

# CHARISMA AND COMMUNITY: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BAWA MUHAIYADDEEN FELLOWSHIP

The causes of events are ever more interesting than the events themselves.  
Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BCE)

History is but a confused heap of facts.  
Lord Chesterfield (1694-1773 CE)

## Introduction

The noted sociologist of religion, Max Weber, pointed out that the founders of new religious movements embody certain qualities that set them off from ordinary men and women. These superhuman, or at the very least exceptional, qualities could be divinely gifted or cultivated by the individual for the purpose of disseminating a particular worldview that is either a reformed version of a pre-existing tradition, such as Shankara in Hinduism and Luther in Christianity, or a radically different vision that has no precedent, as with prophetic founders of revealed religions who radically break with tradition and the past, such as is the case with Islam. Weber famously called these extraordinary qualities charisma (Weber 1947: 358ff).<sup>1</sup> Charisma is that set of powerful elements that provides leaders with the unique gifts required to sway people's opinions in their favour, thereby sowing the seeds for nascent movements that ultimately result in the establishment of new cults in their earliest stages, but gradually develop into distinct sectarian communities that ultimately become denominations when fully matured, if successful in the long run. Moreover, if the charisma of an individual is strong and pervasive, it has the possibility of outlasting the historical person who embodied it, allowing for the institutionalization of the founder's unique qualities in what Weber referred to as the *Amt*, the bureaucratic office in which those qualities are housed. It is this bundle of qualities that then serves as the foundation and the continued sustenance of the human community that emerged and clustered around the founder during and immediately after his or her lifespan.

---

<sup>1</sup> For a valuable post-Weberian study of the concept, see Lindholm 1990.

In this brief paper, I wish to outline a much larger project that traces the emergence of one such charismatic leader who put his extraordinary powers to work to found his own spiritual organization after his public career began in Sri Lanka in the 1940s and ended in the United States in the 1980s.<sup>2</sup> Despite his eventual fame, his origins and much of his past remain largely enigmatic, which is part of his mysterious appeal for many of those seekers on the path to enlightenment who joined him during his remarkable forty-four year public career. Due to his obscurity, one cannot write a traditional history of such a figure based on empirical documentation, for virtually nothing concrete exists. Instead, the diligent researcher must rely heavily on personal testimony and eyewitness accounts, which often have a tendency to become embellished over time, only adding to the mystique surrounding the charismatic individual.

By choosing to consider such oral sources as credible for the purposes of ethno-historical documentation, the line between hagiography and history becomes blurred, leaving only stories and anecdotes.<sup>3</sup> However, I think that one could argue persuasively that “unofficial” history based on legendary occurrences, rumours, and other such sources normally received with a strong sense of scepticism by some can teach us much about why certain individuals are successful in forming new religious communities when others are not. Hagiography, from this perspective, thus becomes a legitimate source of information upon which to draw for sketching the unforgettable careers of charismatic individuals and saints who eventually come to be regarded as larger than life itself (see Lifschitz 1994).<sup>4</sup>

With the exception of one doctoral dissertation (Mauroof 1976) and a bachelor’s honours thesis (Snyder 2003), virtually nothing academic has been written about the individual with whom I am concerned here (but see Webb 1994, 1998, 2006). My data, therefore, are derived mostly from primary sources gathered in the course of doing ethnographic fieldwork in both North America and Sri Lanka; namely, interviews, reminiscences, testimonies, gossip, and written correspondences from and between members of what I term the charismatic individual’s “inner circle,” those people who

---

<sup>2</sup> Tentatively titled *Guru Bawa and the Making of a Transnational Sufi Family*, my projected book will be the first in depth study of this sage and his followers. For a representative sample of his teachings, see Narayan and Sawhney 1999.

<sup>3</sup> The monumental impetus for studying oral history originally came from Vansina 1961 (see also Vansina 1971). For a particularly useful re-evaluation of Vansina’s contribution, see Brown and Roberts 1980.

<sup>4</sup> The literature on Muslim saints lags behind that on Christian sainthood, but some representative studies worth mentioning are Kugle 2007, Renard 2008, and Werbner 2003.

clustered around him immediately after his public ministry began in earnest, most of whom continue being active in the organization founded by the subject of this essay.

Why is this important? My contention is that while we know much about the history of religions in general, we know less about what transpires on the ground during the formative years of a new religious movement's inception, and the longer we wait, the murkier reconstructing events becomes. Although the community I focus on here is by no means large and is still in the process of defining itself, it is transnational and global in nature, which I consider significant enough to justify delving beyond the surface of mere appearances. After all, the founder with whom I am concerned here once said that numbers of adherents do not matter. Spiritual development, in his opinion, is something not easily achieved, nor is it accessible to all. With these points in mind, let me recount the sojourn of a teacher who still brings tears to the eyes of those who knew him when his name is mentioned, even today, a quarter of a century after his death.

### **The Man Behind the Mystery**

According to oral history, sometime between 1940 and 1942, a holy man named Muhammad Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeen (ral.) emerged from the jungles of south-eastern Sri Lanka, near the pilgrimage site of Kataragama (see Figure 1).<sup>5</sup> He was a non-literate Tamil-speaking Sufi belonging to the Qadariyya *silsilah* (lineage), although his affiliation to the order was quite limited and shrouded in mystery.<sup>6</sup> Virtually nothing is known about this individual prior to his emergence from the wilds, and his own autobiography titled *The Tree That Fell to the West* (Muhaiyaddeen 2003), cobbled together by sympathetic editors from thousands of hours of tape recordings, reads more like a transcendental dialogue with God, unhindered by the fetters of time and space, than an historical account of his life.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> He is more intimately referred to as Bawa (father) or honorifically as Bawangal (respected father).

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, later in his life he stopped speaking about himself as an historical entity altogether because he said it distracted people from their quest for God, which he felt was more important than existential reality.

<sup>7</sup> The dates concerning Bawa's arrival in Sri Lanka are ambiguous at best, given other evidence than what his followers say and believe. For example, Bawa himself said he had been in Ceylon since 1899, which is when he claimed that a messenger arrived from the village of Nalla Tanni, Sri Lanka to bring Bawa there. In *Guru Mani*, his first book, which was based on a dictation to an unlettered Tamilian in Jaffna, then published privately in Tamil, the chapter on his visit with Thevanai and Letchimi, two girls he apparently raised earlier on, but ran away and got married, relates how he was at Surali Malai (Spiral Mountain, presumably in Tamil Nadu, southern India) when the messenger came. In part three of the book, in a very brief, one-page statement, Bawa says that he stayed at Kataragama for 18 years, at Jailani for 12 years, then at Adam's Peak for 8 years, then at the Rock Cave "where Sita was kept," in Nuwara Eliya for about 4 ½ years, then in Jaffna for 18 years till the time of dictating *Guru Mani* in 1945, which is a total of 42 ½ years. The mathematical calculations are thus 1945 - 42 = 1903; but, he stated at the end of his autobiographical discussion that he had been in Sri Lanka for 65 years at the time of dictation, so, 1945 - 65 = 1880, which would have made him 106 at the time of his death in 1986, not counting the years before he came to Sri Lanka. The photograph of him included in this publication already shows a man well beyond his teens, which is suggestive of some of his followers' claims that he was over 150 years old when he died. One person in Philadelphia believes that he was over 300 years old, insisting that if the antediluvian Patriarch Noah could live for just a half a century less than a millennium, there is no reason to doubt

What we do know with any certainty, however, is that after many years of meditation in solitude at various locations he eventually settled in the Jaffna area on the northern side of the island in or around 1942, where he ministered to whomever required his services from the home of an affluent family of his patrons. His clientele at first were, by and large, impoverished low-caste Hindus, but Christians and Buddhists visited him on occasion as well. Curiously, very few Muslims seem to have gathered around him during this formative period.

In 1952, he had acquired a dilapidated Dutch warehouse in Jaffna and opened an *ashram* or religious commune within its confines that still exists today, inhabited solely by a former teacher, a pious matron who was close to Bawa during his lifetime. A relative of a Sri Lankan Hindu follower of Bawa's who now resides in Philadelphia assists her in the daily maintenance of the site.<sup>8</sup> Like many South Asian Sufi holy men before him (see, for example, Eaton 1993: 194-304), Bawa also purchased land nearby, which he cleared and then farmed to feed the multitude of people who sought him out. By that time, he was already known as Guru Bawa among his Hindu followers, a father figure equated with lack of ego, mind, and creed, what his Muslim admirers would later refer to as the *insan kamil*, the prototypical "perfect man." As his fame as a healer, exorcist, and counsellor spread, Muslim intellectuals and Theosophists, the latter of whom recognized no boundaries between religions, residing in Colombo eventually sought out the saint and brought him to the city regularly, eventually to start the Serendib Sufi Study Circle in 1962, which was officially incorporated by the Sri Lankan parliament on 27 November 1974.

How, then, was Bawa discovered? The only published account (Mauroof 1976: 40ff), corroborated by a variety of oral sources, states that two brothers from Nallur, a suburb of Jaffna town, took vows to make the 300-mile pilgrimage (*pada yatra*) to Kataragama annually from their home in the north. While journeying there on foot, the two

---

that Bawa also could have lived for three centuries or more. But this goes against the Old Testament teaching that human life spans rapidly diminished thereafter, so that Moses died at 120. See Genesis 9: 28-29 and Deuteronomy 34, respectively. Most Fellowship members, however, contend that there is no point in speculating about this, since Bawa's life could not be judged in the same manner as other mortals.

<sup>8</sup> The woman in question even refused to leave the site when fighting broke out all around her in the 1980s, as is evidenced by the pock marks on the external walls of the structure caused by bullets fired in the vicinity. Witnessing the destruction of many buildings surrounding the commune, Bawa's followers claim it was his miraculous protection that kept the structure in tact throughout the duration of the civil war.



Figure 1: A photo of Guru Bawa in his prime (Courtesy of the Bawa Muhaiyadeen Fellowship).

brothers spotted Bawa in the jungle, where he appeared to them from behind a tree. The first contact was just a "sighting," without communication. The second contact a year later was also just visual, but the third time they spoke with some difficulty, since Bawa apparently spoke a different dialect of Tamil that they could not quite understand.<sup>9</sup> After spending some time with the sage, they invited him to return to Jaffna with them. He declined but told them he would arrive there forty days later, which he did, seemingly without directions to their dwelling.<sup>10</sup>

No sooner did he take up residence with the brothers and their sister there than stories concerning his miraculous powers began spreading first from house to house, then village to village, until a steady stream of people began visiting Bawa at their home for a variety of purposes. One printed account will suffice for my purposes here:

A few months after Bawa had come to their [the two brothers' and their sister's] household, she and a younger sister decided to go to a local temple. Due to the commotion caused in the household by the visiting *swami*, they had not been to the temple for a long time. Also, they knew that the *swami* did not like their previous *swamis* and would disapprove of their visit to the temple. However, one day when the *swami* was resting in the afternoon they both donned their best clothes, gathered flowers to offer the local deity (the Lord Kandasamy), and went to the temple. When they went inside the temple, however, in the place where the figure of Kandasamy stood, all they could "see" was their *swami* whom they had left, apparently sleeping, in their house. They were terrified by the experience, and immediately returned home to their *swami* (Mauroof 1976: 42).<sup>11</sup>

Such stories were common in the early days of Bawa's ministry.<sup>12</sup> In Jaffna, they compelled people to avail themselves of his godly powers. Some came to seek advice about everyday matters and injustices, land grabs being the most common complaint. But demonically possessed people also regularly visited him to be violently exorcised with a schoolmaster's cane that Bawa used to literally beat the demons out of the afflicted persons.<sup>13</sup> According to one eyewitness who is a retired physician, Bawa would

<sup>9</sup> The devout say that it was a medieval dialect (hence, claims to his antiquity) heavily influenced by Arabic called Arwi, which is no longer intelligible to modern speakers of Tamil. The miscommunication was more than likely, however, simply a matter of dialectal difference, since the Tamil spoken in southern India is quite distinct from the numerous varieties of the same language spoken in Sri Lanka. On Arwi, see Shu'ayb 1993.

<sup>10</sup> This is cited as an example of his omniscience, one of the signs of his superhuman powers, along with smelling of flowers, not eating, walking on air, charismatic healing, and raising of the dead, all of which are considered signs of Muslim sainthood. See Ernst 1997: 58-80.

<sup>11</sup> *Swami* is an alternative term used for Bawa by his Hindu devotees in Jaffna. It has a wide semantic range encompassing the terms "father," "lord," "religious teacher," and even "deity."

<sup>12</sup> They continue to abound today as well, providing an important vehicle for remembering the founding teacher. On the constructive role of memory in the contemporary Fellowship, see Korom In Press.

<sup>13</sup> This is one of the phenomena that virtually all of Bawa's American followers who accompanied him to Sri Lanka commented on as being the most horrific and surprising experiences they had. Many became noticeably depressed on seeing their beloved and passive teacher angrily striking

occasionally trap the evil forces in jars as they were departing the skulls of patients, then seal and bury them in the sands of the beach for eternity. He also administered herbal remedies to chronically ill people, many of whom claim to have been miraculously cured by him. Yet others came to seek knowledge about religious matters.

After approximately a decade, Bawa managed to secure a former warehouse near the beach in Jaffna town where he resided with the woman whose brothers had discovered him. She loyally tended to his needs, cooked for the throng of people, and cleaned up after the mass of spectators who came to catch a glimpse of the holy man. The brothers also spent many hours at the newly founded *ashram* as Bawa's apprentices. The elder became a masterful herbal healer, while the younger specialized in psychic disorders. By 1966, Bawa had regular employees consisting of a scribe, a translator, and a chauffeur who drove his car. He also had secured land where he established three farms to grow rice, vegetables, and coconuts respectively.

By this time, Bawa had already been visiting an elite group of his followers in other towns such as Matale and Colombo located in the central and western provinces, respectively. These urban dwellers were not of the typical sort who visited Bawa at the *ashram*. They were, rather, prosperous, well educated, and Muslim, some coming from the Moor community, others from the Malay one.<sup>14</sup> There were also Theosophical Buddhists among these urban patrons. Their interests therefore were less focused on healing and litigation and more on philosophical issues. Unlike the impoverished Hindu villagers who called him *swami* or *guru*, these new Muslim followers identified Bawa as a Sufi, a Muslim mystic deserving the exalted title *sheikh*. It was the group of Muslim intellectuals in Colombo that ultimately formed the aforementioned Serendib Sufi Study Circle, which still operates today, holding monthly occasions for the recitation of *zikr*, followed by the distribution of free vegetarian food to all in attendance.<sup>15</sup> For some years, then, Bawa

---

crazed villagers. It is reported by the current president of the SSSC that Bawa abandoned caning when one person he struck in Colombo threatened to attack him, after which Bawa desisted from using the stick in favour of more non-violent forms of coaxing and persuasion to talk the demon out of the possessed individual.

<sup>14</sup> On the complicated reasons for the use of the term Moor, see McGilvray 1998. For the Malays as being part of the Muslim mosaic of Sri Lanka, see Effendi 1982.

<sup>15</sup> Weekly meetings are also held on Sunday mornings, during which recorded tapes of Bawa's speeches are played, then discussed by the group. These weekly meetings, however, are much smaller than the monthly *zikr* sessions, most likely because no food is served after the weekly meetings.

moved back and forth from Jaffna to Colombo and Kandy, until his life was radically altered in 1969 by an aerogram he received from a confused young woman in the United States.

### **The Saga Continues Across Oceans**

Half way around the world, a young American woman with a penchant for mysticism met a Sri Lankan Moor in 1969, who was a doctoral candidate at a university in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The student told her numerous tales about his fabulous encounters with his spiritual teacher, resulting in her becoming enthralled with the figure and his perennial teachings, seemingly unbound by the strictures of organized religion.<sup>16</sup> The young woman told the student about an experience she had in 1963 during which she fell into a mystical trance. It was in the city of New Orleans during the month of November that this recently married young woman had her baffling experience, the same month that John F. Kennedy was assassinated. As she recalled to me in 2006, "Everything disappeared, as if I was hurdling through darkness. I was terrified, then everything remained bliss, and it lasted for hours." Her husband thought she was ill and had fainted, but then she woke up suddenly, trying desperately to figure out what it all meant. Here is what she says was happening to her:

I was alone, standing still in a detached mood. Things became visually very clear. Then everything seemed to be made up of dark colored dots, all in silence. Then it all disappeared. Everything. No sight, no sound, no smell, no touch, no body, nothing. Then through another kind of sight, seen as if looking at a movie, scenes appeared. It turned out that whatever was wished to be seen could be seen. Things in back of me, things miles away, whatever occurred to one to see, appeared. (Muhaiyaddeen 1972: 249).

A voiceless voice then spoke to her intuitively:

At some point, there began an awareness of a 'silent' voice explaining what was taking place. As the voice spoke, whatever it said became actuality. If it said something, that was what existed at that moment. Nothing else was, except the voice and the state that it explained. It was speaking very quickly, and many things simply can not [sic] be remembered (Ibid.).

Recounting as if a disembodied being herself, lacking any ego whatsoever, she intuits the voice then saying, "There is no time or space. They are One... 'THERE IS ONLY ONE'..."

---

<sup>16</sup> In fact, the original sign in the *ashram*, now gone and replaced by another, less explicit, one, pointed out the non-sectarian nature of the establishment. In addition, the sign also demanded confidentiality in terms of what went on within the walls of the institution as well as silent petitioning of requests, which would be telepathically understood by the master (see Mauroof 1976: 48). Moreover, Bawa's earliest publications emphasized the universal nature of his teachings, which could not easily fit into categorical religious denominations.

The next thing 'I' knew, I was again aware of the world of form and was filled with an intoxication of immense joy" (Ibid.).<sup>17</sup>

Because the experience was ineffable, the woman in question has difficulty articulating what she felt even today. "It is not of language or concepts," she writes. "It is not possible to describe this One" (Ibid.: 250). At first, she couldn't understand what had happened, so she told me that she then turned to Jesus. She prayed to him to send someone to explain her experience to her:

As time went by, it [her experience] became covered over by the problems the world and ourselves give us. But from that moment on, something inside cried, 'Please come! Please come!' After that the world was a very empty place. I still did stupid things. I still do. And I knew that I did not understand what had been experienced, but I did at some point realize that I had to find my Guru. I cried for release and I cried for my Guru (Ibid.).

It took her eight more years to find him. While still in Louisiana, her marriage crumbled. She eventually divorced and moved north to Philadelphia where someone told her about a man who knew a Sri Lankan in West Philadelphia who, in turn, knew a Sufi teacher in his native land. So one day she went to the aforementioned graduate student's apartment, knocked on his door, then asked for his teacher's address. The teacher was none other than Guru Bawa. She wrote him a letter of introduction requesting his spiritual guidance on 21 October 1969, and he responded on 11 November 1969. In his reply, he acknowledged receiving her letter. Referring to her as "sister," he replied that he would be happy to help. She then responded on 24 May 1970 by writing that Bawa is "awesome," and her only determination was for her to go there to be with him at his *ashram*. In this letter she also mentions that her father was preparing to go off to Vietnam for a second tour of war duty, which was causing her mother great anxiety. This made the youthful spiritual seeker even more anxious than she already was, she later told me.

In this way, she began corresponding with Bawa, whose scribe and translator would compose responses based on Bawa's dictation. Thus began a lengthy period of correspondence between 1969 and 1971. In essence, it was spiritual counselling via correspondence. During this period, she came to realize that it would be unrealistic for her

---

<sup>17</sup> The emphases are in original text. Notice that she places the first person pronoun in quotation marks, which suggests that the experience forced her to question the very notion of self.

to abandon everything to move to Sri Lanka to be with him. She then decided to make preparations to sponsor a visit for him to Philadelphia with his entourage by gathering like-minded spiritual seekers around her. Hence, in early 1971, she and her newly formed "fellowship" made final preparations to bring the *guru* to Philadelphia. To secure him a visa, she and a small core of his first devotees informally founded the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship shortly before his arrival on 11 October 1971.

The small group of people comprising the original Fellowship that met the holy man's group at the airport collectively moved into a row home in West Philadelphia, where Bawa gave discourses every evening, after which he would feed the entire gathering with free food cooked in the home's kitchen. By the fall of 1972 the group had drawn up a final charter for the organization, in which Bawa mandated three presidents, three secretaries, and three treasurers, all of whom are still among the sixteen members of the executive committee that assumed control of the organization after the death of the founder. Bawa's intention, according to those selected to lead, was to distribute corporate power in such a way that no single person could make decisions for the entire group.<sup>18</sup>

Known for his regular participation in interfaith dialogues, his infectious charisma drew in more and more people until the house could no longer accommodate the entire group. The Fellowship gradually grew large and prosperous enough to purchase a former Jewish community centre on the outskirts of the city in 1973 that was converted then into a Fellowship house where Bawa's "American family" could reside comfortably. The Fellowship was officially registered as a not-for-profit organization in 1974, with the goal of discovering the meaning of life and humankind's purpose on earth. This event marks the third phase of the movement's institutionalization—the first being the establishment of his *ashram* in northern Sri Lanka and the second being the founding of the Serendib Sufi Study Circle in Colombo. What was still lacking in the sociological sense was a "church," a central place of worship, contemplation, and prayer to which all members would have access.

A few years later, to fill the need for a place of prayer, Bawa and his "children" began building a mosque on the Fellowship grounds that was completed and dedicated in May of 1984, which now serves as a multiethnic religious and educational centre for immigrant Muslims as well as Bawa's American community.<sup>19</sup> From the time he arrived in

---

<sup>18</sup> However, members of the Fellowship who are not in leadership positions often complain about being excluded from decision-making processes and about the noticeable rise in bureaucratization, which Weber (1947: 324-391) says is inevitable. The laity thus feels alienated in the classical Marxist sense at times, which has, in some extreme cases, led to members leaving this tight-knit group.

<sup>19</sup> Philadelphia has quite a significant Muslim population consisting mostly of immigrant Muslims, but some are also African-Americans who converted to Islam during the Black Power movement. Only a few of Bawa's adherents, however, are African-American, one of which holds a prominent position within the administrative ranks of the Fellowship. The Fellowship mosque was the first freestanding one in the city, although others existed in the form of converted storefront ones. Many who attend Friday prayers there are not particularly interested in Bawa or his teachings, but attend for social reasons; that is, to pray together, after which a communal meal is served. Others also bring their children there on Sundays to study Arabic in the attached *madrassa* staffed by Fellowship members. On African-American Muslims in Philadelphia, see McCloud 1996. On issues confronted by African-American Muslims in general, see Curtis 2007.

Philadelphia until his death on 8 December 1986, Guru Bawa led a transnational existence, moving back and forth between his original homeland in South Asia and his newly constructed mosque in Philadelphia. During his fifteen years in the United States, he returned to Sri Lanka four times (May 1972-February 1973; February 1974-July 1975; November 1976-August 1978; and December 1980-November 1982), always bringing along a retinue of his American "family" members with him. During the second trip back, he and forty-one of his American children built what he called God House in Mankumban, near the site of his original *ashram*. This structure has survived the incessant civil war that has plagued that portion of the island in recent decades unscathed, yet another sign of Bawa's miraculous powers, according to his adherents. The site is currently experiencing a revival, now that hostilities have ceased. Rituals and meals are performed and served regularly on Fridays, presided over by a Hindu follower of Bawa.<sup>20</sup>

During his last trip, he fell into a coma and preparations for his burial were being made when, as eyewitnesses told me, he suddenly awoke and proclaimed that an angel had come to take him away, but he pleaded for more time to complete his mission on earth. Purportedly granted pardon by the angel, Bawa returned to Philadelphia for the last time to spend the remainder of his years preparing for his ultimate departure. Despite his declining health, inner circle members claim that he embodied and emanated eternal youth (see Figure 2), yet he died surrounded by his beloved children in the room of the Fellowship house where he spent most of his time after his fourth and last trip to Sri Lanka.<sup>21</sup> His body

---

<sup>20</sup> This non-denominational shrine is dedicated to Mary, the mother of Jesus, with whom Bawa is believed to have been in transcendental dialogue. In the summer of 2011, 33 pilgrims of South Asian and North American descent belonging to the Toronto chapter of the Fellowship will make the journey from Canada to Sri Lanka to visit Mankumban, while others from Jaffna and Colombo will visit the Fellowship in Pennsylvania to observe Ramadan in August.

<sup>21</sup> His movement was somewhat confined during his latter years by the respirator he wore to assist his breathing. Bawa was a heavy smoker for most of his life, even though he did not eat or drink, according to many who knew him well. However, many say his respiratory problems were not caused by nicotine but by taking on the burdens of the world. Bawa acknowledged this himself in one of the letters he sent to the Fellowship founder before his arrival in the United States. In a letter dated 16 November 1970, he dictated, "the world will say that it is sickness. But what it is is tiredness that comes from the suffering in the heart of noble people in this world. It is not sickness. It is a tiredness of the happiness and sadness of those who are noble. You, the children of my liking are the medicine that changes that tiredness. When your wisdom becomes clear, resonates, and

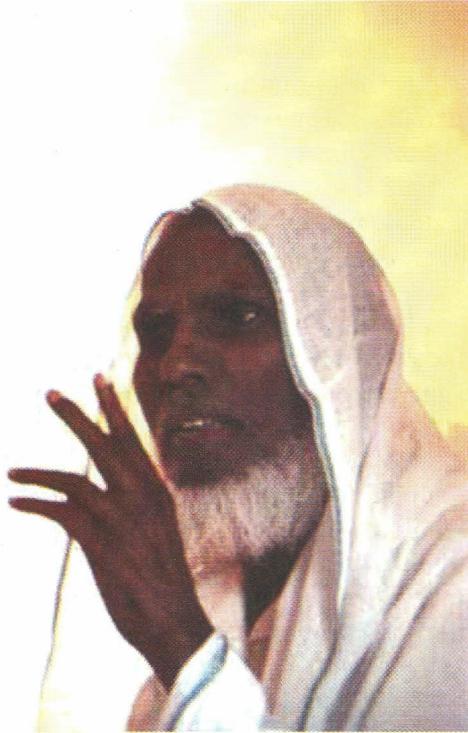


Figure 2: A portrait of Bawa in his later years (Courtesy of the Bawa Muhaiyadeen Fellowship).

was ritually prepared for burial at the Fellowship house, then transported to East Fallowfield, located approximately forty miles outside of Philadelphia on land purchased by the Fellowship years earlier in 1973 to serve as a Muslim cemetery and communal farm.<sup>22</sup> His followers built a *mazar* (shrine) for him over the place where his earthly body now rests (see Figure 3). The location has become an international pilgrimage site and place of contemplation over the past quarter of a century for visitors from North America and South Asia.<sup>23</sup> It is at this site that Bawa's memory is kept actively alive, especially at the time of his annual death commemoration, during which his life is vividly remembered through communal prayer, feasting, and socializing.<sup>24</sup>

### In Lieu of a Conclusion

Based on oral histories and ethnographic data compiled between 2006 to the present on his transnational ministry, I wish to suggest that this humble but charismatic Sufi preacher from Sri Lanka had to make a conscious transition from the generic *guru* to the distinctive *sheikh* to separate himself from the "guru invasion" that took place in the United States during the latter 1960s and early 1970s, after the immigration laws had been relaxed to allow for more Asians to settle on American soil, which allowed them to establish their own alternative forms of spirituality.<sup>25</sup> According to eyewitnesses, Bawa dropped the title of *guru* in 1973 after witnessing Guru Maharaj Ji being paraded around the Houston Astrodome as part of his Millennium 73 extravaganza on television, during which he declared himself Lord of the World (*jagannath*).<sup>26</sup> In his attempt to establish himself as a legitimate Muslim teacher, Bawa gradually came to emphasize not an eclectic Theosophical system of thought, as he earlier seemed to stress, but one based on Islamic *shari'a* (orthodoxy) and *zikr* (recitation), which ultimately would lead to mystical gnosis. But at the same time, he continued to preach in a universal idiom that transcended traditional religious boundaries and reflected a perennial attitude that suggested there is only one God, regardless of what He is called.

---

shines, that clarity becomes the medicine that will change that tiredness. That, my brother, is what happened here. Other than that, there is no such thing as illness, happiness, or sadness for me."

<sup>22</sup> One person who bathed Bawa's body prior to burial attests to the fact that the body showed no signs of decomposition. In fact, it exuded the fragrance of flowers. Even more surprisingly, he claims that no wrinkles whatsoever were visible on the corpse, or noticeable to the touch.

<sup>23</sup> By 1976 the Fellowship boasted ten national and international centers and 7,000 members, and today rough estimates provided by Fellowship officials suggest that Bawa has approximately 10,000 "children" worldwide. The group's directory, however, contains only 1,000 names at most, which suggests that the numbers might be much less than originally thought.

<sup>24</sup> The event on 14 March 2011 marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of his passing, a milestone commemorated with elaborate prayer and feasting, all captured on film by a Pakistani film crew for broadcasting on television in that nation.

<sup>25</sup> Ellwood 1994 ably documents this fascinating period in American religious history. Its subsequent consequences are analyzed by Roof 1999.

<sup>26</sup> There is some controversy as to who made the decision to drop the term. His American children, including the *imam* of the Philadelphia mosque, claim it was Bawa himself, whereas his Sri Lankan followers claim the Americans made the decision for him. Rivalries between the Americans and Sri Lankans is not recent, since it goes all the way back to 1972 when Bawa was scheduled to return to Sri Lanka but postponed due to his lively reception in Philadelphia. See Mauroof 1976: 29.

In summary, Bawa Muhaiyaddeen staged three “comings” during his career that loosely correspond to the stages of institutionalization that I described above. The first is his northern Sri Lankan phase, where he presented himself (or was presented) as a typical Hindu *guru* or Sufi *zinda pir* (living saint), characterized primarily by pragmatism (i.e., farming, healing, settling disputes, etc.). The second phase sets in when he begins to minister to the urban elite of Colombo and elsewhere on the island. This phase is more philosophical, tapping into the theosophical movement that was well under way by the 1970s (see Bond 2003). The third phase coincides with his arrival in the United States. Here he is first understood as the typical perennial mystic, so popular in early seventies’ New Age practice, which perpetuates universalism and anti-dogmatism, but gradually comes to emphasize a distinct Islamic message that focuses on a fourfold spiritual developmental pattern.<sup>27</sup> The progression moves from *shari’a* (revealed law), which involves discerning right from wrong and permissible behaviour to phase two, known as *tariqa* (path), the strengthening of determination, to *haqiqa* (truth), the beginning of communication and union with God, leading finally to *ma’rifa* (gnosis), a more perfected state of union with God that results in *sufiya*, a state of constant remembrance (*zikr*) and contemplation (*fikr*) that transcends the “four religions,” as defined by Bawa: Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Islam, the four religions identified by Bawa, which correspond to different levels of truth and spiritual development (see Webb 1994).

To understand Bawa’s appeal truly, one must trace his historical development from his humble local roots to his rise in international fame. When doing so, one notices a clear-cut move from a tolerant and non-denominational preacher toward a more structured founder of a distinct religious lineage with only tenuous links with a pre-established tradition within Islam. My larger project aims to flesh out this transformation in order to understand how Bawa constantly adjusted his teachings to suit the sensibilities of his changing audiences. This context sensitivity may be a trademark of Bawa’s teachings, which could very well have been influenced by the Buddhist notion of *upaya*, skillful means used to teach at a level comprehensible to the individual student.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> The role of Sufism in the emergence of New Age spiritual practice is poorly understood. Heelas 1996 and Hanegraaff 1996, two key texts on the New Age, for example, pay no attention whatsoever to it. It has only been very recently that some good work has started emerging to address this lacuna. See Wilson 1997.

<sup>28</sup> This is another concept that has not really been explored at all by scholars of religion. While the impact of Hinduism on Buddhism and the impact of Islam on Hinduism have been studied



Figure 3: The shrine and tomb of Sheikh Mohamed Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeen (the spelling used on the English plaque hung above one of the four thresholds) located in East Fallowfield, Pennsylvania, dedicated on 8 December 1986 (Courtesy of the Bawa Muhaiyadeen Fellowship).

Because of the transnational character of the movement, the ultimate goal of the project is to look at the development and flow of this transnational spiritual movement from its point of origin in the past to its present state to understand how this unusual and somewhat anomalous individual's charisma led to the formation of an idiosyncratic Sufi community far removed from the founder's point of origin, but that retains religious, social, and economic ties with the parent organization in Sri Lanka. Moreover, I have here enumerated the stages of institutionalization that occurred as the movement gathered momentum. As I understand it, we are now in the fourth stage of institutionalization, during which what Weber would call the routinization of charisma occurs. It is precisely after Bawa's death that the charisma of office is established, when Bawa's selected acolytes now become figures of authority responsible for maintaining and employing the saint's charisma through his privileged office by creating stricter rules of belief and behaviour, strengthening institutional infrastructure, and expanding membership by disseminating the founder's teachings through various forms of media, such as an aggressive publications program and the launching of an official internet site.<sup>29</sup>

The main question that needs to be asked and ultimately answered is how does an unknown recluse from an obscure suburb of a town located on an island nation rise to fame and establish himself as a global authority on matters of the soul in a seemingly accidental or coincidental manner (despite the Fellowship's claim that nothing happens by chance)? Moreover, what strategies did Bawa and his "handlers" employ to manage his image as he moved from Sri Lanka to the United States, gradually making the transition from an eclectic *guru* to a disciplined and normative Sufi *sheikh* that emphasized Islamic orthodoxy as a foundational platform for achieving a difficult-to-achieve mystical state of gnosis in the end? In asking such questions, and by providing some tentative answers, it is my hope that this essay will contribute to larger questions of interest to social scientists and humanists alike concerning how a marginal "cult" evolves into a "sect," then ultimately a "church" as it temporally ages and doctrinally matures.<sup>30</sup>

---

extensively, virtually nothing exists exploring the influence that Buddhism has had on Islam, or vice versa, but see Elverskog 2010 and Scott 1995. On *upava*, see Pye 2003.

<sup>29</sup> In addition to the sources listed in my bibliography, a variety of books published by the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship Press are easily accessible on the group's website. See <http://www.bmfstore.com/Scripts/default.asp>.

<sup>30</sup> Research for this paper was generously supported by a grant from the American Institute for Sri Lankan Studies. I thank the editor of this journal for his enthusiastic invitation to submit this essay after he heard my oral presentation of it at a workshop on Sufism in Sri Lanka sponsored by the American Institute of Lankan Studies in Colombo during November of 2010. I thank all of the participants of that event for their feedback, especially Dennis McGilvray, Ronit Ricci, and Torsten Tschacher, whose comments I took seriously and incorporated into my revisions for this printed version of the talk. In the end, I am solely responsible for the contents of this essay, some of which might not seem agreeable to the community under study. It is my only hope that ongoing dialogue with members of it will result in a better book a few years from now.

### Bibliography

- Bond, George D. 2003. "The Contemporary Lay Meditation Movement and Lay Gurus in Sri Lanka." *Religion* 33: 23-55.
- Brown, Kenneth and Michael Roberts (eds.). 1980. *Using Oral Sources: Vansina and Beyond*. Special Issue of *Social Analysis*. Number 4.
- Curtis IV, Edward E. 2007. "Islamism and Its African American Muslim Critics: Black Muslims in the Era of the Arab Cold War." *American Quarterly* 59/3: 683-709.
- Eaton, Richard M. 1993. *The Rise of Islam on the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*. Berkeley: University of Chicago Press.
- Effendi, Mohamed. 1982. *Personages of the Past: Moors, Malays, and Other Muslims of the Past*. Colombo: Moors Islamic Cultural Home.
- Ellwood, Robert S. 1994. *The 60s Spiritual Awakening: American Religion Moving from Modern to Postmodern*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Elverskog, Johan. 2010. *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Ernst, Carl W. 1997. *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. 1996. *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
- Heelas, Paul. 1996. *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Korom, Frank J. In Press. "The Presence of Absence: Using Stuff in a Contemporary South Asian Sufi Movement." In T. Pynchman and C. Dempsey (eds.). *Sacred Matters: Material Religion in South Asian Traditions*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Kugle, Scott. 2007. *Sufis and Saints' Bodies: Mysticism, Corporeality, and Sacred Power in Islam*. Durham, NC: North Carolina University Press.
- Lifshitz, Felice. 1994. "Beyond Positivism and Genre: 'Hagiographical' Texts as Historical Narrative." *Viator* 25: 95-113.
- Lindholm, Charles. 1990. *Charisma*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Mauroof, Mohamed. 1976. *The Culture and Experience of Luminous and Liminal Komunesam*. PhD Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.

- McCloud, Aminah. 1996. "'This Is a Muslim Home:' Signs of Difference in the African-American Row House." In B. D. Metcalf (ed.) *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe*, pp. 65-73. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- McGilvray, Dennis B. 1998. "Arabs, Moors, and Muslims: Sri Lankan Muslim Ethnicity in Regional Perspective." *Contributions to Indian Sociology*. 32/2: 433-483.
- Muhaiyaddeen, M. R. Bawa. 2003. *The Tree That Fell to the West: Autobiography of a Sufi*. Philadelphia: Fellowship Press.
- Narayan, B. K. & Rajeev Sawney (eds.). 1999. *Dialogues of the Sufi Mystic Bawa Muhaiyaddeen*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House.
- Pye, Michael. 2003. *Skilful Means: A Concept in Mahayana Buddhism*. London: Routledge.
- Renard, John. 2008. *Friends of God: Islamic Images of Piety, Commitment, and Servanthood*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Roof, Wade Clark. 1999. *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Scott, David. 1995. "Buddhism and Islam: Past to Present Encounters and Interfaith Lessons." *Numen* 42/2: 141-155.
- Shu'ayb, Tayka. 1993. *Arabic, Arwi and Persian in Sarandib and Tamil Nadu*. Madras: Imamul Arus Trust.
- Snyder, Benjamin H. 2003. *Heartspace: The Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship and the Culture of Unity*. BA Thesis, Bryn Mawr College.
- Vansina, Jan. 1971. "Once Upon a Time: Oral Traditions as History in Africa." *Daedalus* 100: 442-468.
- Vansina, Jan. 1961. *De la tradition orale: essai de methode historique*. Tervuren: Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale.
- Weber, Max. 1947. *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. A. R. Anderson and Talcott Parsons. New York: The Free Press.
- Webb, Gisela. 2006. "Third-wave Sufism in America and the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship." In *Sufism in the West*, eds, Jamal Malik and John Hinnells, 86-102. New York: Routledge.
- Webb, Gisela. 1998. "Teaching with Pictures: Three Paintings of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen." In *Windows on the House of Islam*, ed. J. Renard, 290-296. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Webb, Gisela. 1994. "Tradition and Innovation in Contemporary American Islamic Spirituality: The Bawa Muhaiyyaddeen Fellowship." In Y. Y. Haddad & J. I. Smith (eds.) *Muslim Communities in North America*, pp. 75-108. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Werbner, Pnina. 2003. *Pilgrims of Love: The Anthropology of a Global Sufi Cult*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Wilson, Peter. 1997. "The Strange Fate of Sufism in the New Age." In P. B. Clarke (ed.) *New Trends and Developments in the World of Islam*, pp. 179-209. London: Luzac Oriental.