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#### **MUSLIM FOLKLORE, SRI LANKA**

Muslims represent eight percent (1.5 million) of the total of 18.7 million Sri Lankans estimated in 1997, making them the island's third-largest minority after the Tamils. Within that broad category, one must distinguish the small number of Sri Lankan Malays (descendants of eighteenth century soldiers and princely exiles from the Dutch East Indies) as well as Bohras and Memons (Gujarati-speaking trading communities) from the predominant Tamil-speaking Muslim community known otherwise as the Sri Lankan Moors. Roughly one-third of the Moors live as paddy farmers in the Tamil-speaking eastern zone of the island in towns such as Muttur, Kattankudy, and Kalmunai, while the remaining two-thirds are dispersed in the Sinhalese majority areas in the central and western zones of the island, including major urban concentrations in Colombo and Galle. A key source for research on Sri Lanka's Muslims is Goonetilleke's exhaustive *Bibliography of Ceylon (Sri Lanka)*, augmented by other works after 1978, including especially Mahroof et. al., 1986 and Shukri, 1986.

#### ***Various Names and Clan Structure***

From the beginning of the colonial period in the early sixteenth century, the Muslims of Sri Lanka were

designated by the term "Moor" (*Mouro*, "Moroccan") which the Portuguese applied to Muslims throughout their African and Asian empire, as well as by such familiar European terms as "Mohammedan" or "Muslim"; the older term *Cālakar* (Sonagar, Jonagar), which originally denoted West Asians, especially Arabs or Greeks, is falling out of fashion. The Sinhalese have traditionally called them *Marakkala minissu* ("boat people") or *Hambankāriya* (possibly from the Malay *sampan*, "boat," or from Tamil *cāmān*, "goods"). In common English parlance, both "Moor" and "Muslim" are used interchangeably today to refer to indigenous Tamil-speaking orthodox (Sunni) Muslim Sri Lankans.

With the advent of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula in the first half of the seventh century, trade across the Indian Ocean was increasingly dominated from the eighth century onward by Arab Muslim merchants from ports on the Red Sea and the gulf. The medieval Hindu and Buddhist kingdoms of South India and Sri Lanka allowed these Arab merchants—many of whom acquired local wives by whom they fathered Indo-Muslim progeny—to establish port settlements in places such as Calicut, Kayalpattinam, and Colombo. As a result of this simultaneous pattern of Muslim coastal settlement, there is a good deal of shared tradition and common social structure between the Māppīlas of northern Kerala, the Marakkāyars of the Tamil Nadu coast, and the Moors of Sri Lanka. All three groups—Māppīlas, Marakkāyars, and Moors—follow, or at least prefer, some form of matrilineal marriage and household pattern, and many of them recognize some type of matrilineal descent, a fact that makes them distinctive, although not unique, in the typically patrilineal Muslim world. The nature of the Sri Lankan Moorish matrilineal system is best documented for the east coast Moors of the Batticaloa and Amparai Districts, where a system of exogamous ranked matriclans, matrilineal residence, and de facto pre-mortem matrilineal transmission of houses and lands to daughters through dowry is followed by the Tamil Hindus as well. Matrilineal marriage is widespread among Sri Lankan Muslims elsewhere on the island, but not formal membership in matrilineal clan groups. Additional evidence of long-term connections between the coastal Muslims of Tamilnadu and Kerala and the Moors of Sri Lanka is found in the fact that all three groups share a set of distinctive Tamil kinship terms for parents and elder siblings, which are not found among other South Indian Muslims (McGillivray 1989; 1998a).

The Sri Lankan Moors are mainstream Sunni Muslims who observe all of the five orthodox "pillars of Islam": creed (*kalima*), prayer (*salāt*), pilgrimage (*hajj*), alms (*zakāt*), and fasting during the month of Ramadan.

Like Muslims of the south Indian coast and Southeast Asia, the Sri Lankan Muslims adhere to the Shāfiʿī school of Islamic jurisprudence, which distinguishes them from the Indian Muslims of the Deccan plateau who are mostly Hanafi. Unlike Muslims in many parts of India, the Sri Lankan Moors are not internally stratified by hereditary caste-like divisions. There are, however, certain highly respected families with the title of Maulānā who are Seyyids (patrilineal descendants of the Prophet's family) who dispense blessings and embody saintly power. The only hereditary profession among the Moors is that of barber/circumciser (*Ostā*, from Arabo-Persian *ustād*, master), a lower status group that marries within itself.

Muslim households in Sri Lanka tend to be found in enclaved neighborhoods in the towns and in distinct Muslim villages in the countryside, interspersed between Sinhalese and Tamil settlements. A few Muslim towns, such as Beruwala and Akurana, have a reputation for affluence generated by gem trading, but the vast majority of Muslims on the island are of lesser means, earning their living from weaving and mercantile trade or, especially in the Mannar, Trincomalee, Batticaloa, and Amparai regions of northern and eastern Sri Lanka, from rice farming. Because of their great concern for female modesty, the Muslims tend to ensure that their homes provide some degree of visual seclusion for wives and daughters. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, most Sri Lankan Muslim women who formerly wore a sari and blouse had begun to wear an Islamic outer gown (*abayah*) and an embroidered head covering that frames the face (*hijāb*). Marriages are usually arranged, giving consideration when possible to the Dravidian preference for cross-cousin matches, which is found among the Tamils and the Sinhalese as well.

### Foodways

Muslim cooking incorporates the widespread Sri Lankan preference for coconut milk, rather than ghee, as the basis for curry gravies and sauces. Meals are based on boiled rice as well as rice flour dishes such as *piṭṭu* (steamed rice flour mixed with grated coconut in a bamboo tube) and "stringhoppers" (Tām. *iṭṭiyappam*), which are steamed patties of rice-batter vermicelli. There is a popular belief that Muslim curries are hotter and spicier than those of the Tamils or Sinhalese, and the Muslim love of meat, especially beef, is believed to lend a "heating" and energizing quality to their food. In addition to *biriyani* (a sweetly spiced meat and rice dish), the Muslims have given Sri Lankan cuisine one of its most popular desserts, *vattilappam* ("wattalappam"), which is a coconut milk custard sweetened

with jaggery. In some Muslim communities in the central and western parts of the island, it is customary for guests at domestic celebrations such as weddings to share food from a large circular brass tray, but elsewhere individual servings are the norm.

### *Rites of Passage*

Sri Lankan Muslim rites of passage bear a resemblance to those of the Tamils, but the variations are fascinating. To promote fertility, both Muslims and Tamils present pregnant women with plump steamed tarts (*koḷukkattai*), each containing another smaller ("child") tart within, auguring a healthy childbirth. A pregnant woman is regarded as being "heated" until her child is born, at which time her body suddenly becomes "cool," temporarily requiring "heating" foods. The danger to the mother and child posed by lurking ghosts and demons is guarded against by carrying some object of iron on the body at all times. After the twelfth day, the most severe postpartum restrictions are lessened, but it is not until the fortieth day, when the baby's head is shaved for the second time, that the Muslims consider the birth pollution (*muḷukku*) to be entirely gone. In accordance with local Islamic practice, on or before the fortieth day, the wife of the Muslim circumciser (*Ostā māmi*) is called to the house to ritually incise (but not to surgically remove) the clitoris of baby girls.

Later, when these girls reach puberty, the traditional custom—now largely abandoned by Moorish families out of heightened Islamic concern for the modesty of women—had been to conduct a celebration of their first menstruation. Parallels with the puberty ritual for Hindu girls, which is still celebrated by Tamil families today, included seclusion of the Muslim girl and a diet of "cooling" foods. After a week of light-hearted "turmeric play" in which unsuspecting relatives were doused with the "cooling" yellow spice, a group of the girl's female cross-cousins would bathe her with scented soap and lead her, dressed in a fancy sari, into the house to glimpse auspicious ritual objects (e.g., a mound of turmeric paste and a flaming wick, or a decorated water pot). The Moors, unlike the Tamils, also administered a sip of *pāl paḷam* (mashed banana, milk, and sugar) to the girl, just as modern Moorish brides and grooms still do today. This illustrates the strong "wedding" symbolism found in both Muslim and Tamil puberty rituals.

While the minor genital operation on infant girls is conducted secretly, and the Muslim girl's puberty rite is nowadays virtually extinct, the circumcision of Muslim boys between the ages of nine and twelve continues to be celebrated publicly by Moorish families with lots of fanfare and public hospitality. Nuptial

metaphors are evident in the popular name for the ceremony (*cunattu kaliyāṇam*, "circumcision wedding") and in the nickname given to the boy himself (*cunattu māppiḷḷai*, "circumcision bridegroom"). Earlier generations would have dressed the boy in a bright woman's sari and glittery mirrors, while today he might wear fashionable western trousers and movie-star dark glasses. After a procession to the mosque for prayers, the boy returns to his home where food and refreshments are offered to the guests. The operation is often performed on a cohort of several Muslim boys together, both to save money and to provide moral support among a set of chums. After reciting the *takbir*, the standard Islamic invocation before slaughtering an animal—and while women of the family loudly warble *kuravai* ululations (the high-pitched warbling sound produced by women while flapping the tongue against the roof of the mouth) from an adjacent room—the hereditary Muslim barber-circumciser (*Ostā māma*) swiftly removes the boy's foreskin with a razor. During the week of convalescence that follows, the severed foreskin itself is carefully kept on tray of ashes under a paddy mortar, later to be safely disposed of by burial or by being cemented into a wall crevice in order to prevent it being used in hostile sorcery (McGilvray 1994).

### *Weddings*

Sri Lankan Muslim weddings, like those of the Tamils, take place in the house of the bride. Because Muslims everywhere on the island tend to be matrilineal, the wedding house itself later becomes the home of the married couple—as a key part of the bride's dowry. Before the wedding, a formal Islamic marriage contract is signed at a private *nikāh* ceremony at the groom's house, at which a nominal amount of *mahr*, or Islamic brideprice, is also pledged. All subsequent wedding rituals occur at the bride's house, usually around midnight, starting with the arrival of the groom's party bearing the wedding sari and the gold *tāli* necklace in a special wooden box. Compared to the Tamils, there is greater seclusion of women at a Moorish wedding; in fact, the Moorish bride never makes a public appearance before the guests. The crucial rituals of the bride's father handing a few strands of his daughter's hair to the groom, followed by the groom's tying of the wedding *tāli* (which among the Muslims is often a massive gold necklace), and the couple's sipping of a mixture of mashed bananas and milk (*pāl paḷam*), all take place privately in the bridal chamber.

### *Burials*

Funeral customs among the Sri Lankan Muslims emphasize the Islamic injunction for a swift burial.

Same-sex relatives of the deceased conduct the bathing of the corpse, purifying it with perfume and camphor, and wrapping it in a plain white cloth, before a procession of men briskly carries it in a reusable palanquin (*cantakku*) to the mosque for final prayers and thence to the Muslim cemetery for burial on its side in the grave, facing Mecca. Post-mortuary rituals and concerns about death pollution are generally less elaborate among the Muslims than among the Tamil Hindus, although Islamic rules require a 130-day period of seclusion (*iddā*) for widows before they are permitted to remarry. A sequence of domestic post-mortuary prayer-feasts (*kattam*) are held, culminating with the fortieth day *kattam*, which often includes gifts of food to the poor.

While the souls of most ordinary Muslims pass quickly to heaven, the spirits of exceptionally holy persons, especially charismatic Sūfī teachers, are believed to remain closely associated with their buried but undecayed corpses, which are often venerated in public tomb-shrines (*dargāh*) or in a sarcophagus within mosque buildings. All across the island, these deceased Muslim saints (*auliyā*) are worshipped and given offerings for their ability to protect local places and to solve problems for devout believers. This highlights the fact that many orthodox Sri Lankan Muslims also follow Sūfī mystical teachings to some degree, and their most widespread religious devotion has been to Sūfī saints popular in south India as well. Often in association with the worship of these saints one finds groups of Sūfī initiates who share the saint's spiritual lineage (*tarīqa*) and are organized under the leadership of a *sheikh* or *kālīfā*. The most ecstatic of these are the *Bāwās*, mostly members of the Rifā'i order, whose distinctive *zīkr* (ecstatic devotional practice) is to stab themselves with iron spikes and whose initiation rituals involve a symbolic burial and rebirth.

Well-known saints include Shaykh Muhiyadeen Abdul Qādir Jīlānī (d. C.E. 1166), popularly known in Tamil as Mohideen Āṇṭavar ("Lord Mohideen"), Persian-born founder of the Qādiriyya Order whose popularity extends throughout the South Asian Muslim world. He is believed to have visited the popular cave-mosque of Daftar Jailani at Kuragala near Balangoda, Sri Lanka, while on a pilgrimage to Adam's Peak. A second devotional figure popular with Sri Lankan Moors is the sixteenth-century saint Shāhul Hamīd, sometimes referred to in Sri Lanka as Mīrān Sāhib, whose tomb-shrine on the Tamil Nadu coast at Nagoor attracts Muslim pilgrims from both south India and Sri Lanka to witness the saint's death anniversary festival (*kantūri*). Several physically empty but spiritually filled "branch office" tomb-shrines, including one at Kalmunai in eastern Sri Lanka and one in Singapore, celebrate Shāhul Hamīd's death anniversary with flag-

raising and *kantūri* celebrations timed to coincide with those at Nagoor.

### Recent History

In precolonial and colonial times, the Muslims of Sri Lanka actively participated in the production and enjoyment of literature written in Arabic-Tamil, a genre that phonetically represents Tamil sentences using the letters of the Arabic alphabet. Close economic ties between Sri Lankan Muslims and their Tamil-speaking trading partners on the south Indian coast permitted an active exchange of works written in this hybrid literary genre. However, in the mid-twentieth century, with memories of the bloody 1915 Sinhalese riots against Muslim shopkeepers still vividly in mind, Sri Lankan Muslim leaders came to view their Tamil linguistic heritage as a political liability in an era of Sinhalese nationalism. After independence in 1948, the Moors strategically allied themselves with the island's Sinhalese majority parties, extracting political favors for the vulnerable Muslim minority in the face of Tamil charges of cultural betrayal. When in the 1980s and 1990s the Tamil separatist guerrillas of the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) launched attacks on government fortifications and Muslim mosques in the eastern region, and expelled Muslims from the Jaffna peninsula, many Muslims found themselves unexpectedly caught in the middle of a civil war. Despite this, in regions such as the east coast where Moors have lived for centuries alongside Tamils, there still remains hope that interethnic relations can be healed over time.

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