



Photo of Kaleel in Bilal Emporium

The Muslim Community (Moors)

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Introduction

Sri Lanka was known to early Arab seafarers as sarandib, where Muslims believe Adam fell to earth from paradise, and to European colonial powers as Ceylon, an island nation with a dominant Sinhala-speaking Theravada Buddhist majority and several religious minorities, including Hindus, Christians, and Muslims. In the Sri Lankan census of 2012, the entire Muslim religious community of Sri Lanka (combining all Muslim ethnicities

and all Muslim sectarian groups) represented 9.7 per cent of the total population of 20.2 million. Islam is the third largest faith in the island after Buddhism (70.2 per cent) and Hinduism (12.6 per cent). In comparison, Christians (both Sinhala and Tamil) of all denominations are 7.4 per cent.

Within the overall Muslim religious community (*umma*), the largest ethnic subgroup by far – 95

per cent – is the Tamil-speaking Muslims (or Moors), representing 9.2 per cent of the total Sri Lankan population in the 2012 census. All of the other Sri Lankan Muslim subgroups are extremely small by comparison, constituting altogether no more than .5 per cent of the country's population. The largest of these is the Malay community, descendants of Javanese and Malay soldiers and royal exiles transported to Colombo during the Dutch period (1658-1796). In colonial Ceylon the Malays, who like the Tamil-speaking Moors are Sunni Muslims of the Shafi'i legal school,

achieved recognition in government service (police, fire brigades, military) as well as in law and education. There are also three small Indian Muslim trading communities of Sindhi and Gujarati origin, some quite wealthy, who mostly arrived during the British colonial period (1796-1948). Among these, the Memons are Sunni Muslims, while the Khojas and Dawoodi Bohras are Ismaili Shia Muslims. In the twentieth century, a small Ahmadiyya ("Qādiyāri") community, followers of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835-1908), has also established roots in Sri Lanka, notably in Colombo and Negombo.

Origins and Historical Linkages

The historical origins of the Sri Lankan Moors are, in a sense, pre-Islamic, because Persian and Arab sea-traders across the Indian Ocean were well known from Greek and Roman times. It was only after the advent of Islam in 622 C.E. that the same Arab and Persian sailors carried the new faith to the island, as well as to Southeast Asia, seeking textiles, spices, and gems (Ameer Ali 1981a, Effendi 1965, Kiribamune 1986, Wink 1990). Although the earliest evidence from the Islamic period is limited to fragmentary travelers' accounts, early Islamic coinage, some tombstones and a few lithic inscriptions, the origins of the Muslim community of Sri Lanka are plainly continuous with the pre-Islamic seaborne trade between South and Southeast Asia and the Middle East. By the 14th century C.E., Adam's Peak (*Sri Pada*) had become a focus of trans-oceanic Muslim pilgrimage and was starting to become a central element in a distinctively India-centric conception of Islam (Battuta 1986, ch. 8; Ernst 1995). Later, following Vasco da Gama's 1498

naval crusade against the "Moors" of Calicut, Portuguese sailors encountered Muslim traders in Sri Lanka who spoke Tamil, who had ongoing links with the Muslims of the Malabar and Coromandel Coasts of South India, and who had been given royal permission to collect customs duties and regulate shipping in the major southwestern port settlements under the suzerainty of the Sinhalese Kings of Kotte (Indrapala 1986; Abeyasinghe 1986).

Unlike the great North Indian Muslim empires founded by conquest, or local South Indian principalities controlled or influenced by Mughal or Deccan power, Sri Lanka never gave rise to a Muslim kingdom or polity. Nor was it the scene of any major Muslim uprisings such as the Māppila rebellions of the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Kerala (Dale 1980). Nonetheless, the period of Portuguese and Dutch colonial rule was harsh for the Moors, who were subjected to special penalties and restrictions because of their Islamic

faith and the threat they posed to the European monopoly of overseas trade. Ultimately the effect of Portuguese policies was to encourage (and by an official edict of 1626, to require) migration of many coastal Moors inland to the Kandyan Kingdom, where they engaged in *tavalam* bullock transport and a diverse range of other occupations (C.R. de Silva 1968; Ali 1980a: 337ff.; Dewaraja 1986, 1994).

In 1626, King Senerat of Kandy is said to have resettled 4000 Moors in the Batticaloa region of the east coast to protect his eastern flank from the Portuguese fortification of Puliyantivu (modern Batticaloa town) that occurred soon thereafter, in 1627. If true, this is the only historically noted Moorish migration to that area (Queyroz 1930: 745, C.R. de Silva 1972: 88, Mohideen 1986: 7-8). Senerat's resettlement is not corroborated in any local sources, but as early as the 15th century, and certainly by the 17th century, Moorish farmers had become well-established on the east coast (Neville 1887, Pathmanathan 1976). This historical migration explains how the Moors of

Sri Lanka came to pursue occupations of many different kinds across the island, but especially in the Northern and Eastern Provinces of the island, paddy agriculture and fishing.



Culture and Society

From the beginning of the colonial period in the early 16th century, Muslims were designated by the Portuguese colonial power as Moors (i.e., Portuguese *mouro* or North African), a term the Portuguese applied to Muslims everywhere in their African and Asian empire, as well as by such familiar European terms as "Mohammedan" or "Mussalman." In Tamil they identified themselves as Sonahar (*cōnakar*, West Asian or Arabian, from Tamil *cōnakam*, Arabia), although their

most common designation today in all languages is simply "Muslim."

While the Moors include mixed descendants of pre-colonial Arab and Persian seafarers, frequent connections with South Indian Muslim communities and additional intermarriages with Sri Lankan Tamils have occurred over the centuries, a fact that is reflected in various cultural practices (Hussein 2007, Jameel and Hussein

2011). Indeed, commercial, cultural, and even migrational links between Muslim towns in southern India and Sri Lankan Moorish settlements are confirmed in the historical traditions of Beruwala, Kalpitiya, Jaffna, and other coastal settlements where Sri Lankan Muslims have lived for centuries (Casie Chitty 1834: 254 ff.; Denham 1912: 234, Shukri ed. 1986, Mahroof, et al. 1986). Like the coastal Muslims of South India and most of the Muslims of Southeast Asia, the Sri Lankan Moors are members of the Shafi'i legal school, a legacy of the south Arabian sea traders who first brought Islam to the entire region (Fanselow 1989). Today the Sri Lankan legal system recognizes Islamic law in the limited domains of Muslim marriage, family, and inheritance, as well as Islamic religious endowments (*waqf*). Local Islamic judges (*qazi*) are appointed to adjudicate domestic disputes in areas where there are significant Muslim populations.

Starting in the 1600s and possibly earlier, Sri Lanka also experienced the widespread diasporic migration of Yemeni shaykhs and sayyids from the Hadramaut region that scholars have traced across the Indian Ocean and into Southeast Asia (Ho 2006). In Sri Lanka, those elite families who trace descent from the Prophet Muhammad and his closest relations (Arabic *ahl al-bayt*, “people of the house [of the Prophet]”) claim the title of Maulānā, and their exclusive marriage practices serve to safeguard the purity of their high religious status (McGilvray 2008:292-296). Another hereditary endogamous sub-group within the Moorish community is that of the barber-circumcisers, known colloquially as Ostā (from Arabic *ustād*, “master” of a skill). In addition to providing shaves and haircuts for Moorish men in rural settlements in the island, the Ostā has been the customary folk-surgeon who circumcises Moorish boys usually between the ages of 9-12, a practice

that is now being replaced by outpatient surgery in hospitals. Today, however, a female Ostā will still be called upon to perform the genital incision that is customary for Muslim baby girls within the first forty days after birth (Hussein 2007:67-77, 464-465; McGilvray 2008:304-310).

Apart from the five “pillars of Islam” that are expected of Muslims throughout the Islamic world – the declaration faith, prayer five times each day, tithing for religious charity, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and pilgrimage to Mecca – many Sri Lankan Moors also share with their co-religionists across South Asia a devotion to Sufi saints (*avuliyā*) and an engagement with local chapters of Sufi orders (*tāriqā*). Apart from the many local holy men venerated in tomb-shrines (*ziyāram*) across the island, the two most widely popular Sufi saints are Abd'al Qādir Jīlanī (d. 1166 C.E., buried in Baghdad) and Hazrat Shahul Hamid (d. 1579 C.E., buried in Nagoor [Nagore], on the Tamilnadu coast near Nagapattinam). Often referred to in Tamil as *muhiyatīn ārtavar* (“Lord Mohideen”), Abd'al Qādir Jīlanī was the Persian-born founder of the Qādiriyya order whose popularity extends throughout the South Asian Muslim world, including Sri Lanka (Zarcone et al. 2000). A festival and feast in his memory is celebrated annually at Daftar Jailani, a site on the southern escarpment of the Kandyan Hills near Balangoda where he is believed to have conducted mystic meditations in the 12th century C.E. (Aboosally 2002; McGilvray 2004, 2016a). Later, it is believed that Saint Shahul Hamid of Nagoor (known in Tamil as *nākūr ārtavar*, “Lord of Nagoor”) visited the same location, establishing a legend that enhances the fame of the Nagoor Dargah as a destination for Sri Lankan Muslim pilgrimage and vow-making (Azeez Saheb, S.A. 2014).

Active participation in Sufi orders attracts a relatively small number of Sri Lankan Muslims, but it seems have grown in recent decades, led in some cases by charismatic and controversial shaykhs such as Abdullah Payilvan and Rauf Maulavi whose bitter theological opponents invoke Wahhabi and Salafi doctrines of *towheed* (unity of God) against them (McGilvray 2011). Typical lay Sufi practice will involve a Thursday night meeting for *zikr* (reciting or singing in unison the names and attributes of Allah), a group ritual

that differs between specific Sufi orders, under the tutelage of a local Sufi shaykh to whom followers have pledged their spiritual allegiance. The largest Sufi orders in Sri Lanka are the Qadiriyya, Shaduliyya, and Rifa'i, although other tariqas are known, including the Naqsbandi and Chishti orders that have strong followings in North India. Contemporary Sufi shaykhs typically establish their base of support in particular towns and regions, and their style of leadership may reflect local cultural conditions (McGilvray 2015).

photo of Jailani Rifai Ratib



photo of Muslim women at Daftar Jailani



photo of KKP Bawa in green turban



Perhaps the most eye-catching specialists in the Moorish community are the Bawas, a non-hereditary category of Muslim religious mendicants (*faqirs*) who perform dramatic acts of Sufi devotion at mosque festivals and saintly shrines. The Bawas generally display the kinds of public self-mortification practices associated with the Rifa'i order of Sufism: cutting their skin with knives and piercing themselves with iron spikes while a chorus of Bawas sing and beat tambourines. Regarded as antinomian by many conventional Sri Lankan Muslims, the Bawas nevertheless attract crowds of eager spectators for their nightly festival performances at regional Sufi shrines such as Daftar Jailani in the Kandyan Hills, Porvai (Godapitiya) in the deep south, and the Beach Mosque at Kalmunaikkudy on the east coast (McGilvray 2004, 2008:297-304; Hussein 2007:482-490).

To varying degrees, the Sri Lankan Moors preserve matrilineal and matrilineal family patterns, a legacy of pre-colonial and early colonial coastal trade, migration, and familial ties between Sri Lanka and south Indian Muslim ports such as Kilakkarai, Kayalpattinam, Cochin, and Calicut, a connection that has shaped Tamil social structure in Sri Lanka as well (Raghavan 1971:199-217). For example, there is a similarity in kinship terms and a preference for matrilineal (women-owned) houses that can be seen in a comparison with Marakkayar Muslims in coastal Tamil Nadu and Māppiḷa Muslims in coastal districts of northern

Kerala. In the Eastern Province districts of Batticaloa and Ampara, the matrilineal principle of tracing family (*kuti*, matriclan) descent through women, and the matrilineal tradition of transferring houses and land to daughters as a dowry (or as an independent pre-nuptial gift) for the purpose of marriage, is followed by Moors as well as by Hindu and Christian Tamils (McGilvray 1989, 2014). In some east coast Moorish towns such as Akkaraipattu, the older mosques continue to be managed by a board of male trustees representing the matrilineal clans to which members of the mosque congregation belong (McGilvray 2008).

photo of Akk Sinnapalli drum - 1971

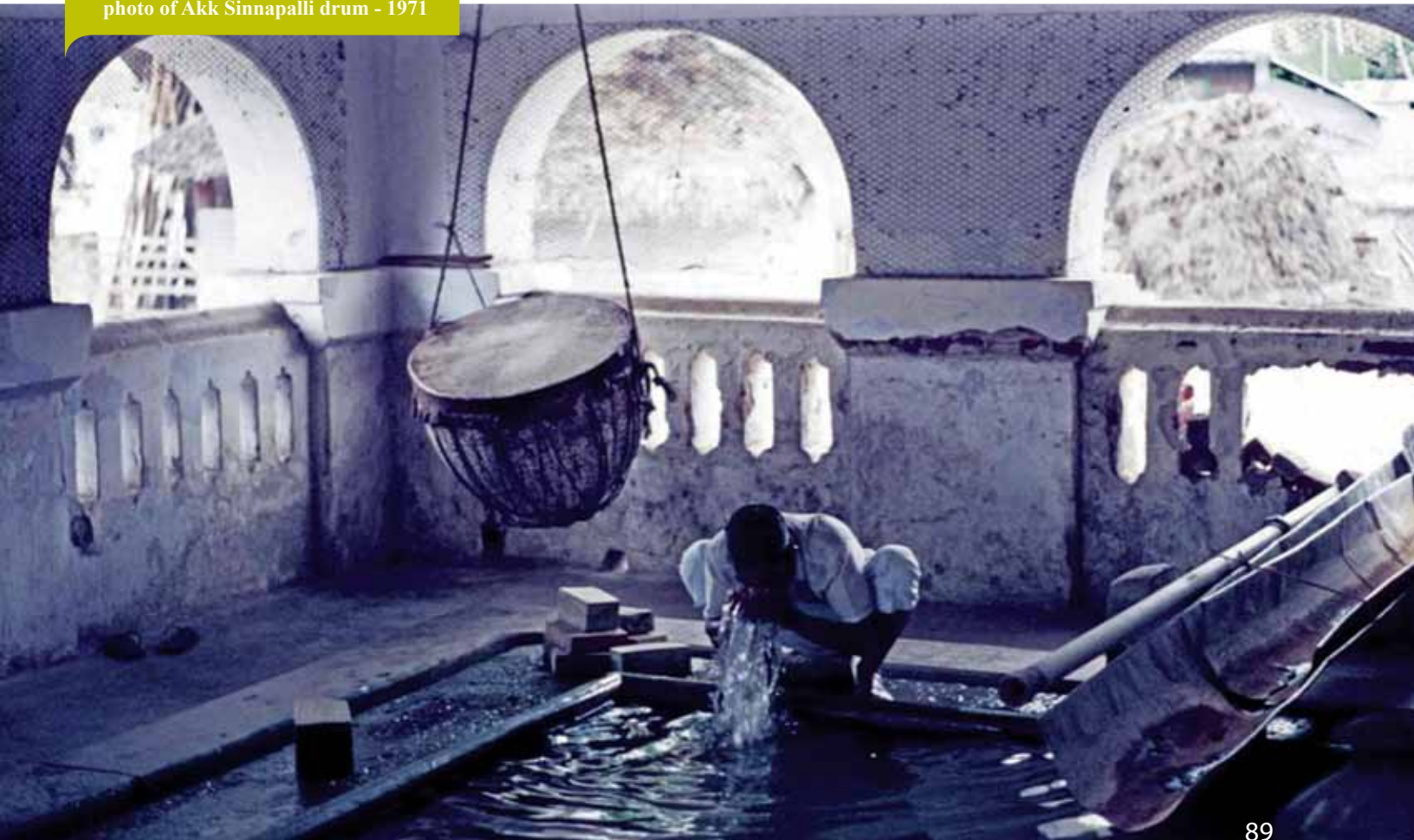


photo of Kattankudy Mira Palli Mosque rooftop



Today there is a wide distribution of the Muslim population across the island, with two-thirds living in Sinhala Buddhist majority regions, including a large urban population in Colombo, and one-third living in the Tamil-speaking agricultural and coastal districts of the north and the east (Fig. 1). Ampara in the east is the only district in Sri Lanka with a plurality of Muslims in the local population, thus a focus of vigorous Muslim politics. Taken as a whole, the Moors of Sri Lanka reflect a wide spectrum of socio-economic levels and occupational specialties, from wealthy urban business magnates and gem-traders to rural

farmers and fishermen, from textile and hardware merchants to restaurant owners and tea shop proprietors, from teachers and professionals to marginal small-holders and impoverished slum-dwellers (Mauroof 1972). The current post-war economic prosperity and professional success of the Muslim community is visible in most parts of the island, except in the IDP camps of Kalpitiya and Puttalam where many Northern Muslim families forcibly dispossessed by the LTTE in 1990 still languish today (Hasbullah 2004, Thiranagama 2011).

Identity and Ethnic Challenges

The variety of disparaging terms for the Sri Lankan Moors is symptomatic of the identity problems they have faced over the centuries in differing colonial European, Tamil, and Sinhalese contexts. Denham (1912: 232n.) observed a century ago that "*chōni*," short for *cōnakar*) was commonly used as a rude Tamil nickname for Muslims in the Batticaloa region. Two other slang terms are *nānāmār* and *kākkā*, regionally variant Moorish kin-terms for "elder brother." During the colonial period, the presence of so-called "Coast Moors," expatriate Muslim traders from the South Indian coast, generated additional tags for Muslims: *marakkala minissu* (Sinh. for "boat people"), *hambaya* or *hambankāraya* (Sinh.) and *sammankārar* (Tam.) from either *Malay sampan* "skiff" or Tamil *cāmān* "goods." The British also used the word "tambey" (Tamil *tambi*, younger brother) to refer to itinerant Muslim traders. Ameer Ali (1980, 1981a) provides a useful discussion of these impolite references, a more extensive vocabulary than is found for the Sinhalese or the Tamils.

Muslims have often been the target of communal animosity and violence from the Tamil side, most harshly seen in the LTTE massacres of eastern Muslims at prayer and the forced expulsion and expropriation of Muslims from Jaffna and Mannar in 1990. However, the most traumatic case of anti-Muslim violence came from the Sinhala side in 1915, when Sinhala mobs burned Muslim shops and homes in an outbreak of civil unrest that required the deployment of British colonial troops to restore order (Roberts 1994, Ameer Ali 1981b). When a leading Tamil statesman of

the day, Ponnambalam Ramanathan, defended the Sinhala rioters against colonial justice, it deepened a rift that had already opened between the Tamil and the Muslim communities over the question of ethnic/racial group representation on the Legislative Council, further eroding Muslim confidence in Tamil leadership and strengthening Muslim loyalty to the British crown. This was also the period when the influential Buddhist religious crusader, Anagarika Dharmapala, was preaching against Muslims and foreigners who were alleged to be weakening the integrity of the Sinhalese nation (Guruge, ed. 1956: 540). Nevertheless, when it became clear that the Sinhala ethnic majority would firmly control the democratic politics of Ceylon as independence approached in 1948, the urban Moorish leadership chose to align itself with the Sinhalese bloc instead of with the Tamil nationalist and federalist parties.

In the first four decades of independence, the Muslim leadership pursued a pragmatic, self-interested, and largely successful strategy of flexible coalitions and alliances within the two main Sinhala majority parties, taking advantage of their position as kingmakers and as foils against Tamil federalist agendas. Throughout this period, local anti-Muslim outbreaks occurred in both Tamil and Sinhala areas, but never escalated to the level of community-wide concern. After 1983, when the armed Tamil Eelam conflict broke out, the Sri Lankan government took care, through concessionary tactics as well as covert subversive operations, to prevent the Muslims in the northern and eastern regions from joining the "Tamil-speaking" nationalist project.

Despite these gestures from the Sinhala majority leadership, however, in the 1980s the Muslims created their first political parties in response to the dangers they faced from the LTTE in the eastern region, signaling their intention to chart a more independent political course between the two ethno-nationalist rivals, the Sinhalas and the Tamils.

This is symptomatic of a recurring dilemma for Sri Lankan Muslims: how to construct a collective identity that provides both meaning and security within the turbulent arena of Sri Lankan ethno-nationalism. In pre-colonial Ceylon, the Moors

as a group would have been viewed as similar to a Sinhalese or Tamil caste: a locally-situated, endogamous, ritually-ranked, occupationally specialized group regulated by royal or chiefly authority. In parts of South India today, specific Muslim communities continue to be categorized this way, but it is an obsolete viewpoint in modern Sri Lanka. Instead, the twentieth century has provided the Moors with three possible ethnic identities, each with its advantages and disadvantages under changing political and social conditions (McGilvray 2016b).

Sri Lankan Moors as “Tamils”

The first option has been the linguistic or cultural one championed by Hindu Tamil leaders such as Ponnambalam Ramanathan in the early 20th century, who sought to classify the Tamil-speaking Moors as “Muslim Tamils” (*islāmiya tamilar*), just as Tamil-speaking Christians are regarded as “Christian Tamils.” It is an undeniable fact that Tamil-speaking Muslims in the Indian state of Tamilnadu see themselves as full-fledged members of the Tamil ethnic group, a historical heritage that is displayed in Arabic-Tamil literature and in early Dravidian-style mosque architecture (Anwar 2013).

This, of course, reflects the difference in linguistic demography between Tamilnadu, where the entire state is either monolingual or bilingual in Tamil, versus Sri Lanka, where 70% of the population speaks Sinhala. Muslims in Tamilnadu have

had nothing to lose, and everything to gain, by embracing the Dravidian nationalist movement, which in turn welcomed them wholeheartedly as “non-Brahmins” (More 1993, Fakhri 2008). For the two-thirds of Sri Lankan Moors living in the central and southwestern Sinhala-majority regions of the island, asserting their identity as “Muslim Tamils” would pose a severe liability, both at the ballot box and in terms of personal safety and economic wellbeing (O’Sullivan 1997). The situation might be different among the Moors of the North-East, where Tamil linguistic loyalties are shared with Hindus and Christians, and where the Moorish contribution to Sri Lankan Tamil literature remains vibrant (Kannan et al. 2014). However, this could lead to a regional split within the Muslim community, something that Muslim politicians have tried to prevent out of fear of losing influence at the center.

Sri Lankan Moors as “Arabs”

The second option for Sri Lankan Muslim identity has been to construct a “racial” claim to Arab ancestry, building upon the colonial categorization of the Moors as descendants of maritime traders and religious pilgrims from the Middle East. Muslims were urged to celebrate their Moorishness, corresponding with their Tamil name *Sonahar* (*cōnakar*, Arab or West Asian). At the turn of the 20th century, the idea of “native races” was the basis for indigenous representation on the Legislative Council in colonial Ceylon, and Muslim leaders hoped that the “Arab” Moorish race could stand on an equal footing with the “Aryan” Sinhalese, the “Dravidian” Tamils, the “Javanese” Malays, and the “European” Burghers. This was also useful as a counter-narrative to the hegemonic Tamil claim that the Moors were their benighted “Islamic Tamil” brethren.

The visits of Arabs and Persians to the island, both as traders and as pilgrims to Adam’s Peak, is well-attested in the historical record, but additional inspiration was provided by the arrival in 1882 of an exiled Egyptian revolutionary, Orabi Pasha, and his fez-capped entourage of followers (Samaraweera 1977). Orabi Pasha became a staunch colonial loyalist after arriving in Colombo, and his neo-Ottoman sophistication inspired new Sri Lankan Muslim fashion styles and projects of community self-improvement, including western-style schools for Muslim children. For Sri Lankan Moors, Orabi Pasha and his supporters came to embody an ideal of Middle Eastern civilization and pan-Islamic solidarity, as later represented in the Khilafat Movement of the 1920s. His Ottoman sartorial taste even inspired

a legal “fight for the fez” in colonial courtroom etiquette (Thawfeeq 1972). The Moors’ Islamic Cultural Home, founded in Colombo in 1944, remains today as the major cultural institution of the Sonahar community, comparable to the Dutch Burgher Union for Sri Lanka’s Eurasian community (McGilvray 1982).

photo of MICH library portraits



The concept of an Arab Moorish “race” provides a simple and appealing origin story. However, at an ethnographic level, Sri Lankan Moorish society departs from Middle Eastern Arab cultural norms in almost every way, apart from Islam itself. Moorish families are not strongly patrilineal or patrilocal; indeed many are matrilineal and matrilocal. They forbid marriage with patrilateral parallel-cousins (i.e., father’s brother’s son or daughter), which is standard practice in the Middle East. Instead, they endorse marriage with cross-cousins, and they reckon family relationships according to a Dravidian-type classification that is virtually identical to the Tamil and Sinhala kinship systems (Yalman 1967, McGilvray 2008). Like the Burghers, many of whom bear little physical resemblance to their

Portuguese and Dutch forebears, the Sri Lankan Moors are often indistinguishable today from the Sinhalese or the Tamils, apart from cultural markers of dress, language, and religion. This awkward point was acknowledged early on by Moorish boosters who nonetheless contended, following European genealogical rules, that even a few drops of patrilineal Arab blood from the 12th century would qualify today's Sri Lankan Moors as members of the Arab race (Azziz 1907). This obviously ignores many generations of intermarriage with Sri Lankan women, a cumulative maternal component that seems far more significant than any original Arab paternity (Ismail 1995).

Most Moors today know Arabic only as a language of prayer and Quranic recitation. Although today one sees many urban Moorish women wearing the black Saudi-style *abaya* and *hijāb*, this Arab form of dress has largely been adopted in the last half-century (Nuhman 2007: 203-208). When I first began anthropological fieldwork in 1969, every Muslim women in the agricultural town of Akkaraipattu (Amparai District) wore an incandescently colorful sari,

pulling the cloth across her face for modesty when necessary (*mukkādu*). Moorish food-ways are clearly Sri Lankan, not Middle-Eastern, with a preponderance of coconut-milk based curries and sweets.

While the claim of Arab ancestry might have a grain of historical truth, there is also evidence of migration and intermarriage from the Coromandel and Malabar Coasts of South India. This would explain why the Muslim community speaks Tamil rather than Sinhala, the language that Moorish descendants would presumably have spoken if their Arab forefathers had wed Sinhala women when they landed in the island. When I spoke with Muslim Tamils in coastal towns of Tamilnadu such as Karaikkal, Kilakkarai, and Kayalpattinam in 2015, they considered Sri Lankan Muslim culture and history to be continuous with their own, citing a long history of family migrations and business dealings with Colombo and other Sri Lankan towns. Similar commercial and family connections with Mappila Muslims from Cochin and Calicut are well known in the British colonial period.

Sri Lankan Moors as “Muslims”

Although attachment to Tamil language and culture remains strong, and racial pride as Arab descendants still resonates widely, the third and currently most popular ethnic marker of the Moorish community today has become simply “Muslim,” a religious label that is intended to provide an escape from all of the prevailing language-based and racially-based quarrels between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. In electing to identify themselves

solely by a religious label, the Moors have done something that the other two major Sri Lankan ethnic groups have been unable to do, simply because there are significant Christian minorities within both the Sinhala and Tamil communities. However, to avoid ambiguity, all other Muslim communities apart from the Moors – such as the Malays, Memons, Khojas, and Bohras – must be identified specifically by name.

When the idea of “Muslim” ethnicity was gaining popularity in the era leading up to independence in 1948, it was not intended to mark out an exclusive Islamic sectarian agenda. Similarly, when the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress (SLMC) emerged in the 1980s in response to LTTE violence against Moors in the Eastern Province, it was not conceived as an Islamist party (Johansson 2016). In the decades since independence, however, the Muslims of Sri Lanka, like Muslims throughout the world, have experienced the effects of pan-Islamic reform movements, leading to significant changes in popular Muslim society and culture. Some of the visible shifts include the widespread adoption of austere Middle Eastern-inspired

purdah and *hijāb* attire by Muslim women, the wearing of Arab-style *thobes* and *jubba* garments, and the concomitant display of henna-dyed beards and hair, by some Muslim men, the construction of many new well-funded mosques and madrasas, the stricter public enforcement of gender segregation rules, the marketing of meat and numerous other products with a halal-certified logo, and the growth of Islamic banks and financial institutions. In addition, some middle-class Muslim self-improvement organizations have urged a greater degree of social distance from non-Muslims in the interest of Islamic piety (Haniffa 2008). In some Muslim circles, participation in the Rotary or Lions Club is now frowned upon because the non-Muslim members may consume alcohol.

photo of Tissa Tasneem with lotus



photo of Muslim classroom



Moreover, the very concept of Muslim-ness itself has been contested in recent decades by the polarization between traditionalist and reformist brands of Islam. I am sure that Muslim paddy farmers on the east coast of the island had no idea that their vow-making and celebration of *kandoori* festivals at local saintly tombs was a “Sufi” practice when I first did research among them in the 1970s, but in recent years fundamentalist opposition to such shrine-based Sufi devotion has

become quite zealous, even violent (McGilvray 2011, Spencer et al. 2015: ch. 5). A number of South Asian Islamic reformist movements are now active in Sri Lanka, among them Jamaat-e-Islami, Tablighi Jamaat, and Towheed Jamaat (Nuhman 2007: 174-184, Faslan and Vanniasinkam 2015). To distinguish themselves, adherents of the older and more customary forms of Muslim worship now actively identify as “Sunnatu Jamaat,” i.e., as Muslim traditionalists.

Sadly, the very Muslim religious identity that Moorish leaders had hoped would shield their community from Sinhalese ethnic nativism and Tamil linguistic chauvinism has recently served to bring them directly into focus as a target of militant Buddhist groups. Their Islamic religious identity has now made the Moors vulnerable to accusations of having exogenous origins and of importing an alien proselytizing religion into *Dhamma Dīpa* (“Island of the Dhamma”), the exclusive Sinhala Buddhist ethno-nationalist vision of Sri Lanka.

Although the current problems flared up in 2011, they are only the latest manifestation of an underlying ethnic friction that has troubled Sri Lanka for over a century. The Bodu Bala Sena (“Buddhist Strength Force” or BBS) and its allies Sinhala Ravaya (“Sinhala Outcry”) and Ravana Balaya (“Ravana Power”) accuse the Muslim community of spreading a religion of jihadist terror, economic exploitation, black-veiled misogyny, and cruelty to animals (Jones 2015, Holt ed. 2016). They argue that Islam is a foreign, neo-colonialist religion like Christianity with no authentic roots in South Asian Indic civilization, and one that

allegedly, like Christianity, pursues “unethical conversions.” They claim that Muslims are waging a secret contraceptive campaign (through tainted powdered milk and contaminated women’s underwear) to keep the Sinhala birthrate low, while maintaining a relentless reproductive rate of their own that will demographically transform Sri Lanka into an Islamic nation within a generation or two. They seek to demolish Muslim mosques and saintly tombs that have been built within the “sacred zones” of Buddhist temples and archaeological sites, while objecting to the expansion or construction of new mosques in other areas (Amarasuriya, et al. 2015, McGilvray 2016a). They mock Muslim women’s Arab-style *hijāb* (black outer *abaya* garment, plus head-covering scarf or wimple) and *niqāb* (full facial veil) as resembling a scary “gunny-sack monster” (*goni billa*), and they allege that hidden jihadi terror squads are poised to attack from within the Muslim community. They object to the success of Muslim-owned retail chains such as Fashion Bug and No Limit, whose clerks are accused of seducing Sinhala shopgirls for the purpose of religious conversion. They decry the Muslim slaughter of cattle, despite the fact that beef is a widely consumed part of the Sinhala diet, and they claim, astonishingly, that the kitchen staff in Muslim restaurants are required by their religion to spit three times into the food before it is served to non-Muslim customers. The most successful achievement of the BBS campaign has been to remove the visible halal certification logo from supermarket food and toiletries sold to the general public, arguing that non-Muslim consumers should not have to pay the cost for certifying halal meat and merchandise (Haniffa 2017).

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