Aidurūsiya, but I was never given a supervening logic which made clear sense of these categories. All agreed, however, that each Sufi order was segmented into a confusing array of sub-orders or "branches" (Tamil, kilai,) and that the basic principle of organization was a "chain connection" (Tamil, caṅkili totarppu) of successive master-disciple relationships. It was also clear that, in the eyes of the Bawas themselves, each different Sufi order clings to those outward features of dress and ritual which lend it uniqueness in contrast with the others. The Bawas emphasized that only certain Sufi orders or sub-orders customarily perform acts of mortification of the flesh. Even among those that do, however, the exact style of the weapons used is traditionally distinctive from group to group, as is the style of wearing the turban (e.g., one "horn" versus two), et cetera. The shape, color, and design of the Bawa's personal accoutrements also vary with his order, each article having an esoteric symbolism for those initiated in Sufi wisdom. However, formal doctrinal differences between orders, if any, were not mentioned.

### Becoming a Bawa

There are said to be two ways to become a Bawa: karu vali ("the way of the embryo," i.e., birth) and kuru vali ("the way of the guru," i.e., initiation). As with many of those rhyming dyads so pleasing to the Tamil ear, this contrast is not quite as clear as it sounds, for everyone who wishes to become a Bawa, regardless of birth, must study under a guru or spiritual teacher. However, the point is that if a man is the descendant of a Bawa, he is presumed to have inherited certain qualities of saintliness and devotion which will greatly assist him in his spiritual vocation, while an outsider must prove his suitability through effort and pious deeds. Descent within the line of Bawas (bāwā paramparai) is patrilineal and is quite independent of a man's concurrent exogamous matrilineal clan (kuṭi) membership. A number of Bawas with whom I spoke reiterated the principle of patrilineal descent, stating that it was consistent with Islamic tradition, but they particularly praised those Bawas who could trace Bawa ancestry on both their mother's as well as their father's side. While presumptive candidacy for a career as a Bawa is transmitted from father to son, such descent does not determine which particular Sufi order a man will enter. This is a choice determined by the selection of one's Sufi preceptor, who must also be a recognized Kalifā. Reviewing the family histories of several local Bawas, I did note some instances in which a son had entered a Sufi order different from that of his father.

Those Bawas who have entered the calling without being sons of Bawas are rare; indeed, among the Bawas of the Akkaraipattu area in the late 1970s there were none. A survey of households indicated that current generation Bawas are marrying non-Bawa women about 50 percent of the time, which is also what their fathers seem to have done, according to my genealogical evidence. Most of the present Bawas were born in the Batticaloa region, a few as far away as Mannar. An analysis of Bawa marriage choice reveals no patterns of matriclan affiliation or marriage alliance which deviate from the bilateral cross-cousin marriage preferences typical of all the Tamil and Moorish groups in this region. All of the Bawas in the Akkaraipattu area are married and have access to dowry property through their wives, so they typically engage in some paddy cultivation during part of the year. Alms collected on the annual Bawa

circuits of the island augment their livelihood, and several have additional skills: one Bawa is a teacher of "Chinese fighting" (cīnātī), one is a practitioner of curing by the use of mantras (mantirīkam), another is an herbal folk doctor (paricari), and two are talented singers who have recorded Muslim devotional music for radio broadcasts in Sri Lanka.

### Initiation: A Ritualized Death and Rebirth

Perhaps the most intriguing custom of the Bawas is the process by which a man is initiated into the order, a procedure which was described to me in some detail but which I never actually witnessed. Once a man has sought the tutelage of a recognized Kalifā, it may take him six years to acquire the knowledge and self-discipline necessary to become a Bawa. After a certain amount of preliminary study, he receives the first level of initiation, which is chiefly the giving of some secret words or phrases (Tamil, upatēcam, "sermon") to the candidate by his guru. The first initiation (Tamil, tītcai, diksha) transforms the candidate into a murīd or novice, and he is then able to begin a religious mendicant life.

It is the second tītcai, however, which is the truly important one. When the novice is considered by his guru to be ready, he is prepared for a symbolic death which terminates his identity as an ordinary mortal. At least 40 Bawas, the quorum necessary to convoke an official jamāt, must gather at the site, usually at a taikyā adjacent to a graveyard. First, the body of the novice is completely shaved by the Ostā barber-circumciser. This is necessary in order to remove the vestigial pollution which remains on his body hair from contact with the walls of his mother's vagina during birth. After his initiation, the new Bawa will never cut his regrown hair, except perhaps for his beard, for he considers it to have been blessed by his guru and by the members of the assembled jamāt. The novice is laid naked upon a plank, bathed according to Islamic practice as if he were a corpse, and dressed in a white funeral shroud (kafan) as if for burial. In the presence of the assembled jamāt, the novice then receives a sermon, a final set of phrases for meditation, and a new "initiation name" (Tamil, tītcai peyar) from his guru, the Kalifā, who in his capacity as giver of Sufi ordination is called the Kilāfat. Members of the jamāt then place their hands upon the novice's head and bestow their blessings, after which the novice enters a "grave" for 40 days of fasting, solitude, and meditation. In some cases the grave is an actual pit in the ground covered with a temporary shelter of cloths and poles, in other cases, a cloth enclosure (Tamil, pantal) which is erected inside the taikyā itself as a substitute tomb for the novice. While inside this symbolic grave, or jillā (Persian, chillā, 40 day retreat), the novice is nourished by milk and fruit once every 24 hours and is visited only by his guru. He is expected to sleep as little as possible and to meditate as much as possible. Meanwhile, members of the Bawa jamāt recite conventional Moorish post-mortuary prayers (Tamil, kattam) on his behalf on the 1st, 3rd, 7th and 40th days. On the final day, the newly ordained Bawa is reborn from his symbolic grave and joins the fraternity of Sufis.

### The Bawas in Muslim Perspective

More historical and comparative research will be necessary in order for me to fully interpret the data which I have outlined in this paper. At this stage, however, at least some preliminary comparisons can be drawn from the literature on Sufi institutions elsewhere in the Islamic world. The historical study of Sufis in Medieval Bijapur by Richard Eaton (1978) is perhaps the most thorough account of relations between Sufism

and the state in South Asia. I have no evidence that the Bawas in Batticaloa played any significant role under the medieval Mukkuvar kings of the region, nor do I even know quite when they first arrived. Eaton's study may prove relevant, however, for its discussion of the position of Sufis in the cultural "shatter zone" between rival centers of Vaishnava and Viracaiva sectarianism in the Deccan. Hindu Batticaloa presents some heterodox features, including a non-Brahman Viracaiva priesthood, and it intermittently paid tribute to the Buddhist Kandyan kingdom in the pre-colonial period. There may, therefore, be some mileage to be gotten from the "shatter zone" concept in the context of Moorish (and Bawa) settlement, despite the absence of any evidence of the "warrior Sufi" in Batticaloa (Eaton 1978: ch. 2).

A quite different perspective on the Sufis is offered by Clifford Geertz in his analysis of the bazaar (sug) in Sefrou, Morocco (1979). Here the emphasis is upon the role of Sufi lodges (zāwīa) as social-cum-religious associations of market traders and artisans and upon the gradations in the types of devotional practices (from "clean" to "dirty") associated with different occupational groups in the bazaar. In the Sri Lankan case I have described, however, there are no particular links between the Bawas and the bazaar, so an overt economic dimension to Sufi activities is not apparent.

One of the clearest impressions one gets about the Bawas in Akkaraipattu is that their unorthodox dress, manner, belief, and ritual -- their overall style if you will -- is strongly disapproved of by some of the middle and wealthy Moorish peasants and by the orthodox Islamic experts, the maulavis and ālīms. It must always have been this way to some degree, since Sufism has characteristically posed a challenge to centralized Muslim authority wherever it has spread. Yet the current wave of pan-Islamic reform and "purification" of the faith, which reaches the hinterlands of Batticaloa particularly in the form of Colombo-trained government schoolteachers of Islam, has no doubt sought to further discredit the Bawas, as well as other local Moorish institutions which are nourished from roots in the shared regional traditions of both the Moors and the Tamils. At one point in my fieldwork, my attention was directed to the efforts of a group of zealous experts, humorously described to me as "revolutionary ālīms," who sought (unsuccessfully, as it turns out) to block the widespread attendance of Moorish women at the annual Bawa flag-raising festival at the Kalmunaikudy "Seashore Mosque" on grounds of Islamic modesty. A decade earlier, however, kindred ideological forces were very successful in terminating the employment of untouchable Hindu Paraiyar drummers and musicians in processions associated with local religious feasts (kantūris) at Akkaraipattu mosques (McGilvray 1983).

Despite these pressures, the Bawas of the Batticaloa region seem to be thriving, at least in so far as one can judge from outward appearances. Further clues to the place of the Sufi tradition in south Indian and Sri Lankan Muslim society may lie in a closer analysis of the existing literature on neighboring groups such as the Muslims of Taminadu (Mines 1972, 1973; Bayly 1983), the Maldives Islands (Maloney 1980), and the Laccadive Islands (Kutty 1972). On first impression it seems that the south Indian Muslims who most resemble the Moors of Batticaloa sociologically, the matrilineal Māppillas of Kerala, have nourished few Sufi traditions, in contrast to the Tamil Muslims who have developed the great dargah at Nagoor (Miller 1976; Dale 1980).

### **Sufism and Saivism in the Batticaloa Region**

I will conclude this discussion with a few observations about the Bawas from the perspective of the Saivite Hindu traditions of the Tamils of this same region. It should be kept in mind, however, that the Muslim Moors constitute nearly half of the overall



population of this easternmost part of the island. In other words, there is a strong Muslim constituency here, and one must not imagine that the Bawas are obliged to respond in any direct sense to Tamil Hindu religious practices or pressures. Nevertheless, the Tamils and the Moors do share a great deal of common culture outside of the textual religious domain, and so some quick and tentative contrasts and comparisons of local Sufi and Saivite practices may generate a context for some useful discussion. The main points I would make are as follows:

1. Sacred origins. A common theme in Hindu temple myths of this region is the inadvertent discovery of a hierophany in the forest, a preexisting icon of a deity, such as lingam or a vēl weapon, which is subsequently venerated and which — according to a sort of idealized view of the history of human settlement — becomes the focus of a new royal protectorate and ultimately of a newly instituted caste hierarchy which then serves the deity (and incidentally, serves the king, who is presumed to have recruited the various castes from elsewhere). In other words, earthly manifestations of Hindu sacredness are believed to be "out there" in the natural environment, waiting to be stumbled upon by some Veddah hunter or an itinerant pilgrim and later venerated through architecture and ritual service. For both Bawas and orthodox Moors, in contrast, divine power does not pre-exist in the environment; agents of the sacred are said to have arrived historically in the form of wandering Muslim holy men, a number of whom were casually described to me as having floated ashore "on a plank" from the Middle East. All of the oldest mosques seem to house at least one sacred tomb in which repose the bones of a local saint, an avuliyā. However, as in the Hindu sthala purāṇa literature, Moorish Mosque myths tend to recount how a locus of holiness (usually the sacred aura of the saint's corpse) was first discerned by unsuspecting bystanders. For example, rain is said to have fallen on the head of everyone except the saint, or his corpse is reported to have retained the glow of perfect health until it was properly enshrined. In the case of the Sufi saints, their charisma lives on in their spiritual disciples, as well as residing in tomb-shrines or taikyās erected over their graves. All Muslim saints seem to have come from elsewhere: their exogenous origins are seemingly one source of their spiritual power.

2. Flag-raising. Certain practices are part of the ritual inventory of several religious groups in the region. The most evident example is the ritual of "flag-raising" (kotivērram) which inaugurates the annual festivals at Hindu temples, Sufi shrines, and Catholic churches. Presumably, this institution was borrowed from the Hindus, but the Bawas and the parish priests have given the ritual wholly different form and content. The flag I saw raised at a regional Siva temple was a long piece of white cloth painted with Hindu symbols by a hereditary Blacksmith, while the flag raised at the Seashore Mosque is of totally different design and incorporates Muslim symbolism such as the number 786, a numerological equivalent of "In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful." Despite wide variations in actual practice, the idea of a flag-raising ritual to mark the beginning of an annual festival now seems taken for granted in each group.

3. Religious techniques. Both public temple rituals as well as propitiation of domestic tutelary goddesses conducted by the Tamil Hindus of this region frequently involve possession-trance, particularly possession by powerful local goddesses such as Pattirakāḷi, Māriyamman, and Kaṇṇakiyamman (McGilvray, in press). Local orthodox mosque-oriented Muslim worship offers nothing remotely comparable to this ecstatic and highly theatrical type of Hindu religious display. Part of the appeal of the Bawas to the general Moorish public must be their relatively flamboyant and ecstatic style in contrast to the dominant and sober Muslim puritanism. However, in an obvious effort to concentrate and focus the power of Allah visibly within their own bodies, the Bawas

seem to offer an exhibition of divine power rather than a path by which the public can directly participate in, or interact with, such divine power. The Bawas claim to be mystical virtuosi, and their public performances take on the quality of a "show."

Spirit-possession in the Hindu sense seems to occur among the Moors chiefly through the agency of annoying and troublesome djinn, minor Muslim spirits roughly on a par with Tamil Hindu pēy and picācu. Benevolent higher-order supernaturals, particularly all-purpose saints such as Mohideen Āṇḍavar, are invoked to intercede in such cases and to help solve a wide range of pragmatic human problems. There is a good deal of similarity between the Hindu and Muslim systems at this level. It is my impression, however, that the Moors, more than the Tamils, rely upon dreaming as a direct channel of communication with the supernatural world.

Ecstatic practices involving mortification of the flesh are a widely acknowledged part of Tamil Hindu and Sinhalese Buddhist religiosity in Sri Lanka. Such practices are also major instruments of religious competition, particularly between the "indigenous" Hindu-Buddhist traditions and the "imported" Muslim and Christian faiths. The Bawas, more than most ordinary Moors, are keenly aware of Hindu-Buddhist forms of self-mortification, such as hooks and needles through the skin and cheeks, flagellation, and fire-walking. Apparently in order to appear equally imbued with divine power, yet at the same time to retain some Muslim distinctiveness, the Bawas engage in "cutting and stabbing work" while shunning the use of fire-walking. The actual ritual techniques employed by the Bawas during their exhibitions of faith include tambourine drumming and repetitive singing of Islamic creedal phrases (zhikr) in unison, faster and faster, in a steadily rising crescendo. The whole circle of Bawas supports each individual performer in turn, under the supervision of a master of ceremonies who is not necessarily the leader of the Bawa chapter. The musical quality of the event is quite different from that of a Tamil Hindu temple ritual. The master of ceremonies seems to take special responsibility for the consecration and blessing of the implements of torture, stroking them, incensing them, rubbing them with ash, and whispering incantations to them before handing them to the performer. Afterward he removes them from the performer's flesh with equal sanctity and reverence. Often the entire circle of Bawas will touch and bless the weapons before a performer commences. Clearly it is the Bawa group acting in unison which is believed to generate the spiritual power which is manifested in the individual performer. Tamil Hindu mortification practices are often highly organized (e.g., firewalking), but they take place in a much more complex ongoing ceremonial and mythological context which involves a much wider range of public participation. Still, it is true that a "supporting staff" of drummers and singers often accompanies Hindu trancers, particularly when they are acting as mediums through whom the goddess is speaking. Sacrifice, a major element in some Tamil rituals, plays no role in Bawa ecstatic practices. However, a Bawa performance will often occur in conjunction with a Muslim charitable feast (kantūri) which commemorates the death anniversary (urs) of a local saint and which involves the slaughter of animals according to standard Islamic practice.

The Moors of this region, like the Hindus and the Catholics, make vows and conduct pilgrimages. Apart from the highly esteemed pilgrimage to Mecca, the most desirable foreign pilgrimage is to Nagoor in Tamilnadu, where the shrine of south India's most famous Sufi saint is located. Occasionally men and boys in Akkaraipattu are even given the name Nagoor Tambi ("little brother of Nagoor"). At the local level, however, some of the specific vows made by the Moors closely resemble those of the Hindus, as when pots of sweetened milk-rice (pukkai) are offered before a popular saint's tomb. While Tamil Hindus occasionally make offerings to Muslim saints, the Moors do not, to

my knowledge, reciprocate by visiting Hindu shrines. The temple of Kataragama in the forest of southern Sri Lanka is the site of annual fire-walking rituals and other ecstatic vow-fulfillments and is definitely the major focus of Tamil Hindu and Sinhalese Buddhist pilgrimage in the island (Obeyesekere 1978). It is revealing to note that a mosque and shrine dedicated to a Sufi saint has grown up there alongside the Hindu temples and the Buddhist vihara. There is no official Muslim participation in the Kataragama festival, but Moorish pilgrims can legitimately attend and find an outlet for their own religious needs in a highly charged devotional atmosphere. The Catholics in Sri Lanka, apparently unwilling to stake out a claim to part of the action at Kataragama, have since the 19th century developed their own center for pilgrimage and ecstatic devotionism at the Madhu Church in the dry zone jungle N.W. of Anuradhapura.

4. Symbolic death and rebirth. Scholars with whom I have shared some of this material on Sufis in Sri Lanka have found the Bawa initiation ceremony, with its explicit ritualization of death and rebirth, the most intriguing aspect. I did not realize at the time of my fieldwork that most Sufi orders do not perform such rituals, and only now am I groping to uncover the historical origins of these distinctive practices. There is obviously a comparison to be made with rites of initiation into Hindu ascetic orders through "social death" and funeral rites conducted on the cremation ghats in Varanasi (Bharati 1961, Sinha & Saraswati 1978) as well as with the more generalized motif of death associated with the Buddhist monkhood. Both the Hindu sannyāsis and the Buddhist bhikkus, however, are world-renouncers, whereas the Bawas, in spite of their conspicuous closeness to the Muslim graveyard, maintain all of their family and economic ties after initiation and seem to confine most of their religious mendicancy to certain seasons of the year. The symbolic death of the Bawa is not a form of escape, but a form of purification, as the shaving of the "corpse" seems to show.

If the Bawa is not quite a world-renouncer, what else might he be? The principle of quasi-hereditary qualification for membership in the Sufi order evokes less of the individualistic sannyāsi and more of the hereditary priest. The traditional Hindu priests in this part of the island are not Brahmans, but are instead Viracaiva Kurukkals, remotely affiliated with the Lingāyat sect of Karnataka. Their mortuary rituals, like those of all Hindus in the region, emphasize burial rather than cremation. There is a belief that the tombs of saintly Kurukkals will eventually become sacred temple sites when the personal lingam of the deceased, placed initially in the mouth of the seated corpse, sprouts upward through the skull and emerges above ground. Despite this exotic doctrine, I was shown no lingams which had yet sprouted into temples. Furthermore, there are no Hindu initiations or rites of passage in this region which incorporate the idea of symbolic death. Thus, while there is some shared interest in the ritual and symbolism of the grave, the parallels between the Bawas and the Kurukkals seem tenuous and coincidental. And it is also clear that the Bawas do not serve the sacerdotal functions of priests to the Moorish community, a responsibility firmly held by regular mosque personnel.

One dimension of death symbolism is, however, widely shared by both Muslims and Hindus of the region. This concerns the commemoration and propitiation of the dead soul in the dangerous period following burial and on each anniversary after the death. Both Tamils and Moors conduct a series of post-funerary offerings and charitable feasts in the name of the deceased, and their underlying assumptions about the liminal status of the dead soul are fairly similar. The tradition, widespread in the Islamic world, of making the death anniversary (urs, marriage with god) of each Sufi saint the major festival observance of the year would thus also make good sense to Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus.

### Work in progress

This study of Sufi institutions and ritual practices in Sri Lanka is still at a preliminary stage of development, and so the material presented here must be understood as "work in progress." However, I would be grateful to have comments or suggestions pertaining to the broader comparative significance of the ethnographic data I have offered. In particular I would be interested to know of other sources of information about Sufi institutions in south India or in Southeast Asia which might offer comparisons and contrasts to enrich my understanding of Sufism in Sri Lanka and its links with the larger Islamic world.

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