

Of Shamans and Sufis

An Account of a “Magico-Religious” Muslim Mystic’s Career

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Despite the fact that the noted anthropologist Michael TAUSSIG (1989) claimed that shamanism is a contrived category created by Euro-American academics out of a pastiche of practices around the world, the study of the subject is still going quite strong, as indicated by the review article written by ATKINSON (1992) just about a decade ago. However, less studied is the relationship between shamanism and Islam.¹ While not quite comparable in essence, the mystical branch of Islam known as Sufism does

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1. Some exceptions do, of course, exist (CENTLIVRES 1971; SIDKY 1990), especially studies of Central Asian religious phenomena associated with Turkic people, following the lead of KÖPRÜLÜ (1929), who first argued that the similarities between Sufis and shamans led to the mass conversion of the region’s people. See also SELEZNEV and DUDOIGNON (2000). However, AMITAI-PREISS (1999) tempers the argument somewhat in suggesting that the Sufis who influenced the elite were, in fact, the opposite of their ecstatic counterparts. This notwithstanding, the author admits that both types of Sufism (that is, sober and intoxicated) played a role in bringing about the successful conversion of a majority of the population.

indeed include among its practitioners charismatic individuals who perform many of the same functions as shamans do in their own societies. WINKELMAN (1990; 1992) terms these shaman-like individuals “magico-religious” healers in his ambitious cross-cultural studies of shamans and other healers (medicine men, witch doctors, mediums, mystics, and so forth) found throughout the world.

Although no universal definitions of the Tungus-derived terms “shaman” and “shamanism” exist upon which all scholars agree, SIKKALA (1978) geographically confines the phenomenon to the Eurasian and Subarctic regions, while PETERS and PRICE-WILLIAMS (1980) experientially define it more broadly as all magico-religious practitioners who utilize trance, which ELIADE (1964) refers to sensuously as ecstasy. Winkelman himself cautiously limits it to hunter and gatherer societies.² As such societies make the transition to a sedentary, agricultural lifestyle with political integration into stratified society, he states, shamans too transform into other sorts of magico-religious healers (WINKELMAN 1990, 310). Yet all of these magico-religious healers share one fundamental experience that is common, which is an ecstatic state achieved by soul flight. We might call such ecstasy an altered state of consciousness, which WINKELMAN (1990, 311) argues can be achieved in a variety of ways, including, but not limited to, auditory driving (chanting, singing, or drumming), fasting, drug use, austerity, isolation, sleep deprivation, seizures, collapses, or lapses into unconsciousness.

It is my contention that, with the possible exception of drug use, the figure with whom I am concerned here utilized all of these same techniques to achieve ecstatic union with his God, and thereby was given the power to heal in return.³ As I hope to make clear below, Sufis are not shamans, for they share different cosmologies. Nor do all Sufis embody the same traits as the subject at the center of this chapter does. However, for comparative purposes, it is useful to indicate some of the similarities that do exist on the

2. For a valuable overview of the field of studying shamanism, see DUBOIS 2009, in which he wisely avoids defining the term in favor of arguing that it comprises a coherent worldview that deserves to be called a “religion.”

3. I say “possible” because my subject smoked tobacco incessantly for most of his life. While many would not recognize it as a “drug” in the conventional sense, it is often used in shamanic ritual to bring about trance and ecstasy, sometimes in combination with alcohol or psychotropic substances. See VON GERNET 2000.

phenomenological level, if for no other reason than typological and comparative purposes.

In what follows, then, I wish to outline a much larger project that traces the emergence and career of a charismatic Sufi folk preacher 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.⁴ The figure with whom I am concerned here is Muhammad Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeen (ra.), a charismatic individual who rose to prominence on the basis of his exemplary actions. Max WEBER (1948, 267–301, 323–62) used the term “exemplary” to refer to an extraordinary individual who is, as Charles LINDOLM (1998, 210) puts it, a “living receptacle of a static, immanent, and abstract essence.” The exemplar helps human beings escape the trappings of this world to achieve a desired state of transcendence, then ultimately union with a higher power. Exemplary religion is thus the “natural home of charisma” (LINDOLM 1998, 210). Bawa, the paternal title by which he is most often addressed, belongs to this particular brand of Sufism that emphasizes the intercessory powers of a human being who has mastered skills not easily acquired by average people for the purpose of aiding others. His exemplary deeds eventually led to his elevation in status to *qutb*, literally the vertical pole that allows lesser individuals the possibility to move upward along its spiritual axis to achieve a state of gnosis that brings the seeker closer to the goal of transcendental union (KOROM, 2012b).

Despite his eventual fame, Bawa’s origins and much of his past remain largely enigmatic, which is part of his mysterious appeal for many of those who followed him down the path to enlightenment 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, as I discovered during eight months of fieldwork in Sri Lanka on a vain quest to uncover written sources to reconstruct his life. Instead, what I recorded were numerous narratives about miracles Bawa performed on the island prior to his departure for the United States in the 1970s. In my specific case, one must therefore rely heavily on

4. 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 SAWNEY 1999.

personal testimony and eyewitness accounts, which often have a tendency to become embellished over time, only adding to the mystique surrounding the charismatic individual. Such stories, however, make it quite clear that one of the main reasons this saint rose to prominence was his ability to heal and to perform other miracles, which he downplayed later in his life but continued to do up until his death. Indeed, many of his followers adamantly insist that he continues to assist and guide them from the afterlife (KOROM 2012a).

By choosing to consider oral sources as credible for the purposes of historical documentation, the line between hagiography and history becomes blurred, leaving only stories and anecdotes.⁵ However, I think that one could argue persuasively that “unofficial” history based on legendary occurrences, rumors, and other such sources normally received with a sense of skepticism 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 LIFSHITZ 1994).⁶

With the exception of one doctoral dissertation (MAUROOF 1976) and a bachelor’s honors thesis (SNYDER 2003), virtually nothing academic has been written about Bawa, a Tamil term for father that is used by his intimates to refer to him (but see WEBB 1994; 1998; 2006; and KOROM 2011; 2012a, 2012b). 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 some written correspondence from and between members of what I term Bawa’s “inner circle,” those people who clustered around him immediately after his public ministry gathered steam internationally, most of whom continue being active in the organization founded by their spiritual father.

5. The monumental impetus for studying oral history originally came from VANSINA (1961; 1971). See also the reevaluation in BROWN and ROBERTS 1980. On spoken anecdotes as a source for Islamic hagiography, see, for example, MILLIE 2008.

6. The literature on Muslim saints is not as extensive as that on their Christian counterparts, but some representative studies worth mentioning are KUGLE 2007, RENARD 2008, and WEBNER 2003.

Origins

According to oral history, sometime between 1940 and 1942, a holy man emerged from the jungles of southeastern Sri Lanka, near the pilgrimage site of Kataragama. He was a non-literate Tamil-speaking Sufi belonging to the Qadari lineage, although his affiliation to the order was quite limited and shrouded in mystery. Indeed, later in his life he stopped speaking about himself historically because he insisted that it distracted people from their quest for God, which he felt was far more important than existential reality. Virtually nothing is known about this individual prior to his emergence from the southern jungles of Sri Lanka in the 1940s. In fact, the biography of his life titled *The Tree That Fell to the West* (MUHAIYADDEEN 2003) is an edited text compiled by his inner circle members solely from thousands of hours of tape recordings of his sermons archived in Philadelphia. It is by no means historical in the conventional sense, since it is based on the sage's own reminiscences, which unfold much more in the manner of parables that oscillate constantly between objective and subjective reality, outer and inner states of being.⁷

What we do know with any certainty, however, is that after many years of meditation in solitude at various locations throughout the southern and central provinces of the island he eventually settled in the northern Tamil-speaking region known as Jaffna in approximately 1942. It was from there that he ministered to whomever required his services from the home of an affluent family of his patrons. Most of his clientele were initially 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. At this early stage of his career, he was more of a generic holy man who eschewed labels, catering, as he did, to anyone who required his services. It would only be later that titles came to play a more important role in identifying him and his religious affiliation. As one commentator states, Bawa's Sufism was "recognizable as Islamic only in its terminology" (CHITTICK 1995). While this statement could be contested on many grounds, the fact is that most of those in Jaffna who required his

7. It is almost certain that Bawa was not born in Sri Lanka, yet the dates concerning his arrival there are by no means clear. See KOROM 2011.

services to cure psychological and physiological illnesses were not Muslims. They therefore tended to use their own labels for him, as he himself acknowledged on many occasions (KOROM 2012a; 2012b).⁸

In 1952, he had acquired a dilapidated Dutch warehouse in Jaffna, which he converted into a religious commune that still exists today. A pious matron who is a former school teacher and personal associate of Bawa during his lifetime maintains the premises today, as she has done ever since her spiritual mentor went abroad.⁹ Like many South Asian Sufi holy men before him (see, for example, EATON 1993, 194–304), Bawa acquired parcels of land nearby, which he cleared and then farmed to feed the throngs of people who sought him out regularly. 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 prototypical “perfect man.” As his fame as a healer, exorcist, and counselor spread, urban Muslim intellectuals and Theosophists, the latter of whom recognized no boundaries between religions, eventually sought out the saint and occasionally brought him to the capital city, which inspired them to establish the Serendib Sufi Study Circle (sssc) in 1962.¹⁰

The story of Bawa’s discovery is worth recounting in brief because it has now become the stuff of legend among his global group of followers. 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 conduct annual walking pilgrimages to the sacred precincts of Kataragama in the south from their home in the north. While on their way there, the two brothers spotted Bawa in the jungle, where he appeared to

8. Most of the Jaffna Muslims with whom I spoke were barely familiar with him, although one admitted to me that Bawa was a “friend of God,” a special way of saying that he was a saint.

9. A relative of one of Bawa’s Sri Lankan Hindu followers who now resides in Philadelphia assists her in the daily maintenance of the site. Out of devotion to her teacher, the woman in question even refused to abandon the location during the devastating civil war between government forces and Tamil rebels. The building’s outer walls are still covered with bullet holes. Witnessing the destruction of many buildings surrounding the commune, Bawa’s followers claim it was his miraculous protection that kept the structure safe during that tumultuous period.

10. The sssc was officially incorporated by the Sri Lankan parliament on 27 November 1974 for the purpose of promoting Bawa’s brand of Sufism.

them from behind a tree. The first contact was a brief sighting, without communication. The second instance a year later was also just visual, but the third time they spoke with some difficulty. The reason for the difficulty in communication was that Bawa apparently spoke a different dialect of Tamil, one that they could not quite understand.¹¹ After spending some time with the sage, they invited him to return to Jaffna with them, but he declined, telling them he would arrive there forty days later. According to oral testimony, he found his way to their home without directions, which some note as a sign of his omniscience.¹²

Stories such as the one included below concerning his miraculous powers began spreading shortly after his arrival. At first, his amazing deeds spread from house to house, then village to village, until a steady stream of people began visiting Bawa at his 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)¹³

11. 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 (where Bawa was probably born) is quite distinct from the numerous varieties of the same language spoken in Sri Lanka. On Arwi, see SHU'AYB 1993.

12. This is one of the signs of his superhuman powers, along with floral scent emanation, abstention from food, walking on air, charismatic healing, and raising the dead, all of which are considered signs of Muslim sainthood. See ERNST 1997, 58–80.

13. "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."

Such stories were common in the early days of Bawa's ministry.¹⁴ In Jaffna, they compelled people to avail themselves of his godly powers. Some came to seek advice about everyday economic matters such as land grabs or social injustices such as caste or religious discrimination. But demonically possessed people also regularly visited him to be exorcised violently with a schoolmaster's cane that Bawa used to beat the demons out of the afflicted patients.¹⁵ According to one eyewitness who is a retired physician, Bawa would trap the evil spirits in jars as they departed the skulls of patients. He would then seal and bury them in the sands of the nearby beach. He also administered herbal remedies to chronically ill people, many of whom claim to have been miraculously cured by him. Although the majority came to him for pragmatic reasons, a few came to seek knowledge about more abstract religious matters.

After approximately a decade, Bawa managed to secure the warehouse mentioned above 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 regularly to catch glimpses of the holy man. The brothers also spent many hours at the newly founded commune 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

14. 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 2012a.

15. 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 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 favor of more nonviolent forms of coaxing and persuasion to talk the demon out of the possessed individual.

sort who visited Bawa at the commune. Instead, they were mostly prosperous, well-educated Muslims from both the Moor and Malay communities.¹⁶ There were also some Theosophical Buddhists among these urban patrons. Due to their intellectual inclinations, this new affluent class of patrons 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 *shaykh*. 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 recitation, followed by the distribution of free vegetarian food to all in attendance.¹⁷ For some years, then, Bawa moved back and forth from Jaffna to Colombo and Kandy, until his life was radically altered in 1969 by a letter he received from a confused young woman in the United States.

The Tree that Fell to the West

Halfway around the world, an American female mystic met a Sri Lankan Moor in 1969. The Moor was a doctoral candidate at a university in Philadelphia at the time they met. He told her numerous tales about fabulous encounters with his spiritual teacher back in what was then known as Ceylon. The awesome stories he told her about his teacher's perennial teachings free from the strictures of organized religion were enough to convince her that contact with the exotic wise man could resolve the confusion she was experiencing.¹⁸ The young woman told the student about an experi-

16. 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.

17. 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 recitation sessions, most likely because no food is served after the weekly meetings.

18. In fact, the original sign in the commune, 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

ence 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 woman had her baffling experience. 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. Years later, she wrote the following in an appendix to one of Bawa’s books:

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.

(MUHAIYADDEEN 1972, 249)

Recounting as if being disembodied, lacking any ego whatsoever, she intuitively speaks to her, saying, “There is no time or space. They are One... ‘THERE IS ONLY ONE’... The next thing ‘I’ knew, I was again aware of the world of form and was filled with an intoxication of immense joy” (MUHAIYADDEEN 1972, 249).¹⁹

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” (MUHAIYADDEEN 1972, 250).

the universal nature of his teachings, which could not easily fit into categorical religious denominations.

19. The emphases are in the 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.

At first, she could not understand what had happened, so she turned first 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.

(MUHAIYADDEEN 1972, 250)

It took her eight more years of confused searching to find the person to answer her many questions about the disturbing experience she had years earlier in balmy New Orleans.

While still in Louisiana, her marriage crumbled. She eventually divorced and moved north to Philadelphia where an acquaintance 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, and 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. He responded to her query on 11 November 1969. 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. In the same 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. She later told me that this made her even more anxious than she already was.

In this way, she began corresponding with Bawa, whose scribe and translator would compose responses based on the teacher's dictation. A lengthy period of correspondence followed between 1969 and 1971. During this period, she came to realize that it would be unrealistic for her to abandon everything to move to Sri Lanka to be with him, yet spiritual counseling via correspondence was insufficient to solve her mental agony. She then decided to gather like-minded spiritual seekers around her to make the necessary preparations for Bawa and his entourage to visit Philadelphia. Hence, in early 1971, she and her newly formed "fellowship" made final preparations to bring him to Philadelphia. To secure a visa, she and a small core of

his first admirers informally founded the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship shortly before his arrival on 11 October 1971.

The small group of people comprising the original Fellowship met the holy man's group at the airport, after which they all moved into a row home in West Philadelphia. Bawa gave discourses there every evening, followed by free vegetarian food cooked in the home's kitchen by him and his followers. 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.²⁰

Known for his regular participation in interfaith dialogues, his infectious charisma, and rumors of transcendental powers including the healing touch 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 center on the outskirts of the city in 1973 that was converted by them into a communal house where Bawa's "American family" could reside comfortably.²¹ 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 commune 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 com-

20. 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, 324–91) says is inevitable as a new religion takes root and establishes an economic base. 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.

21. The residence came to be known colloquially as the Ship, an apt metaphor for the journey on which they all were about to embark.

pleted and dedicated in May of 1984. In addition to providing a gathering place for Bawa's American convert family, it now serves as a multiethnic religious and educational center for immigrant Muslims.²² From the time he arrived in 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, always bringing along a retinue of his American "family" members with him.²³ 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 commune. This sanctuary 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.²⁴

During his fourth and 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 the angel of death 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, yet he died surrounded by his beloved children in the room of the Fellowship house where he spent most of his time after

22. 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.

23. The dates of the four trips are May 1972–February 1973; February 1974–July 1975; November 1976–August 1978; and December 1980–November 1982.

24. The site is currently experiencing a revival, now that hostilities have ceased. Rituals are conducted and meals served there weekly on Fridays, and a guest house built on the compound's grounds remains open to welcome Bawa's children from abroad.

his final trip to Sri Lanka.²⁵ His body was ritually prepared for burial at the Fellowship house, after which it was transported for burial to East Fallowfield, a small Christian agricultural community located approximately forty miles outside of Philadelphia.²⁶ The land was purchased by the Fellowship years earlier in 1973 on Bawa's orders. He had instructed them to purchase the 100-acre parcel of land to serve as a Muslim cemetery and communal farm, for he was distressed at how costly it was to carry out a funeral in the United States. After his burial, his followers built a serene shrine for him over the place where his earthly remains now rest. Over the years since his passing, the place has become an international pilgrimage site and place of contemplation for visitors from North America and South Asia.²⁷ 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.²⁸

25. 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 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."

26. 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.

27. 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.

28. 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.

Closing Remarks

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 *shaykh* to separate himself from the “guru invasion” that took place in the United States during the late 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.²⁹ According to eyewitnesses, Bawa dropped the guru title in 1973 after witnessing Guru Maharaj Ji being paraded around the Houston Astrodome as part of his Millennium 73 event, which was aired on television. While Maharaj Ji was being paraded around in a throne carried on the devoted shoulders of his admirers he declared himself Lord of the World, a common appellation for the Hindu deity Krishna.³⁰ 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 law and Sufi 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.

In summary, Bawa Muhaiyaddeen staged three “comings” during his career that loosely correspond to the stages of institutionalization I described above. The first is his northern Sri Lankan phase, where he presented himself (or was presented) as a typical Hindu teacher or Sufi saint,

29. ELLWOOD (1994) ably documents this fascinating period in American religious history. Its subsequent consequences are analyzed by ROOF 1999. In some interesting ways, Bawa’s transition from guru to *shaykh* somewhat parallels the transition WINKELMAN (1990; 1992) says the shaman makes to other forms of magico-religious specialization as a result of changing social and economic circumstances.

30. There is some controversy as to who made the decision to drop the term. His American children, including the prayer leader 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).

characterized primarily by pragmatism (farming, healing, settling disputes, and so forth). The second phase occurs when he begins to minister to the urban elite of Colombo and elsewhere on the island. This period is more philosophical, tapping into the theosophical movement that was well under way by the 1970s (see BOND 2003), but during which he continued healing people and performing various sorts of miracles, such as bringing the dead back to life. The third phase coincides with his arrival in the United States. Here he is first understood as the typical perennial mystic, so popular in the emergent New Age belief system of the seventies, which perpetuates universalism and anti-dogmatism. Eventually, however, he comes to emphasize a distinct Islamic message that focuses on a fourfold developmental pattern.³¹ The progression moves from revealed law, which involves discerning right from wrong and permissible behavior, to phase two, known as the path, on which the strengthening of determination occurs, to a third stage of truth, during which communication and union with God begins to occur, leading finally to gnosis, a more perfected state of union with God that results in a state of constant remembrance and contemplation that transcends the “four religions.” Bawa defined these as Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Islam, each of which correspond to different levels of truth and spiritual development (see WEBB 1994).

To appreciate Bawa’s appeal, one must trace his historical development from his humble local roots to his rise in international fame. When doing so, one notices movement from a tolerant and non-denominational preacher toward a more structured founder of a distinct religious lineage maintaining 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 skillful means used to teach at a level comprehensible to the individual student.³²

31. The role of Sufism in the emergence of New Age spiritual practice is poorly understood. HEELAS 1996 and HANEGRAFF 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.

32. 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

Because of the transnational character of the movement, the ultimate goal of the project is to look at the development and flow of this spiritual organization 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 behavior, 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.³³

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 a small 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, allowing him to make the gradual transition from an eclectic guru to a disciplined and normative Sufi *shaykh* who emphasized Islamic orthodoxy as a foundational platform for achieving a difficult-to-achieve mystical state of gnosis in the end? In answering such questions, one would need to look at the charismatic nature of Bawa's career, which is where we notice some striking parallels with the

been studied extensively, virtually nothing exists exploring the influence that Buddhism has had on Islam, or vice versa, but see ELVERSKOG 2010 and SCOTT 1995. On *upāya* (skillful means), see PYE 2003.

33. In addition to the sources listed in my bibliography at the end of this chapter, 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>.

shaman figure, as I discussed at the outset. To begin with, Bawa spent many years in isolation, which corresponds to the shaman's "solitary quest" outlined by WINKELMAN (1990). It was during this solitary quest that Bawa began to practice other shamanic techniques mentioned above, such as auditory driving (chanting & singing), fasting (abstaining from food altogether), and austerity (living in caves and jungles without personal belongings).

It is also said that Bawa practiced sleep deprivation. The way that it was explained to me was that when he was lying down at night practicing recitation, he would not actually sleep, but fall into deep trance, during which soul flight would occur. As Bawa described it, he would travel to other times and places to do "God's work." Bawa's personal physician often referred to him as being quite sickly. Bawa attributed this sickness not to smoking, which he was prone to do, or fasting, which further amazed everyone who knew him well, but to taking on the illnesses of others in order to heal them. By absorbing their pain, he became physically weak. During his last trip to Sri Lanka, he explained his collapse into unconsciousness as precisely one such case. He claims that he was helping four people who were in the process of dying to cross over from life to death, which resulted in him displaying symptoms of his own death. Once his task was complete, he was able to return to full consciousness to explain his ordeal to eyewitnesses.

Bawa, however, was a reluctant prophet, in the sense that he hesitated at each major step in his career. It took him a few years to make the commitment to begin his formal ministry in Jaffna, then it took him many more to spread out to Colombo. It is said that when Bawa was invited to the capital to found the Serendib Sufi Study Circle, he balked, stating that he feared he was a tree upon which too many people would perch. Interestingly, his correspondence from Colombo to Philadelphia indicates that he was eager to leave the island for foreign terrain. It is not clear why, but perhaps he was aware of the impending bloodshed that would occur once ethnic conflict and violence led to civil war.³⁴ One thing is certain, though. It took a certain amount of recruitment and cajoling by interested parties to convince Bawa to make the moves that he did. Their motivations, no doubt, were based on self-interest arising out of their observations of this unique individual.

34. His followers claim that Bawa predicted the war long before it began, and that he also claimed that Jaffna would rise like a jewel in the ocean, once the hostilities ceased.

What the two Tamil brothers from Jaffna saw in Bawa was a man of mystery subject to involuntary visions and prone to ecstatic trance states in which he would perform astral projection. The selection of shamans, according to Winkelman and others, similarly involves recruiting individuals who show signs of illness, involuntary visions, possession, etc. Although each case of such selection and appointment would require more in-depth analysis, it is clear that similar, if not completely parallel, phenomena are occurring. Sufis are not shamans and shamans are not Sufis, yet something is shared between them, namely a penchant for healing that is acquired through unusual means that some might mistakenly identify as psychopathological. After all, involuntary ecstasy is something reported from all strata of society throughout the world, be it the shaman of a hunting and gathering band or the ecstatic fits of a New Age channeler.³⁵

The quick skeletal outline that I have provided in conclusion should provide some tantalizing beginnings for thinking about how certain Sufis act like shamans, and by doing so how it aids their careers. Just as Winkelman suggests that shamans transform into other sorts of healers as social structure changes, so too does Bawa transform himself into different types of spiritual practitioners as his career evolves over time. By providing some tentative beginnings to understanding the dynamic career of one extraordinary individual, I hope that this chapter 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, as well as how the work of a shaman becomes transformed into other sorts of spiritual specialization as time continues to move forward.

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35. One anthropologist who earlier studied South American shamanism noted in his study of the contemporary American channeling phenomenon that there are striking parallels between the two. See BROWN 1997.

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