



the
south
asianist

Lighting incense and oil lamps during *Jum'a*: Hindu-Sufi devotions in contemporary Northern Sri Lanka

Merin Shobhana Xavier

Vol. 6, No. 1, pp. 46–75 | ISSN 2050-487X | www.southasianist.ed.ac.uk

Lighting incense and oil lamps during *jum'a*: Hindu-Sufi devotions in contemporary Northern Sri Lanka

MERIN SHOBHANA XAVIER

The northern province of Jaffna is generally viewed as a Tamil Hindu heartland. This contribution, however, nuances this religiously homogenous view of this region through a case study of Hindu participation and engagement with Sufism, the mystical tradition of Islam. It centres on the figure of Muhammad Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeen (d. 1986) and his adherents and spaces. Bawa was a Tamil teacher who formed his ministries in Jaffna prior to his migration to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1971. His arrival in America led to the development of a transnational religious community. In Jaffna, the two prominent spaces for Bawa's community are his *ashram* (house) in Jaffna town and a mosque-shrine (*masjid-mazar*) known as Mankumban on Velanai (or Kayts) Island. Mankumban contained a memorial tomb to Maryam (Mary), which was removed in 2017. During Bawa's tenure and since the end of the nearly three-decade civil war in Sri Lanka, these spaces have been dominated mainly by local Tamil Hindus. Hindu followers of Bawa remain foremost leaders of these spaces. They cook *kanji* (rice soup) to break the fast during Ramadan (a month of fasting), celebrate *mawlid* (birthdays of the Prophet Muhammad and saint 'Abdul Qadir al-Jilani (d. 1166)) and prepare for *jum'a* (Friday prayers) and/or *poosai* (prayer ritual). Using ethnographic data, this contribution explores how Hindu followers of Bawa are preserving and transforming Sufi-Islamic practices in contemporary Northern Sri Lanka, which has then raised issues of authenticity and orthodoxy with regards to their performance of piety by Muslims in the same movement. How these negotiations are unfolding in this movement nuances not only how Hinduism and Sufism are developing in Sri Lanka, but in South Asia as a whole.

Introduction¹

The spread of Islam into South Asia unfolded through processes that included networks, such as trade and travelling mendicants (i.e., Sufi teachers), in addition to literary transmissions and military conquests. As Islam expanded into the South Asian continent through these diverse modes, it adapted religiously, culturally, politically, and linguistically, to its localised contexts. Thus, the latter cross-cultural exchanges led to new heterogeneous embodiments of Islamic piety and rituals in tandem with theological, philosophical, and legal developments. The ways in which Sufism, a mystical and spiritual approach to Islam, manifested in the South Asian context is one example that captures the outcome of these diverse encounters and subsequent developments.² Sufi teachers (p. *shuyukh*), such as the Mu'inuddin Chishti (d. 1236) of Ajmer and Nizamuddin Awliya (d. 1325) of Delhi, attracted Muslim and Hindu disciples. In doing so, such teachers did not always require their disciples to convert to Islam in order to participate in their Sufi *tariqa* (order). These religiously pluralistic practices have raised a central theological contention in Islam, and its relationship to Sufism, centred mainly on whether one can practice Sufism (i.e., ritually) without being a Muslim (i.e., in compliance with Islamic law or *shari'a*). For some Sufi leaders, Sufism, as understood through a qur'anic framework of universalism, was accessible beyond Islam, while for others Sufism necessitated one's full participation in Islam (i.e., legally and ritually) (Ahmed 2016). Needless to say, these debates did not unfold only in South Asia, but have been ongoing throughout Islam's formative history, and continue today (Sedgwick 2016). While those who wish to maintain an exclusive (restricted) position on the parameters of Islam and Sufism continue to negotiate these issues, the lived reality captures a far more fluid response to this quandary. The latter fluidity is nowhere more evident than in and around Sufi spaces, especially the shrines of holy figures or Sufi saints, who ministered according to the diversity reflected in their immediate environments (Sikand 2007; Ernst and Lawrence 2002; Rozehnal 2007; Bellamy 2011; Bigelow 2010; Flueckiger 2006). Embodied everyday practices by various adherents in and around Sufi spaces captures the complexity of Sufism as it is lived out by Muslims and non-Muslims.

In the religiously diverse landscape of Sri Lanka, these narratives of interface between Muslims and Hindus in ritual activities are not readily discussed, though other historical and shared precedents exist (see discussion of Sri Prada by de Silva in this volume). Studies of religions in Sri Lanka often neglect encounters between supposedly dissimilar religious communities, especially of Sufis and Hindus in predominantly Tamil

¹ A version of this chapter was first published in my book *Sacred Spaces and Transnational Networks: Bawa Muhaiyaddeen and Contemporary Shrine Cultures* (Bloomsbury Press, 2018). Thank you to Bloomsbury Press for granting me permission to publish this as an article for this special volume.

² Other examples include the Ismaili communities (Daftary 2011; Sila-Khan 2004) and the rise of the Ahmadiyya movement in Punjab towards the end of the 19th century, while Sikhism emerged at the crossroads of Sufi, Hindu, and bhakti traditions.

Hindu regions such as Jaffna (Northern Sri Lanka). In the case of scholarship on both religious traditions (i.e., Hinduism and Sufism/Islam) there is a tendency to represent them as hermetically sealed traditions. However, when one enters everyday spaces, such as temples and shrines dedicated to holy figures, these compartmentalised approaches to Hinduism and Sufi-Islam quickly dissolve. In this contribution, then, I illustrate some of these currents of exchanges between Hindus as the “other”, through a case study of a Sufi community known as the Serendib Sufi Study Circle (SSSC) in Jaffna, Sri Lanka. This particular example of a Hindu following of a Sufi teacher, Muhammad Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeen (d. 1986) (who hence forth will be referred to as Bawa), and the subsequent enactments of rituals in sacred shared spaces through acts of personal devotion, highlights the intended purpose of this current volume. At the intersection of shared spaces between Hindus and Sufi-Muslims in northern Sri Lanka, one is inevitably drawn to the complexity of lived Hinduism and its intimate proximity to the ‘Other’.

The case of Sri Lanka

Inter-religious encounters between Hindus and Muslims in Sri Lanka are further problematised by the unique ethno-linguistic tensions that have festered since Sri Lanka’s (Ceylon’s) independence from British colonial powers. In the aftermath of independence, the growing ethno-linguistic tensions between Sinhala and Tamil communities led to the rise of the militant separatist movement known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Religious, linguistic, and ethnic identities were at the centre of the call for political representation that spilled into a nearly three-decade long civil war. The question of the role of the Tamil Muslim community and their voice as a third minority block is a rather complicated one and beyond the scope of this particular analysis. However, “Muslims”, an ethnic label used to demarcate the Tamil Muslim community in Sri Lanka, experienced moments of systematic violence from numerous participants of this larger political struggle. For instance, all Muslims were forcibly expelled from Jaffna on November 30, 1990. In certain instances, people in some districts were only given a few hours to leave, while others were given a couple of days. The displacement of nearly sixty-five thousand Tamil Muslims from Jaffna and the seizure of their property resulted in the creation of permanent internal displacement camps in regions such as Puttalam (Thiranagama 2011; McGilvray and Raheem 2007; Amarasingam 2015). The expulsion of Muslims from Jaffna ruptured the historical presence of Islam in the northern provinces, and specifically its presence in Bawa’s ministry in Jaffna. Still, during my fieldwork in this community and its spaces in Jaffna, I found that the spaces were thriving due to the predominant presence of Hindu members in Jaffna.³

³ During monthly gatherings, such as in Colombo, I met some of the internally displaced Muslims, so I am aware of their voices and continued presence in this community, though they are not physically present in Jaffna.

Nature of research

The research for this case study is based on my study of the transnational communities of the Tamil itinerant Bawa (Xavier 2015, Xavier 2018). Bawa first established an *ashram* in Jaffna, while his students in Colombo mobilised and formed the Serendib Sufi Study Circle. Eventually, in response to interest from some American students with spiritual inclinations, Bawa visited Philadelphia in October 1971. To prepare for Bawa's arrival and to help secure a visa document, these American students formed the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship (BMF) in Philadelphia. Currently, students of Bawa cut across religious (i.e., Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, and Christian), ethnic and national (i.e., Tamil-Sri Lankan, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Iranian, African-American, etc.) identities and thus the movement is religiously, culturally, and ethnically diverse.⁴

I began studying Bawa and his communities for my doctoral research in 2011 and have since published a monograph on his transnational communities (Xavier 2018). For my research, I analysed Bawa's teachings in Tamil and placed it within broader Sufi hermeneutical thought (Xavier 2011), while my fieldwork consisted of ethnographic data collection and semi-structured interviews in Sri Lanka, Canada, and the United States from 2011 to 2017. For this contribution, however, I focus specifically on Jaffna and the Tamil Hindu members, as a means of contributing to the larger thematic discussion at the centre of this volume. My encounter with this particular group is based on fieldwork I conducted from July-August 2013 and June 2016 in Sri Lanka. Additionally, I also employ interviews that I conducted with Tamil Hindus from Sri Lanka who had migrated to Philadelphia.

In what follows, then, I situate two prominent sites: the (1) *ashram* of Bawa and (2) Mankumban dedicated to both Bawa and Maryam (Mary), the mother of 'Isa (Jesus). Then I illustrate some activities that unfold at these sacred sites on a regular basis, in addition to describing some of my interactions with members of this particular community. Finally, I engage with the voices of Bawa's followers, particularly their interpretations of who Bawa was or is. Most of the active members in Jaffna knew Bawa when he was alive in Jaffna or have a relationship with Bawa that goes back one or two generations. I conclude by unpacking Hindu and Sufi interpretations of Bawa, as it is such perceptions of Bawa that result in the kinds of performances of ritual piety that I document throughout this analysis. This particular case study then suggests that it is the Hindu disciples of Bawa who are currently maintaining Bawa's ministries, especially his spaces. This is not to suggest that Muslims are not present in the movement as a whole, or in Jaffna in particular. Muslim members of this transnational community may travel from Colombo or from abroad (i.e., North America and Saudi Arabia) to visit sacred spaces associated with Bawa in Jaffna. The few Muslims who utilise these spaces in Jaffna are women.

⁴ To date, while I have met South Asian Muslims in America who are followers of Bawa, in the course of my research I have met only one Indian Tamil Muslim follower of Bawa, who is now in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The matter of Indian Tamil followers of Bawa should be a future research topic.

These Muslim women have full access to Mankumban, which is rather distinct from other mosques on the island and even some Hindu temples where women's access is restricted. Thus, when Muslim and non-Muslims (Hindus) encounter each other in and around these shared spaces, it is evident that there are moments of negotiation of the Other in the presence of the sacred. Not all of the adherents are concerned by questions of authenticity in their relationship to the respective spaces associated with Bawa or to Bawa himself. For instance, some of the institutional leaders are concerned about the parameters of Islamic-Sufi authenticity and orthodoxy, especially in relation to the practices introduced by Hindu members of the community. It was the practices performed by Hindus and some Muslims at Mankumban that resulted in the removal of a tomb in Mankumban in late 2017 (see discussion further below). These tensions, as mentioned earlier, have existed in the historical development of Islam, and they have also unfolded particularly with Bawa and his communities, especially with regard to spatial constructions and ritual performances.

Limitations of research

Since my project was based on mapping the larger transnational context of this movement from Sri Lanka to America (i.e., multi-sited), there were limitations to what I was able to explore in Jaffna. For instance, one aspect that I did not engage with was the role of caste identities amongst Bawa's Hindu devotees. I did ask my interlocutors in Jaffna if there were caste patterns amongst the Hindu members and if caste identity affected their ability to participate in ritual activities or influenced spatial accessibility. Most followers of Bawa repeatedly informed me that Bawa taught against castetism, since it was a divisive framework that limited one's encounter with God or challenged *tawhid* (unity). Additionally, caste practices were not prominent in the United States.

I also was not able to explore other Sufi communities in Jaffna or Velanai Island specifically, due to limitations of accessibility as a female researcher. For instance, next to Mankumban on the shoreline of Chaddy Beach, is another mosque-shrine complex dedicated to Shaykh Sultan Abdul Qadir Voliyyullah, who is locally dated to 1598, and of whom little is known. Though I attempted to gain access to this shrine space and speak with members of the mosque, I was unable to do so because of my gender. This particular mosque-shrine does not permit women to enter. Thus, though Sufi spaces do exist in Jaffna, accessibility has also been an issue at times as a female researcher. That said, I have been studying Sufi spaces across Sri Lanka (i.e., Sri Pada/Adam's Peak, and Dafter Jailani) in addition to the intellectual and textual legacies of Sufism by Muslim reformers, such as M. C. Siddi Lebbe (d. 1898) (McKinley and Xavier 2017). Also, scholars such as Dennis McGilvray (2004, 2014, 2016) and Bert Klem (2011) have documented Sufi communities in other regions of Sri Lanka. Collectively these studies are useful sources to complement my work on Jaffna.



Image: Map of Sri Lanka with significant spaces discussed in this article in relation to Sufism and Bawa's communities. Spaces discussed in this article are indicated with a star. Source: Google Maps, adapted by the author.

Finally, my research was not statistical or quantitative in nature, and so I did not gather numerical data on Muslims or Sufis in the whole of the Jaffna region. Rather, my research is based on focused ethnographic analysis through encounter and participant engagement. So, where possible, I relay numerical information on what I documented during my fieldwork, but I do not have representative figures for the entire region, which future research should address.

From local Hindu to transnational devotion: the formation of Bawa's communities

Scholars such as Frank Korom (2011, 2016, 2012, 2012b) and Gisela Webb (1994, 1998, 2006, 2013) have provided early historical studies of Bawa and his community's formation. Webb, for instance, was the first scholar to have completed sustained analysis of Bawa's Fellowship in the American context, while Korom was the first to situate Bawa's Sri Lankan milieu. Though I build upon both of these scholars' important contributions to the study of Bawa and his early institutions, I differ in my methodological approaches. My research is ethnographically inclined. As such, I have drawn heavily from semi-structured interviews and conversations, especially with Jaffna Tamil followers of Bawa. Furthermore, I situate Bawa's community within the context of Sufism and Hinduism in Sri Lanka. Additionally, my scholarship has been invested in using spatiality as a means to frame the religiously diverse make-up of the members of this transnational movement, especially as a tool to study the ways in which rituals and interpretations are transmitted, but also transform or adapt in the process. I understand Bawa's spaces in Jaffna as spatial continuities of sites he was associated with in his own early life. As such, I pay particular attention to these spaces especially in the historical background I offer below. This context is purposeful, as it provides a broader setting for Bawa, his spaces, and the rituals that I engage with in the following sections. I also offer accounts of the followers of Bawa in Jaffna, which has not been done in previous scholarship.

Bawa's Early Years in Jaffna

Bawa was first spotted near Kataragama in Sri Lanka, a site associated with both the Hindu deity Murukan and Islam's perennial mystic Khidr.⁵ Two Hindu pilgrims from Nallur (in Jaffna) were reputedly the first individuals to make contact with Bawa. They encountered Bawa during their pilgrimage to Kataragama (Mauroof 1976: 46; Korom 2011, 2012a, 2016). In the early oral narratives of Bawa, there was already an immediate association of Bawa with shared spaces between Hindus and Muslims, such as

⁵ Khidr is an exemplar of spiritual guidance in Sufism. In the oral traditions of Sufism in Sri Lanka he appears often. More research is needed on his prominence in Tamil Sufism and in narratives of Sufism in Sri Lanka. Bawa repeatedly refers to him in his own teaching stories, as seen in *the Guidebook* (1976) where he provides an interpretation of the qur'anic story of Khidr and Moses (Qur'an 18:60-82). For more on this figure see Hugh Talat Halman's *Where the Two Seas Meet* (2013).

Kataragama. Both early and current Hindu disciples of Bawa drew parallels between Bawa and Murukan. Many felt that Bawa was an incarnation of Murukan. For Muslim followers, they understood that Bawa was a Sufi *shaykh* (teacher) or a *qutb*, a cosmological principle that accords a particular *shaykh* the status as the highest saint or axial pole of the universe.⁶ I will return to these differing perspectives on the identities of Bawa in the concluding sections.

After living with several disciples in different villages in Jaffna, Bawa finally moved to Jaffna Town, where he established an *ashram* (his place of residence) sometime in the 1950s. It was during this time that many came to Bawa for healings and exorcisms while also seeking assistance to settle disputes (i.e., familial and land based).⁷ Many of the devotees in Jaffna today who regularly participate in ritual activities at the *ashram* are from the same families who were originally healed by Bawa. Historically and currently, the visitors and members were socio-economically and religiously diverse. For instance, the matron, who was formerly Hindu, was a school teacher whose chronic illness brought her to Bawa, while Ganesan and Priya Thambi were both educated professionals.⁸ They were all born as Hindus, and identified as seekers of truths in varying ways, which led them individually to Bawa. They all suggested that they felt attracted to his presence and his teachings. Some of the early companions (such as Ganesan and his family) were affiliated with Satya Sai Baba⁹ while others were devoted to regional deities, such as Murukan, whose temple forms a central sacred site in Jaffna Town. Ganesan, who eventually moved to Philadelphia to be with Bawa explained his early experiences of meeting him in the 1970s in Jaffna:

[...He] would sit at the table [...], he had a *sirong* [wrap], sometime bare bodied and all, you know ordinary person, old, old ordinary person. He'd sit on the bed and all the people, all poor people in that area a man or family would go and sit next to him and relay their problems. And he would talk to them, talk to them, very attentively, listen to every word, ask questions. It could be something simple as so and so borrowed fifty rupees from me and haven't returned it to me. Or so and so was re-fencing the border and they've taken some part of our land, something like

⁶ *Qutb* is translated as the pole or axis of the universe. It signifies an individual who has attained an inner gnosis that is completed through outward manifestation of radiance. In Sufism, it could be understood as the "Pole of a Spiritual hierarchy," or can refer to an era, i.e., the "pole of a period."

⁷ These activities of ritual healing and localised relationship with gurus/*shaykhs* are quite common, especially in the South Asian sphere and can be noted in the works of Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger's *In Amma's Healing Room* (2006).

⁸ Priya Thambi is a pseudonym. The "matron" asked that I focus on Bawa and not on her for my research. So, I have negotiated this by using the title she holds, as opposed to her name. For Ganesan, I use his real name.

⁹ Satya Sai Baba movement developed around Sathyanarayana Raji who was born in 1926. In 1940, he identified himself as Sai Baba, the reincarnation of Shirdi Sai Baba (d. 1918) a holy man from Maharashtra, who was said to have amalgamated elements of Hinduism and Islam, for more see *the Gurus in South Asia: New Interdisciplinary Perspectives* edited by Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikegame (2012).

that, worldly things. They would come to him about many things but he would listen very carefully, attentively and nobody can disturb you at that time. And he didn't say I didn't come here to do these things, my business, my mission is different, no anything like that. A lot of love and then at the end he would [...] give them a solution about what to do. And I would see them and they'd turn out and come back and he'd go you are all God. He said I worship the same God you worship. You ask God and I also ask God [...]. The thing that I noticed was poor or rich it doesn't matter, he treated them all the same way. And [...] you can call it love, that is full attention to them, completely dedicated to their wishes and their wants, and this was what I saw, I was a Hindu, he was supposed to be a Muslim. No difference, that was very well. And then at the end of it all, he'd tell a small story, a story which was wisdom based. As much as to say, if you had this wisdom, you wouldn't need to come here. You would be able to solve it your own way.¹⁰

Ganesan knew that Bawa was Muslim, and he identified himself as a Hindu when he met Bawa. Still, neither he nor Bawa had any difficulty with their differing religious identities during their interaction. Since moving to Philadelphia, Ganesan has transitioned to more outward practices of Islam, such as praying five times a day and fasting during Ramadan. However, his practices of fasting or praying at the Fellowship *masjid* (mosque) are not the norm amongst all of Bawa's disciples, as Bawa did not require his disciples to convert to Islam, a reality that is evident amongst his Tamil Jaffna followers. Bawa actively cultivated inclusive spaces, as he welcomed visitors and students from all religious, cultural, linguistic, political, and social backgrounds. Ganesan's comments are also indicative of Bawa's socially progressive world views. For instance, Bawa broke society's rules during a period in Jaffna Peninsula (in the 1970s) when there was stigma and discrimination associated with caste identity. From the early days of his public lecturing, he was a staunch promoter of an egalitarian framework based on the qur'anic assertion of absolute unity or oneness (*tawhid*).

Sometime in the early 1940s Bawa also sought out land in Northern Jaffna based on a mystical relationship to Maryam, the mother of 'Isa (Jesus).¹¹ The property was located near the village known as Mankumpan on Velanai Island (Kayts Island).¹²

¹⁰ Ganesan, interview with author, The Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 23 April 2014.

¹¹ Mary/Maryam plays a significant role in Sunni and Shi'a Islam, and in Sufi traditions. Some classical Sufi thinkers, such as Ibn al-'Arabi (d. 1240) interpret her as the height of femininity. Aliah Schleifer's *Mary the Blessed Virgin of Islam* (1997) is a valuable introduction to these different traditions. For more on Bawa's relationship with Maryam please see Xavier's *Sacred Spaces and Transnational Networks in American Sufism: Bawa Muhaiyaddeen and Contemporary Shrine Cultures* (2018).

¹² This island is at times referred to as Kayts Island or Velanai Island, both are villages on this island, and part of the Jaffna Peninsula. The Dutch also referred to this island as Leiden.



Figure 1. Prayer takes place in front of Bawa's bed and includes the lighting of an oil lamp and venerating the bed of Bawa. Photograph by Merin Shobhana Xavier.



Figure 2. Inside Mankumban in the main sanctuary of the tomb in honour of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen and Maryam (Mary), the mother of 'Isa (Jesus). Communal prayers took place in front of the tomb as well as individualised forms of veneration, such as circumambulation of the tomb. This tomb was removed in October 2017. Photograph by Merin Shobhana Xavier taken August 2013.

In 1954 Bawa purchased the property that Mankumban sits on because of his understanding of this particular location's proximity to Maryam (see figure 2 and 3).¹³



Figure 3. Above is a photograph of Mankumban on Velanai (or Kayts) Island in Jaffna, Sri Lanka during *jum'a* prayers.

Some of Bawa's disciples hold that Maryam's tomb was originally located here, while others understand that Bawa encountered Maryam in a previous life in another form (as the *qutb*) and so built this structure in honour of that encounter. This complex was known as "God's House," and the name Mankumban became used frequently to refer to this site. In 1954 Bawa began the construction of the building that was to be dedicated to Maryam.¹⁴ Even though many of his followers in Sri Lanka offered financial backing for the completion of the building, he halted the construction of this project, alluding that his future "children from the West" would help finish what he started.

¹³ Some of the senior disciples of Bawa suggested that this proximity was based on the water itself. The spot on the beach signals a theme encountered throughout the spaces associated with Bawa: water. From the Headquarters of the Fellowship in Philadelphia to the *mazar* in Coatesville and his *ashram* in Jaffna, Bawa repeatedly constructed a water system either through pumps or through digging a well. On a practical level, this seems like the valuable foresight of a farmer, who was aware of the need for water in cultivating the land and growing vegetation. Mystical connections at Sufi shrines through water is a theme found in other Tamil Sufi communities, such as Shahul Hamid's (ca. 1513-1579) shrine in Nagore, South India (Narayanan 2006).

¹⁴ He laid the foundation for this infrastructure and dug a well to access fresh water, as he did in all spaces he constructed (i.e., the *ashram* and the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship).

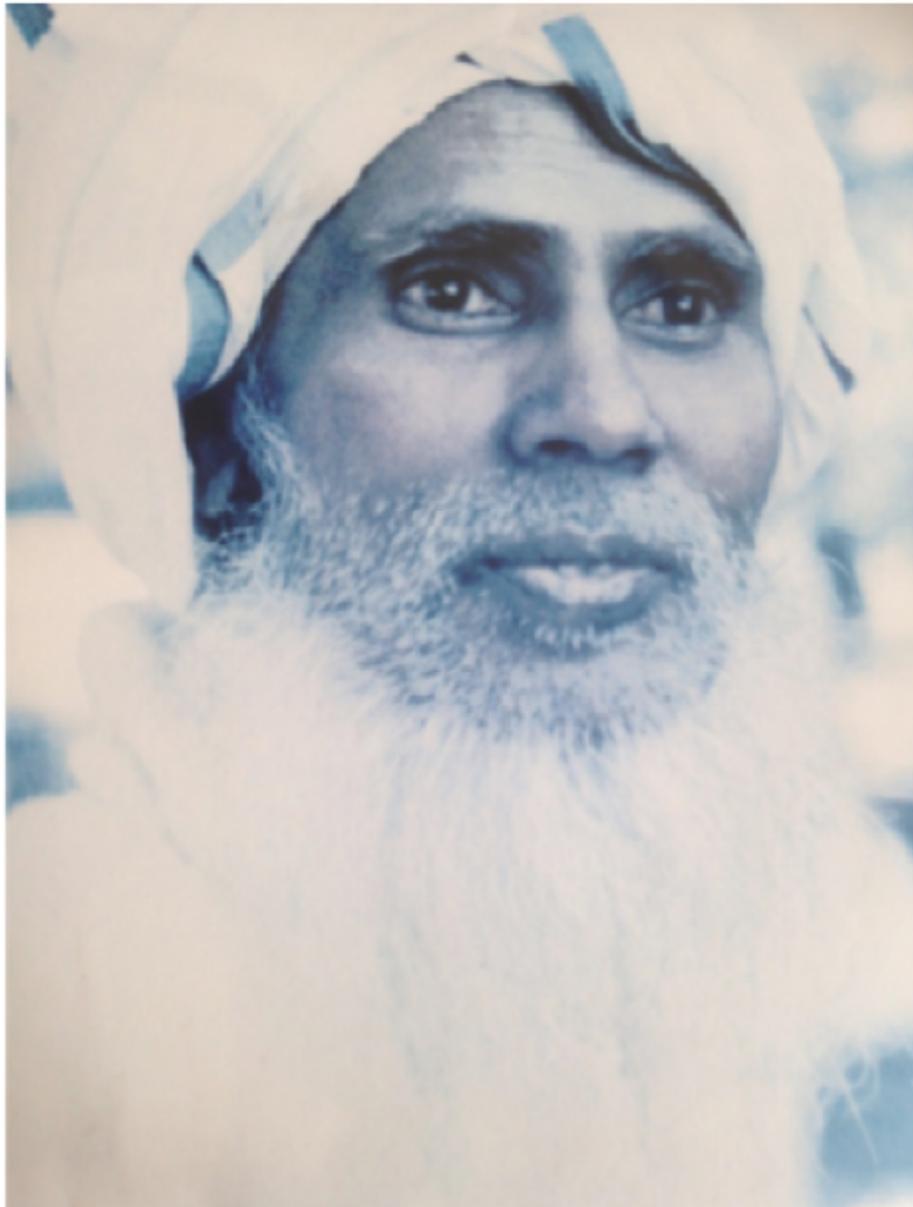


Figure 4. Photograph of Bawa displayed in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
Photograph by Merin Shobhana Xavier.

Bawa was also a farmer. He cultivated two farms according to some of my interviewees, while others have suggested that Bawa had three farms (Mauroof 1976). One of the farms is based in Puliyankulam, in Vavuniya District in Sri Lanka. This farm has recently been refurbished after it was decimated during the final stages of the war. Members have reconstructed a home with a kitchen, restored the well that Bawa initially dug and have started farming again. Moreover, once a month, usually the first Sunday or Saturday of the month, members from the Jaffna *ashram* take the local bus to Puliyankulam and locals near the farm also join in prayers and a communal meal, similar to practices in Mankumban and the *ashram*, as documented below.

From Jaffna to Colombo

Dr. Ajwad Macan-Markar met Bawa through his sister-in-law Gnanier who invited Bawa to her home in Colombo. Thereafter, Ajwad also requested that Bawa stay with his family in Colombo. Bawa spent most of his time in Jaffna at his *ashram*, but in Colombo, the home of Dr. Macan-Markar formed the main centre for the Serendib Sufi Study Circle (SSSC). The SSSC was officially registered with the government in 1963. To this day, the Macan-Markar's home serves as the headquarters of the SSSC. This was the first time that Bawa and his followers institutionalised their movement and framed it legally as a Sufi organization. Bawa's existing Jaffna institutions fell under this legal incorporation.



Figure 5. Post-war, some disciples refurbished the farm in Puliyankulam. Photograph by Merin Shobhana Xavier

Communal celebrations of *mawlid*s or birthday celebrations of the Prophet Muhammad or 'Abdul Qadir al-Jilani' (d. 1166) continued in Colombo, as they had in Jaffna.¹⁵ Colombo also tended to focus on service to those who were less fortunate. One of Bawa's students, Customs Rahman Thambi (d. 2004), also established a centre in

¹⁵ *Mawlid*s, or birthday celebrations for Prophet Muhammad and saintly figures, are practised amongst some Muslim families in Sri Lanka. They may be celebrated at a family home or at a Sufi shrine. Additionally, devotional literature to these figures may be recited to invoke blessings and grace or as a form of thanksgiving for major life events, be they baby births or the start of a new endeavour (i.e., job or trip). Within the communities of Bawa, *mawlid*s were a practice that began in Jaffna and continued throughout Sri Lanka and in America.

Matale in central Sri Lanka. This space which developed out of the home of Customs Rahman Thambi includes a shrine in the jungle and attracts a Muslims from Matale.



Figure 6. The jungle shrine completed by Customs Rahman Thambi and maintained by his family, Matale, Sri Lanka. Photograph by Merin Shobhana Xavier.

Bawa Comes to America

Mohamed Mauroof, a Sri Lankan Muslim graduate student, who was studying at the University of Pennsylvania, invited Bawa to visit Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, because he felt that Bawa could quell the growing racial unrest in the city at the time. Bawa visited Philadelphia in October 1971 and began to cater to a new American audience. Initially, most of the visitors were members of the African-American Muslim communities, such as the Moorish Science Temple (MST) or the Nation of Islam (NOI).¹⁶ Soon thereafter,

¹⁶ The Moorish Science Temple formed based on the teachings of Noble Drew Ali (d. 1929), born Timothy Drew in North Carolina, who was likely influenced by Marcus Garvey's (d. 1940) pan-Africanism. Ali taught Islam as the religion of the black man amidst a racially segregated America. The Nation of Islam (NOI) was a movement led by Elijah Muhammad (d. 1975), which also similarly preached a theology of black Islam, especially based on a return to the original religion of the African-Americans. Malcolm X (d. 1965) was one of the early prominent ministers who led this movement to its popularity, though he would eventually leave it and convert to Sunni Islam.

Bawa started to attract those who were spiritual seekers of the counter-culture era of the 1960s and 1970s. American members of his communities included Christians, Jews, and Muslims, as well as those from African-American and European-American ethnic and cultural identities. As the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship was being established in America, Bawa travelled between Sri Lanka and America tending to his religiously and culturally diverse disciples (Webb 1994, 2006, 2012).

In 1984, he and his disciples built a *masjid* (mosque) as an addition to his thriving headquarters. With Bawa's passing in 1986, he was buried in the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship farm and cemetery located about an hour west of Philadelphia. Bawa's tomb (*mazar*) has become a premier site of visitation for members of Bawa's communities. It has also become a site of pilgrimage (*ziyara*) for North American Muslims in diaspora, who travel to this site to acquire blessings (*baraka*) (Dickson and Xavier 2015, Xavier, 2018).¹⁷ As a whole, Bawa's institutions and spaces form a transnational movement from Jaffna to Philadelphia. Smaller branches exist in Toronto, Canada and Boston, United States, while new branches are forming in cities like Karachi, Pakistan.¹⁸ Bawa did not appoint a successor to lead his community. So Bawa's communities, with no appointed successor, have continued to grow diversely across these sites because of the various localised spaces and contexts. As such, although I spend the remainder of this paper discussing only the Jaffna site, it goes without saying that this is just one node amongst many for this transnational movement.

¹⁷ Pilgrimages to Sufi shrines are known as *ziyara*. For some Muslims, non-obligatory pilgrimages, or *ziyara*, are contrasted to the obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca, or the *hajj*. Some within the Muslim world view *ziyara* to be theologically heretical, because it challenges the central Islamic principle of monotheism. Despite such contentions, praying, meditating, and celebrating at a *mazar* forms an important and, in some cases, central part of Muslim life in as varied contexts as South, East, and Central Asia, the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa. These spaces also attract many from differing religious communities, especially in the context of South Asia where Hindus and Sikhs utilise these spaces, which then garners Sufism further vitriol from anti-Sufi Muslims who view these shrines as heretical, as the space is understood as challenging the theology of *tawhid* or absolute monotheism of God.

¹⁸ Though I have inquired into official numbers, leaders of the community often relay that there may be a thousand families who are officially registered, but many regular visitors are not registered, in Philadelphia alone. Individual branches, such as those in Toronto and Boston, also have their own registered families. On a global scale, it is difficult to gauge the movement simply based on official membership, which probably is just over two thousand North American members. Much of the participation of this community, both in Sri Lanka and in America, is community oriented. What I mean by this is that local Muslims in Philadelphia attend Bawa's mosque for Friday prayers, but do not consider themselves members of the Fellowship community and vice versa. It is for this reason that I think that official numbers are not representative of this community's activities as a whole.



Figure 7. *Masjid* of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Photograph by Merin Shobhana Xavier.



Figure 8. The *mazar* of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen in Coatesville, Pennsylvania. Photograph by Merin Shobhana Xavier.

The *Ashram* and its Ritual Activities

Early Years at the Ashram

The *ashram* (*asrama* or hermitage) of Bawa was the site where his ministry commenced in Sri Lanka. In the South Asian context, *ashrams* have a particular historical and religious context that speak especially to a Hindu milieu. *Ashrams* vary in size and activity, but they are likely to include kitchens to serve those in need and they also provide hospitality to travellers and visitors. They may also contain altars for fire sacrifice and, like a temple, be sites for *puja* (prayer services) if a deity is housed in the *ashram*. Meditation halls are also common in an *ashram*, though the critical component of an *ashram* is a living “charismatic guru” (Khandelwal 2012: 206).

Mauroof, who wrote his dissertation on Bawa’s communities, explains that he found rules at the entrance to Bawa’s *ashram* when he visited in the 1960s as a disciple of Bawa, which he summarised as the following:

1. the non-sectarian attitude toward religion and gods;
2. the rules of conduct at the ashram specifying that the matron of the ashram was the final authority in regard to conduct;
3. the procedures for conduct when the guru was not present. Patients and students were to sit silently and make their requests within their selves. They were promised that by the performance of such conduct they will understand the true power of the institution in regard to the resolution of problems; and
4. that no one should relate the incidents that they see happening in the ashram to outsiders (1976: 48).

It is evident from Mauroof’s early experiences at the *ashram* during Bawa’s tenure that the *ashram* was already a space in which identification with a specific religious tradition was evaded. It was the guru of the *ashram* that maintained the final word, and when the guru was absent it was the “matron” who maintained the authority. This authority of the matron at the *ashram* remained constant throughout my fieldwork. I will say more about the figure of the matron below. A similar female authority does not exist in any other of Bawa’s transnational spaces. Taken together with the devotion of Maryam at Mankumban, the preservation of female authority in Jaffna is rather noteworthy, but such examples of female authority in Sufism are not uncommon, especially in the South Asian milieu (Flueckiger 2006; Pemberton 2000, 2006, 2010).

The *ashram* was also the site of Islamic ritual activities led by Bawa. As early as 1962, Bawa held *mawlid*s for the *Qutb* Muhaiyaddeen (Jilani) at the *ashram*. Muslim singers and reciters were invited for the feast, while meals and gifts (i.e., fruits or coins) were distributed to all those who attended, both Muslim and non-Muslims. This feast took place annually and coincided with the annual general meeting for Bawa’s followers in the town hall in Jaffna. Residents from Jaffna and across the island came to hear

prominent local speakers during the town hall event. Some of Bawa's followers attended both celebrations while others only attended one (Mauroof 1976: 51). After the recitation of the *mawlid*, Bawa discoursed to those gathered and at the end of the main event, a vegetarian meal was distributed to all those present. To ensure that everyone was able to participate regardless of religious identities, Bawa ensured that only vegetarian meals were cooked. From Jaffna to Pennsylvania, Bawa instituted vegetarianism as a central practice for his followers, and again this reflects broader practices of food distribution, or *langar*, at Sufi shrines in South Asia (Werbner 2012; Rehman 2009).

It is the religious diversity of the attendees that is notable in Mauroof's study of this early community. For instance, the *mawlid* celebration was purposely synchronised to align with the annual public general meeting held by Bawa for all of his followers and the public at large. Though the larger festival commemorated by Bawa included the *mawlid*, an Islamic commemoration of the birthday of a saint or Prophet Muhammad, they were by no means attended solely by Muslims. These events attracted Hindus who actively participated in the recitation of songs, such as praises to the Prophet Muhammad while also joining in the free meal that was served. Thus, during Bawa's early ministry, there is evidence of Hindu participation alongside Muslims in Islamic rituals and commemorations, which continued after his death but not without tension.

During the heights of the Eelam Wars (civil war), the *ashram*, which was still under the control of the followers of Bawa, was the site of varying disputes. For instance, during the expulsion of the Muslims from Jaffna by the LTTE, the *ashram* of Bawa was also under threat, as members of the LTTE demanded the deed to the property since they perceived Bawa's community as a Muslim one. The matron and other senior members collected signatures from all the members of the community and presented it to the members of the LTTE, arguing (with list of visible names) that the community was not solely a Muslim one, but rather included Tamil Hindus as well. Thus, as Muslims were forced to leave Jaffna, Bawa's *ashram* remained secure because it was treated as a Hindu community.

I was also informed that the LTTE and the army, during various iterations of the heights of the conflict, occupied the property but reputedly snakes had appeared and scared away the occupying forces. During heightened periods of the war, then, activity at the *ashram* was restricted. Senior members like Priya Thambi and other Tamil Hindu followers (men and women) tried to ensure they remained at the *ashram* so that squatters, such as the LTTE or the army, would not confiscate the property, while also trying to prevent any looting or damages. The matron even left Jaffna and was welcomed in Philadelphia, but eventually returned to Jaffna, explaining that her role was to tend to the *ashram*, as appointed by Bawa. She returned to the *ashram* and has since remained there. Since the end of the war and the expulsion of the Muslims, one sees a continuity of Hindu presence at the spaces of Bawa, especially in an institutional capacity in the roles of the matron and Priya Thambi. Ritual events that unfold at the

ashram are led by the matron, and include Hindu participants, but the liturgical register of the rituals is Islamic in nature.

Present Day Ritual Activities at the Ashram

Daily prayers, or *poosai*, are held at the *ashram* in the meditation hall. The hall contains a memorial bed that belonged to Bawa. All ritual activity is focused on this bed (see figure 1). Daily prayers, which are held twice, are led by the matron of the *ashram*. This ritual often attracts more women than men. When I participated in this ritual there were often five women (all but the matron were Hindus) and three Hindu males. As part of daily prayers, devotees sprinkle incense powder into a silver pot and personally venerate the bed of Bawa. This is completed after listening to a cassette of Bawa singing the *Sura al-Fatiha* (the Opening) and *Sura al-Ikhlās* (Sincerity) in Arabic. The cassette also contains a recording of Bawa reciting a *dua* (intercessory prayer) in Tamil asking for protection and guidance, which is played immediately after select passages are recited from the Qur'an.¹⁹ To conclude, the matron and those present, sing the Tamil and Arabic song "Engal Bawa" or "Our Bawa,":

Precious Bawa, Golden One, our Sheikh of *Gnanam* (wisdom), Muhaiyaddeen, Let us meet together with love and praise as the Virtuous One. *La ilaha ill Allahu, La ilaha ill Allahu* (there is no god, but God) *La ilaha, ill Allahu, Muhammadur-Rasulullah* (there is no god, but God and Muhammad is his messenger)

As the Guru, lacking nothing, as the one complete and good, You show the Treasure without equal, O Sheikh of *Gnanam*, Muhaiyaddeen

Chorus

To swim the roiling sea of birth, to cross with the *Kalimah* (word) boat, You're the rudder, which guides us to shore, O Sheikh of *Gnanam*, Muhaiyaddeen.

Chorus

As the stag, as the doe, as the Limitless Ray of Light, As pure honey, as the *Deen*, you're the Sheikh of *Gnanam*, Muhaiyaddeen.

Chorus

As pure gold, as precious jewels, as ruby, as pearl, and emerald, As jewelled light within the eye, you're mingled with effulgent light. Remain forever in our hearts, O Sheikh of *Gnanam* Muhaiyaddeen.

Chorus

As the grace, as the wisdom, as the Guru within wisdom, You're the effulgence mingled with the Guru, spreading Everywhere, O Allahu.²⁰

¹⁹ The quality of the cassette was quite poor that even my recording of the prayers and my listening to it repeatedly made it difficult to fully transcribe the Tamil portions of Bawa's prayers. From the fragments, I was able to translate, Bawa invokes Allah's names of *ya Rahim* and *ya Rahman* and concludes by calling to "the Lord of the universes."

²⁰ For consistency, these lyrics have been reproduced from the transliterated Arabic and English translation used by the Fellowship.

Once this song was completed, the matron leads those present in the *salawat*, or the recitation of blessings for the Prophet Muhammad:

sallallāhu ‘alā Muhammad; sallallāhu ‘alaihi wa sallam sallallāhu ‘ala Muhammad; ya Rabbi salli ‘alaihi wa sallim (May Allah bless Muhammad; may Allah bless him and grant him eternal peace. May Allah bless Muhammad; O my Lord. Bless him and grant him peace).²¹

At the *ashram*, the *salawat* is the central recitation that takes place during daily prayers, but no *salat* (five-time prayers) are kept. The regular participants who assist with the preparation of *iftar* and the *mawlid*, in addition to participating in daily prayers, are also Hindu disciples of Bawa. To date I have not seen Muslims participate in the daily prayers at the *ashram* (aside from the matron), as this particular ritual resembles a *poosai* (*puja* or prayer ritual) at a Hindu temple more than the *salat* at a mosque, even though it includes the recitation of Arabic prayers and the Qur’an. This does not mean that Muslims, both Sri Lankans and Americans, do not visit the *ashram*; they do; however, they perform their own personal forms of devotion at the bed of Bawa. For instance, in August 2013, when a group of twenty Canadian and American pilgrims, who were mostly Muslim, visited the *ashram*, they did not participate in these prayers. Rather, they performed private *dhikr* (prayer of remembrance) and devotions at the bed of Bawa.

Mankumban: A Masjid-Shrine Complex to Maryam and Bawa

The SSSC Colombo committee, which maintains legal authority of this property, appointed the imam (*lebbe*) to lead the prayers for Mankumban. The imam I met during my fieldwork, M. Bagoos Haleed, died in September 2016. I am uncertain if the current executive members of the SSSC have appointed a new imam for Mankumban. Bagoos was a senior disciple of Bawa. He was appointed by the Colombo leadership to ensure that proper Islamic practices were kept at the mosque, especially in the light of the dominant Hindu presence. Bagoos kept five times prayers, but it was he alone who performed these prayers. Initially when Bagoos and I met, he informed me that Mankumban was beyond any particular religious tradition. However, over time I found

²¹ The *tasilya* or invocation of the blessing upon the Prophet Muhammad is often found in Sufi communities, who recite the *tasilya* hundreds or numerous times during *dhikr*. The recitation of blessings to the Prophet Muhammad is connected to hadith traditions, such as the hadith *qudsi*: “Do you approve, O Muhammad, that nobody from your community utters the formula of blessing for you [even] once but I bless him ten times, and nobody from your community greets you [even] but once I greet him ten times” (quoted in Schimmel 1985: 92-93). It is such traditions that have led to the understanding that the invocation of blessing upon Muhammad through the *salawat* meant the gaining of “good credits” (Schimmel 1985: 92-93). For more on the developments of the *tasliya* please see Schimmel’s study *And Muhammad is His Messenger* (1985).

that he was often uncomfortable with the daily and weekly prayers that were unfolding at Mankumban, especially because the focus of the activities was not the five times Muslim prayers, but rather personal and communal acts of devotion towards the memorial tomb. It was apparent that the varied practices he noticed at Mankumban was something he struggled with, yet from what I noted he did not prevent them.

The centre room was the main sanctuary of Mankumban. It contained a large elevated tomb that was meant as a memorial tomb for Maryam and Bawa. When Mankumban was under construction, Bawa laid in this spot and went into an unconscious state. Those who were present thought he had died, but he became conscious again. As a result of this particular incident, there was a sense that Bawa left some of his presence in this particular burial ground. Hence it has served as a form of memorial for him, even though his actual remains are in Coatesville. The tomb was erected after the end of the civil war in 2003 by two senior disciples of Bawa (one Hindu, the other Muslim). However, these ritual activities have raised tensions at Mankumban, and the new executive leaders of the SSSC have removed the tomb in Mankumban as of late 2017 (at the time of writing this paper). They said that the construction of the tomb was not the intention of Bawa, citing that it was added to Mankumban in 2003 by two senior leaders and not by Bawa himself. The implications of this decision are now being felt, even amongst American and Canadian disciples of Bawa, who themselves performed pilgrimage to Jaffna to visit this memorial tomb. It remains to be seen what this will mean for the future of Bawa's Jaffna sites. Below, then, I document the ritual practices that unfolded at Mankumban when the tomb was the centre of devotion during my fieldwork.

The tomb was draped with a green-suede *chaddor* (cloth) with gold embroidery with a red and gold border (see figure 2). This tomb was under a wooden engraved canopy with four poles and takes up most of the room. This main sanctuary contains an oil lamp. In front of the tomb was a Qur'an-holder with a Qur'an and some Fellowship newsletters from Philadelphia. Those who come for private devotion to Mankumban come to the front of this room and usually fully prostrate and touch their forehead to the ground in front of the tomb. They also light incense sticks and circumambulate the tomb in the inner sanctuary. Below I describe in more detail one ritual activity that unfolded weekly at Mankumban, to further illustrate the presence of Hindu participants in Muslim spaces and rituals.

Jum'a at Mankumban

On a Friday in August 2013, when I was present for *jum'a*, Bagoos and another Muslim pilgrim from Toronto, Canada, performed the *salat* (Islamic prayer) in one of the separate rooms in Mankumban. The main hall of Mankumban contained about fifty to seventy-five males, females, and children from Hindu and Muslim backgrounds who were waiting for the *poosai* to begin. It appeared that more Muslim women than Muslim men were present. I noticed that some Muslim men attended the mosque nearby and joined for the

free meal after their prayers. There was no *khutbah* or sermon on this Friday at Mankumban. During prayers, men and women sat separately side by side, with women on the right.

A recording similar to that used at the *ashram* of Bawa reciting the *Sura al-Fatiha* was played. *Salawat* and “*Engal Bawa*” were sung and incense sticks were lit. Only two senior male devotees stood in the inner sanctuary, while everyone else, including the matron of the *ashram* remained in the large hall. The matron stood in front of all the devotees, helping to lead the recitations. Once the recitations were complete, those who wanted to circumambulated the tomb and Bawa’s room (in the separate complex adjacent to the shrine) with their lit incense sticks. While circumambulating, the participants made sure that they circulated the incense stick around Bawa’s items (i.e., beds, chairs). They ended their procession with the incense sticks at the flagpole (*koti*), outside Mankumban (such flagpoles are frequently seen at Tamil temples), where they wedged the incense sticks into the ground at the foot of the *koti*. Though everyone participated in the singing and prayers, most of those present (about half) lit incense and venerated personal items of Bawa, and most of them were Hindus.

In this communal prayer service, Muslims were also present, especially Muslim women. The presence of Muslim women in Mankumban is significant, because in other mosques, and some Hindu temples in Sri Lanka women are not permitted access. Some of the Muslim women present also sang the *salawa* but did not participate with the other Hindu members who circumambulated the tomb or Bawa’s personal objects. Many of them had their hair loosely covered and some wore *hijabs*. These practices of covering were fluidly maintained. There were also some Christians in attendance, and many restless children from the local village attended, knowing that free food would be distributed.

Once the main liturgy (*poosai*) was completed, the food that had been prepared was served to all the visitors in a separate hall. This was a vegetarian meal. All the males were served first in the food hall and then all the females were served, likely reflecting a cultural norm more than any religious direction of Bawa. Small bags, which contained fruits, cookies, and sweets, which were placed before the tomb during the prayers, were distributed as *prasad* (blessed food) to take home. The food was prepared by some of the regular Hindu disciples of Bawa, who were both men and women. They arrived early in the morning and helped cook the large feast with the matron and Priya Thambi. Priya Thambi informed me that the weekly Friday prayers and the serving of food has been a post-war practice and not one that was instituted specifically by Bawa. The institutionalisation of this practice was a means of reinvigorating the centre so that the army and other locals would not attempt to squat on the property, as land claims and squatting are constant problems in this region post-war.

Imam Bagoos did not participate in these events on the day I was present for *jum’a/ poosai*. When he completed his *salat*, he retired to his room. When I saw him later,

he informed me that he was uncertain about the rituals taking place at Mankumban, explaining that they were not Islamic in nature. He even shared with me that the nearby mosque, which was about half a mile away from Mankumban on the shoreline, whose *khutbah* you could hear blaring on the sound system during prayers at Mankumban, complained about the “heretical” practices that were taking place here, referring to the tomb veneration practices noted above. These sentiments from local Muslims about the predominant presence of Hindus and their ritualistic practices, such as the lighting of the incense and oil lamps, left Bagoos feeling unsettled. Such internal tensions point to the ongoing negotiations of what constitutes “authentic” Sufism and its relationship to Islam and Hinduism. While Hindus find no problem in participating in the singing of blessings to Prophet Muhammad in Arabic or the veneration of Maryam and Bawa, some Muslims find the presence of Hindus a theological and ritual challenge. Hindus in this particular community engage with the Other (i.e., Sufi-Muslims) both spatially and ritually, despite the apprehension of some of the Others they share the space with, and this has been noted in other Tamil South Indian Sufi communities (Narayanan 2006; Mohammad 2013; Flueckiger 2006).

Still, it is likely that it was the above ritual practices that led to the removal of the tomb by the executive leaders of the SSSC. Their contention has been that the tomb was never constructed by Bawa and as such the practices of veneration around the tomb do not reflect Bawa’s teachings. Interestingly, they hold that the issue is not of Hindus and Muslims, affirming that anyone can come and visit Mankumban, and they can just sit in quiet meditation. Of course, though, the veneration and practices at the tomb implicated Hindu members of this religious Jaffna community the most, as it was they who utilised this space regularly. More changes seem to be imminent, with new executives who are currently deliberating the removal of the guest house that is part of the Mankumban complex, which was also added by later leaders of the SSSC and not Bawa himself. Currently, news has reached the American and Canadian members of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, and some are petitioning against the proposed structural changes by the executive leaders in SSSC, especially through social media petitions (i.e., Facebook). It remains to be seen what the implications of these changes are for Bawa’s Jaffna spaces, and most especially for Hindus who have been utilising and preserving these spaces. Yet, despite these ongoing disputes between Hindu and Muslim followers of Bawa in Jaffna, particularly over the performance of ritual veneration, their understanding and perception of Bawa has far more similarities than differences.

At the heart of faith and devotion: Guru Bawa

Hindu Perceptions of Bawa

During my research visits to Jaffna, I found the Hindu presence more apparent. The Hindu participants do not deny that Bawa was a Muslim teacher. Still their devotion to Bawa is

centred on his guru-ship (*swami*-hood), for some this may mean that he has an intimate proximity to god, or is in fact a manifestation of a deity itself. In Jaffna, disciples of Bawa still refer to him as *swami*²² (lord or priest) or guru.

This idea of a guru in many South Asian cultural contexts has both a particular and expansive significance. The label “guru” is also synonymous with *maharaj*, *sant*, *baba*, *sadhu*, *mahant*, *swami*, *sanyasi* and *acharya* (Copeman and Ikegame 2012: 1). Guru, whether from the Hindu or Sikh tradition, was a title that denoted the ability of holy figures to maintain positions of “in-betweenness”, which then enabled them to attract and incorporate diversity. This ability, in many regards, was (is) the success of gurus. Hindu followers of Muslim teachers are (were) not an uncommon historical or contemporary reality in South Asia. Sufi teachers are known to have had Hindu devotees, such was the case with some teachers of the Chishti lineage, while practices such as visitation to a *mazar* are common across different religious traditions in South Asia (Narayanan 2006; Ernst 1997; Schimmel; 1975; Flueckiger 2006; Sikand 2007; Bellamy 2011).

The devotees with whom I spoke with in Jaffna accepted Bawa as a Muslim teacher, although, in doing so, their own identity of being a Hindu did not necessarily need to be altered. The Hindus in Jaffna, they often explained that Bawa was “like god” (*kadavul*) or was a *swami* (lord). The reason for their devotion to him was because of his proximity to god that created god-like qualities in him. As noted above, during Bawa’s early ministry in Jaffna, many of the Hindu devotees also found affinity between the local deity Murukan and Bawa. In *the Tree that Fell to the West: Autobiography of a Sufi* (2003), Bawa narrated that he was found as a baby in the temple of Murukan by a king.²³ Such narratives helped craft the correlations between Bawa and Hindu traditions, which are then invoked throughout Bawa’s ministry. They are a result of regional manifestations of Hinduism that are used to interpret and incorporate a Muslim holy figure. In the discourses of Bawa that I have studied, he does not self-identify with any of the epithets given to him, even as Murukan.

Sufi-Muslim perceptions of Bawa

In the Sri Lankan Islamic landscape, ‘bawa’ was and is a common title used for Sufi mendicants and *fakirs* (wandering ascetics). Bawas’ roles were central to the celebration of *mawlid*s of the Prophet Muhammad and Jilani in Sri Lanka (McGilvray 2004, 2016; Schomburg 2003). They served as ritual leaders during *mawlid*s, either through leading of singing or in performances of ecstatic acts and self-mortification associated with Rifa’i Sufi tradition (McGilvray 2004, 2016; Schomburg 2003). They were the seminal perfor-

²² This is a common honorific used in South Indian religious traditions for deities and for spiritually elevated human beings or wise elders. The title is invoked culturally in Hinduism but also in Christianity.

²³ In Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu poems, such as *puram*, the quality of *mara* (courage in warfare) is associated with the deity of Murukan and is most revered. Though temples dedicated to Shiva are common in Sri Lanka, it is Murukan and his heroism that is most traditionally venerated in Tamil Hinduism in Sri Lanka.

mers and leaders in ceremonies, music, and rituals at shrines during Sufi celebrations, and also served as shrine keepers.

In the specific case of Bawa, correlations are made between Bawa and Baba/Bawa (father) Adam, the first father of mankind according to Abrahamic traditions, especially as narratives in South Asian Sufism state that Adam was cast to Serendib after his expulsion (Ernst 2016). Bawa's association to Adam's Peak and the Prophet Adam (Baba Adam); similar to Dafter Jailani with the Jilani; and Kataragama with the perennial mystic Khidr; places Bawa in a unique sacred geography associated with Islam and Sufism on the island. Significantly these are also sites that are shared with Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Buddhist traditions in Sri Lanka. In the context of Sri Lanka, then, the title 'Guru Bawa' connects Bawa to two predominant Tamil religious traditions, that of Hinduism and Sufi-Islam.

For some, such as Priya Thambi, a senior Hindu-Sufi devotee of Bawa, his understanding of Bawa is steeped in both Hinduism and Sufism. In the newly refurbished farm house in Puliyanukulam in Vavuniya district (see Figure 5) the material culture curated in the house alone indicates the complex sacred topography that Bawa's Hindu-Sufi disciples (i.e., Priya Thambi) are actively constructing. For instance, during my visit there was a painting of the Sufi Mu'inuddin Chishti, along with photographs and pictures of Bawa and his spaces (i.e., the *masjid* and the *mazar*), along with his books. There was also a framed photograph of the sacred Mount Kailas, the mountain that is venerated as the abode of Lord Shiva, and its accompanying Lake Manasarovar, which is located in Tibet. These pictures were framed and organized by Priya Thambi who saw these various sites as part of the same spiritual milieu. This example of material culture and the formation of sacred spaces highlight the daily negotiations that unfold in local sites amongst followers of Bawa. Devotees of Bawa in Jaffna actively construct narratives from both Hindu and Sufi traditions to create their own paradigms of the cosmos and their place within it. Such formations of Bawa by Hindus challenge Muslim followers who place him within only an Islamic Sufi milieu.

The Muslims I encountered in Colombo follow the Islamic teachings of Bawa and focus mainly on the *dhikr* practices, which some Hindus participate in as well. For some, the performance of *dhikr* is in addition to the keeping of Islamic rituals, while others maintain that only following the practices laid out by Bawa (i.e., *dhikr* and *mawlid*) is enough for being a Muslim, the latter is evidenced in the matron of the *ashram* (i.e., the performance of *salat* or lack thereof).

In our case study of this particular community in Jaffna, Sufis, Muslims, and Hindus share spaces, rituals and beliefs due to their relationship to a charismatic figure, Bawa, who they individually relate to. This relationship leads to their ritual participation and use of sacred spaces associated with Bawa. Such experiences are not unique to the South Asian context or Sri Lanka for that matter, but these moments of interface are not often captured, especially in the light of the country's ongoing ethno-religious and linguistic

tensions and conflicts.

Hindus' testament of Bawa as a 'god-like' figure goes against the principle of absolute monotheism adhered to in Islam. This question of *tawhid* (unity) and its practice amongst Sufis has been a concern historically for jurists, such as the Sunni Muslim theologian and reformer Ahmad ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328). The reverence to Sufi saints and personalities, such as Bawa, led to accusations of *shirk* (or the association of partners to God) by those with anti-Sufi sentiments (Sirriyeh 1999). These claims raise the question of whether one is venerating the Sufi teacher (i.e., Bawa) or God (through Bawa). For Hindu devotees, though, this is not a concern in the same way it is for Muslim followers of Bawa. Still, such statements of affinity of Bawa to the divine (or "god-like") are not far different from Sufi saints who were said to have achieved intimate proximity to Allah through self-annihilation (*fana*) of their lower self (*nafs* or ego). It is such interpretative tendencies of who Bawa was and the liminality that he maintained (as 'god-like', *guru*, *swami* and *qutb*) that are critical to exploration of his diverse communities and the resultant polysemic rituals noted at his *ashram* and Mankumban.

Conclusion

Bawa's community includes Hindus and Muslims in Sri Lanka, while in America it comprises Christians, Jews, Buddhists, and Muslims. Bawa openly welcomed all those who were interested in his teachings but also provided ritual and spatial channels to help centralise his teachings. These rituals and spaces were based on South Asian (Tamil) Islamic traditions. In exploring the rituals and spaces above, there is a sense of "composite religious identity" manifesting for Hindu members of this community in Jaffna, where religious fluidity is maintained (Sila-Khan 2004). On the other hand, this case study of Bawa's spaces is reminiscent of Joyce Flueckiger's study of Amma in the South Indian context, where spaces (domestic, secular, and religious etc.) become intersections where "numerous crossing[s]" unfold (2006:14). Those from different religious affiliations are able to share the site of the divine relatively easily while others are not. Hindu students of Bawa, such as the Priya Thambi and the Hindu participants, are dedicated to Bawa. At the same time, we also encountered those who "converted" to Islam, like Ganesan and the matron, though they do not favour the use of this term (conversion). Rather they describe their relationship to Islam as a return to an original state. Still, they felt that 'conversion' (turn) was necessary to actualise the teachings relayed by Bawa, even though Bawa never required a conversion to Islam from his followers at large.

The centre of devotion and spaces for this movement, then, is Bawa. Muslims, Hindus, and many more participate in rituals of devotion at Bawa's established spaces because of belief in him. The belief in who he is varies, as noted above. Some Hindus see him as a guru or as a manifestation of the divine (i.e., Murukan), while Muslims view him as the *shaykh* or the *qutb*, the most elevated status given to a saint.

Female members were especially represented within both the Hindu and Muslim communities. The matron is an example of this feminine authority, particularly as veneration was taking place at a tomb in honour of Maryam, a seminal female figure for Christian and Muslim traditions. Personal piety, then, leads to sharing and mixing between Hindu, Muslim, and Sufi contexts in this particular case study. In their presence, Hindu members also transformed the rituals. Hindu members used Arabic and evoked blessings for the Prophet Muhammad and their guru-*shaykh* Bawa, but they also incorporated ritual and cultural practices which were steeped in the Hindu tradition, be they the use of incense or oil lamps in the performance of *poosai*. The latter signals to the influence of culture in the transformation of Sufism and Sufism in transformation of Hinduism. It was precisely these forms of practices, particularly as they were focused on the tomb, that has created tensions, primarily for the majority of the executive leaders in the SSSC, who are Muslims, and the Hindu majority in Jaffna. The latter differences in ritual observances led to the removal of the tomb in Jaffna in late 2017. The new executive leaders of the SSSC argued that the tomb was not the intention of Bawa. The implications of this decision for Mankumban and its uses requires a return to the field to investigate how the sacred is managed in the *absence* of a memorial tomb. However, such moments are illustrative of the complex ebb and flow of ritual performances at shared spaces between Muslims and Hindus in Jaffna.

A monolithic and 'pure' conception of Hinduism and Sufism is difficult to tease out in this particular case study. What one encounters, rather, is the fluidity and diversity of lived Sufism and Hinduism, further suggesting that the 'Other' was not in fact an Other at all but a co-participant in the preservation of the teachings and spaces of Bawa. Hindu members of this community actively prepare the ritual spaces, food, and serve Muslims who come to the *ashram* and Mankumban. It is Hindu devotees who utilise Bawa's spaces regularly and help lead rituals associated with Sufism. These tendencies are not specific to Bawa or even to Sufism but are a reality of guru-centred devotional communities in South Asia, which Sri Lanka is a part of. From Sufi traditions to bhakti movements, guru-centred traditions are transgressive. They dissolve religious categories and dwell in liminal realms that enable sharing to take place between Hindus and others. 🙏

References

- Ahmed, S. 2016. *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Amarasingam, A. 2015. *Pain, Pride, and Politics: Social Movement Activism and the Sri Lanka Tamil Diaspora in Canada*. Georgia: University of Georgia Press.
- Bellamy, C. 2011. *The Powerful Ephemeral: Everyday Healing in an Ambiguously Islamic Place*. Berkeley: University of California.
- Bigelow, A. 2010. *Sharing the Sacred: Practicing Pluralism in Muslim North India*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Copeman, J. & A. Ikeygame (ed.) 2012. *The Guru in South Asia: New Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Edinburgh: Routledge.
- Daftary, F. 2011. *A Modern History of the Ismailis: Continuity and Change in a Muslim Community*. London: I. B. Tauris.
- Dickson, R. & M. S. Xavier. 2015. Négociation du sacré à Philadelphie: soufismes concurrents au sanctuaire de Bawa Muhaiyaddeen. *Contributions to Social Compass* 62 (4): 584-597.
- Ernst, C. W. 1997. *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism*. Boston: Shambhala.
- _____. 2016. *Refractions of Islam in India: Situating Sufism and Yoga*. London: Sage.
- Ernst, C. W. & B. B. Lawrence. 2002. *The Chishti Order in South Asia and Beyond: Sufi Martyrs of Love*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Flueckiger, J. B. 2006. *In Amma's Healing Room: Gender and Vernacular Islam in South Asia*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Sila-Khan, D. 2004. *Crossing the Threshold: Understanding Religious Identities in South Asia*. London: I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd.
- Katz, M. H. 2007. *The Birth of the Prophet Muhammad*. New York: Routledge.
- Khandelwal, M. 2012. The Cosmopolitan Guru. In *The Guru in South Asia* (eds.) J. Copeman & A. Ikeygame. Edinburgh: Routledge: 202-221.
- Klem, B. 2011. Islam, Politics and Violence in Eastern Sri Lanka. *Contributions to Journal of Asian Studies* 70. 3: 730–753.
- Korom, F. 2011. Charisma and Community: A Brief History of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship. *Contributions to The Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities* 37: 19-33.
- Korom, F. 2012. Speaking with Sufis: Dialogue with Whom and About What? In *Interreligious Dialogue and the Cultural Shaping of Religions* (eds.) C. Cornille & S. Corigliano. Oregon: Cascade Books: 224-249.
- Korom, F. 2016. Longing and Belonging at a Sufi Saint Shrine Abroad. In *Islam, Sufism and Everyday Politics of Belonging in South Asia* (eds.) D. Dandekar & T. Tschacher. New York: Routledge: 77-100.
- Mauroof, M. 1976. *The Culture and Experience of Luminous and Liminal Komuesam*. PhD thesis. University of Pennsylvania.
- McGilvray, D. 2016. Islamic and Buddhist Impacts on the shrine at Daftar Jailani. In *Islam, Sufism and Everyday Politics of Belonging in South India* (eds.) D. Dandekar & T. Tschacher. London: Routledge: 62-76.
- _____. 2014. A Matrilineal Sufi Shaykh in Sri Lanka. *Contributions in South Asian History and Culture* 5.2: 246-261.

- _____. 2004. Jailani: A Sufi Shrine in Sri Lanka. In *Lived Islam in South Asia: Adaptation, Accommodation & Conflict* (eds.) A. Imtiaz & H. Reifeld. Berghahn Books: New York and Oxford: 273-289.
- McGilvray D. & M. Raheem. 2007. *Muslim Perspectives on the Sri Lankan Conflict*. Washington: East-West Center Washington.
- McKinley, A. and M. S. Xavier. 2017. The Mysteries of the Universe: The Tamil Muslim Intellectualism of M. C. Siddi Lebbe. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*. 1-18.
- Mohammad, A. 2013. *The Festival of Pirs. Popular Islam and Shared Devotion in South India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Muhaiyaddeen, B. 2003. *The Tree that Fell to the West: Autobiography of a Sufi*. Philadelphia: Fellowship Press.
- Narayanan, V. 2006. Tolerant Hinduism: Shared Ritual Spaces- Hindus and Muslims at the Shrine of Shahul Hamid. In *The Life of Hinduism* (eds.) J. S. Hawley & V. Narayanan. California: University of California Press: 266-270
- Pemberton, K. 2006. Women Pirs, Sainly Succession, and Spiritual Guidance in South Asian Sufism. *Contributions in The Muslim World* 96: 61–87.
- _____. 2010. *Women Mystics and Sufi Shrines in India*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.
- _____. 2000. *Women, Ritual Life, and Sufi Shrines in North India*. PhD Thesis. Columbia University
- _____. 2004. Muslim Women Mystics and Female Spiritual Authority in South Asian Sufism. *Contributions in Journal of Ritual Studies* 18: 1-23.
- Rozeenal, R. 2007. *Islamic Sufism Unbound: Politics and Piety in Twenty-First Century Pakistan*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Schimmel, A. 1985. *And Muhammad is His Messenger*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina.
- Schomburg, S. E. 2003. 'Reviving Religion': *The Qadiri Sufi Order, Popular Devotion to Sufi Saint Muhyiuddin 'Abdul Qadir al-Gilani and Processes of 'Islamization' in Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka*. PhD Thesis. Harvard University.
- Sikand, Y. 2007. *Sacred Spaces: Exploring Traditions of Shared Faith in India*. New York: Penguin.
- Sirriyeh, E. 1999. *Sufis and Anti-Sufis: The Defence, Rethinking and Rejection of Sufism in the Modern World*. Richmond, UK: Curzon Press.
- Schleifer A. 1997. *Mary the Blessed Virgin of Islam*. Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae.
- Thiranagama, S. 2011. *In my Mother's House: Civil War in Sri Lanka*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Webb, G. 1994. Tradition and Innovation in Contemporary American Spirituality: The Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship. In *Muslim Communities in North America* (eds.) Y. Haddad & J. Smith. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press: 75-108.
- _____. 2006. Third-wave Sufism in America and the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship. in *Sufism in the West* (eds.) J. Malik & J. Hinnells. New York: Routledge: 86-102.
- _____. 2013. Negotiating Boundaries: American Sufis. In *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam* (eds.) H. Juliane & S. Omid. New York: Cambridge University Press: 190-207.
- Xavier, M. S. 2013. The *Insan Kamil* of Bawa: The Metaphysics of a Tamil Sufi Sheikh. *Contributions to the Sri Lanka Journal of Humanities* 39: 51-63.
- _____. 2015. *Masjids, Ashrams and Mazars: Transnational Sufism and the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship*. PhD theses. Laurier University.
- _____. 2018. *Sacred Spaces and Transnational Networks in American Sufism: Bawa Muhaiyaddeen and Contemporary Shrine Cultures*. London: Bloomsbury Press.