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Arabs, Moors and Muslims: Sri Lankan Muslim ethnicity in regional perspective

Dennis B. McGilvray

In the context of Sri Lanka's inter-ethnic conflict between the Tamils and the Sinhalese, the Tamil-speaking Muslims or Moors occupy a unique position. Unlike the historically insurrectionist Māppilas of Kerala or the assimilationist Marakkāyars of coastal Tamilnadu, the Sri Lankan Muslim urban elite has fostered an Arab Islamic identity in the 20th century which has severed them from the Dravidian separatist campaign of the Hindu and Christian Tamils. This has placed the Muslim farmers in the Tamil-speaking north-eastern region in an awkward and dangerous situation, because they would be geographically central to any future Tamil homeland. The first part of this essay traces the historical construction of contemporary Muslim ethnicity and surveys their position in contemporary Sri Lankan politics. The second half of the essay provides an ethnographic portrait of a local-level Muslim community closely juxtaposed with their Hindu Tamil neighbours in the agricultural town of Akkaraipattu in the eastern Batticaloa region of the island.

Nearly 8 per cent of Sri Lanka's people are Muslims, as compared with 18 per cent who are Tamils, but these simple-sounding minority labels actually conceal more than they reveal of the island's ethnic complexity. For the past 100 years the urban leaders and political spokesmen of the Muslim community have strongly denied any suggestion that they could be seen as 'Tamil Muslims' or 'Muslim Tamils', even though they speak Tamil at home, share many Tamil kinship and domestic practices, and have even composed Muslim commentaries and devotional works in Tamil, some of them written in Arabic–Tamil script (Uwise 1986, 1990). The bewildering list of terms for the Sri Lankan Muslims is symptomatic of the identity issues which they have faced over the centuries in differing colonial European, Tamil and Sinhalese contexts.

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From the beginning of the colonial period in the early 16th century, members of the predominant Tamil-speaking Muslim community in Sri Lanka were designated by the term 'Moor' (*Mouro*, 'Moroccan') which the Portuguese applied to Muslims throughout their African and Asian empire, as well as by such familiar European terms as 'Mohammedan' or 'Mussalman'. In the early 1970s, when I began my fieldwork among the Moors of eastern Sri Lanka, I found that 'Muslim' was the most common term they used when speaking in their own native Tamil, although strictly speaking, the religious term 'Muslim' should encompass the ethnically distinct Malays and the small Gujarati trading groups as well.[1] The term *Cōṉakar* (Sonagar, Jonagar), an older Tamil and Malayalam word which originally denoted West Asians, especially Arabs or Greeks, seems to be falling out of fashion, although 'Lanka Yonaka' was still used as an ethnonym for the Sri Lankan Moors in the 1971 Census.[2] In common English parlance, both 'Moor' and 'Muslim' are used interchangeably today to refer to indigenous Tamil-speaking Muslim Sri Lankans, 93 per cent of all followers of Islam in the island, most of whom are orthodox (Sunni) members of the Shāfi'ī school of Muslim jurisprudence.[3]

Figure 1
Sri Lankan population by ethnicity and religion (estimated)

Population of Sri Lanka (1997 estimated)		18.7 million
Sinhalese	74%	13.8 million
Sri Lankan Tamils	12.7%	2.4 million
Indian Tamils	5.5%	1.0 million
Moors	7%	1.3 million
Others (Malays, Burghers, Veddahs, etc.)	1%	.2 million
Buddhists	69%	12.9 million
Hindus	15%	2.8 million
Muslims (including Moors and Malays)	8%	1.5 million
Christians	8%	1.5 million

Sources: *CIA World Factbook 1997* and Embassy of Sri Lanka website (http://www.slembassy.org). The most recent Sri Lankan census was conducted in 1981.

[1] The Sri Lankan Malays, so termed by the British because of their Indonesian Malay lingua franca, are Sunni Muslims. Their ancestors were exiled Javanese princes as well as a medley of banished criminals and Dutch Company soldiers of diverse Indonesian origin dispatched from Batavia during the 18th century (Hussainmiya 1986; Mahroof 1994). There are also some small groups of Bombay and Gujarati traders who have businesses in Colombo: Bohras and Khojas (both Ismailis), and Memons (who are Sunnis). Some schismatic Qādiyāṇis (Ahmadiyyas) are said to be found in the Gampola region, remnants of a group once influential in Colombo as well (Abdul Majeed 1971).

[2] Denham (1912: 232n.) observed a half-century ago that *Cōṉi* ('Sōni' or 'Chōni', short for *Cōṉakar*) was commonly used as a term for Muslims in the Batticaloa region, although the nickname has derogatory overtones today. Two other negative slang terms are *Nānāmār* and *Kākkā*, regionally variant Moorish kin-terms for 'elder brother', the latter unfortunately also a colloquial homonym for 'crow' in Tamil. Additional Sri Lankan terms for the so-called 'Coast Moors', expatriate Muslim traders from the South Indian coast, include *Marakkala Minissu* (Sinh. 'boat-people'), *Hambaya* or *Hambankāraya* (Sinh.) and *Cammankārar* (Tam.), both either from Malay *sampan* 'skiff' or from Tamil *cāmān* 'goods', and Tambey (Tam. *tampi*, younger brother), a British colonial term for itinerant trader. See Ameer Ali (1980: 99ff, 1981a) for a general discussion.

[3] I use both terms in this essay, with no intended implications about the basis of contemporary group identity.

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The fact that Sri Lankan Muslims would prefer an ethnic label which is European or Islamic rather than Dravidian in origin points to one of the major cleavages within Sri Lanka's Tamil-speaking minority. Recently, a few historians and spokesmen for the Muslim community have even asserted that 'Muslims have no commitment to any particular language', citing the willingness of Moors living in Sinhala-majority districts to enroll their children in Sinhala-medium schools (Shukri 1986b: 70; see also K.M. de Silva 1988: 202). One author contends that the Muslims are becoming 'a linguistically divided community' because young Muslims in Sinhalese districts are learning Sinhalese instead of Tamil (Ali 1986–87: 167). Whether this process will soon result in the loss of Tamil, and the widespread substitution of Sinhala, as the language of the Moorish home seems to me dubious, not least because of the chronic shortage of Muslim teachers qualified in Sinhala (Mohan 1987: 107; Uwise 1986).[4]

The ethnic identity and political stance of the Sri Lankan Muslim community, like that of many culturally-defined groups contesting for a secure place in the world today, have undergone change over the past century in response to colonial and post-colonial pressures and from the internal dynamics of the Muslim community itself. The Moors played a pivotal role in post-Independence Sri Lankan politics, but this became especially true after 1983, when the armed conflict over Tamil Eelam suddenly placed many of them in an extremely tight position, caught between the Sri Lankan security forces and the Tamil rebels of the LTTE.[5] In order to reveal the roots of the dilemma which the Sri Lankan Muslims currently face, I will first trace the historical development of the Moorish ethnic identity in Sri Lanka in comparison with two South Indian Muslim groups to whom the Moors are closely related, the Māppiḷas of Kerala and the Marakkāyars of Tamilnadu. Then, with this historical background in mind, I will ethnographically explore the tense relations between Tamils and Muslims living in Sri Lanka's eastern region where the future outcome—either ethnic accommodation or ethnic division—still hangs in the balance.

I
Early history of Sri Lanka's Moorish community

Although the earliest evidence from the Islamic period is limited to fragmentary travellers' accounts, early Islamic coinage, some tombstones here and a few lithic inscriptions there, the origins of the Muslim community of Sri Lanka are plainly continuous with the pre-Islamic seaborne trade between South and Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Not only Arabs, but Persians too, were frequent early visitors to the island (Ali 1981a: 71–76; Effendi 1965; Kiribamune 1986). With the advent

[4] Colombo is the *only* place in the island where I have ever met a Moor who could not speak Tamil. Multilingualism is, however, gaining among middle-class Colombo Muslims, some of whom prefer to send their children to Sinhala or English medium schools to hedge their bets about the future of the country. The sermons in some Colombo mosques are also delivered in Sinhala or English on certain days (Nilam Hamead, personal communication).

[5] For an up-to-date overview of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict see Nissan (1996). For more background on the failure of democratic institutions, see Tambiah (1986).

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of Islam in the Arabian peninsula in the first half of the 7th century, and the subsequent conquest of Persia, trade across the Indian Ocean was increasingly dominated from the 8th century onward by Arab Muslim merchants from ports on the Red Sea and the Gulf. Unlike the Persian and Turkic invasions of North India which established major states and empires, the Muslim impact upon the coasts of South India and Sri Lanka from the 8th century onward was predominantly Arabic in culture and mercantile in motivation, part of the same historical stream which resulted in the Islamisation of insular Southeast Asia (Wink 1990: ch. 3).

The medieval Hindu and Buddhist kingdoms of Kerala and Sri Lanka, eager for revenues from overseas commerce, allowed Arab merchants—many of whom acquired local wives by whom they fathered Indo-Muslim progeny—to establish a dominant economic position in port settlements such as Calicut and Colombo (Arasaratnam 1964; Dale 1980; Kiribamune 1986).[6] The Tamil-speaking Coromandel Coast of south-eastern India, which was then still linguistically unified with Kerala, also attracted Arab Muslim traders who established an enclave at Kayalpattinam at the mouth of the Tambrapani River—as well as at Kilakkarai, Adirampattinam, Nagapattinam, and other coastal settlements farther north—to which they imported, among other things, Arabian horses for the armies of Tamil Hindu kings and from which they exported Indian textiles (Bayly 1989). When in 1498 Vasco da Gama launched his Portuguese naval crusade against the well-established 'Moors' of Calicut, most of the remaining Arab traders began to depart from the Malabar Coast, leaving locally intermarried Māppiḷa Muslims to carry on the fight, in one form or another, during 450 years of European colonial domination (Bouchon 1973; Dale 1980: 47). At about the same time, the Portuguese encountered 'Moors' in Sri Lanka who spoke Tamil, who had on-going links with the Muslims of the Malabar and Coromandel Coasts of South India, and who had been given royal permission to collect customs duties and regulate shipping in the major south-western port settlements under the suzerainty of the local Sinhalese Kings of Kotte (Ali 1980; Indrapala 1986; Abeyasinghe 1986).

While the period of Portuguese and Dutch colonial rule was onerous to all Sri Lankans, it was especially harsh for the Moors, who were subjected to special penalties and restrictions because of their Islamic faith and the threat they posed to the European monopoly of overseas trade. Ultimately, the effect of Portuguese policies was to encourage (and by an official edict of 1626, to require) migration of many coastal Moors inland to the Kandyan Kingdom, where they engaged in *tāvaḷam* bullock transport and a diverse range of other occupations (Ali 1980: 337ff; C.R. de Silva 1968; Dewaraja 1986). In 1626, King Senerat of Kandy is said to have resettled 4,000 Moors in the Batticaloa region of the east coast to protect his eastern flank from the Portuguese fortification of Puliyantivu which occurred soon thereafter, in 1627. If true, this is the only historically noted Moorish migration to that area (C.R. de Silva 1972: 88; M.I.M. Mohideen

[6] The maritime trading monopoly given to Muslims, Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians was particularly marked in Kerala, where Brahmanical influence among high-caste Hindus placed a strong ritual taboo on sea voyaging (Wink 1990: 72–73).

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Figure 2
Map of Sri Lanka and South India, showing locations of three major Muslim groups referred to in the text: Māppiḷas, Marakkāyars, and Moors.

1986: 7–8; Queyroz 1930: 745). Senerat's resettlement is not corroborated in any local sources, but as early as the 15th century, and certainly by the 17th century, large numbers of Moorish farmers were well-established on the east coast.[7] This is the area with the highest proportion of Muslims in the local population today, and also the region where I have done my own fieldwork.

[7] One historian claims that hard evidence for King Senerat's resettlement of the Moors in Batticaloa is lacking in the work of the early Portuguese chroniclers such as Queyroz, upon whom all later historians have depended. Abeyasinghe (1986: 145 fn 46) suggests that Queyroz misinterpreted 16th century letters between Goa and Lisbon which simply report that 4,000 Moors were *already* living in Kandy and Batticaloa at that time. The *Nāṭu Kāṭu Paravaṇi Kalveṭṭu*, a document possibly from the 16th century, clearly indicates that Moors (*Cōṉakar*) were living in the Akkaraipattu-Irakkamam area of present-day Amparai District (Neville 1887; Pathmanathan 1976). A memorandum of 1676 written by Pieter de Graeuwe, the Dutch East India Company chief for Batticaloa, also makes reference to the Moors in this region of the island (De Graeuwe 1676).

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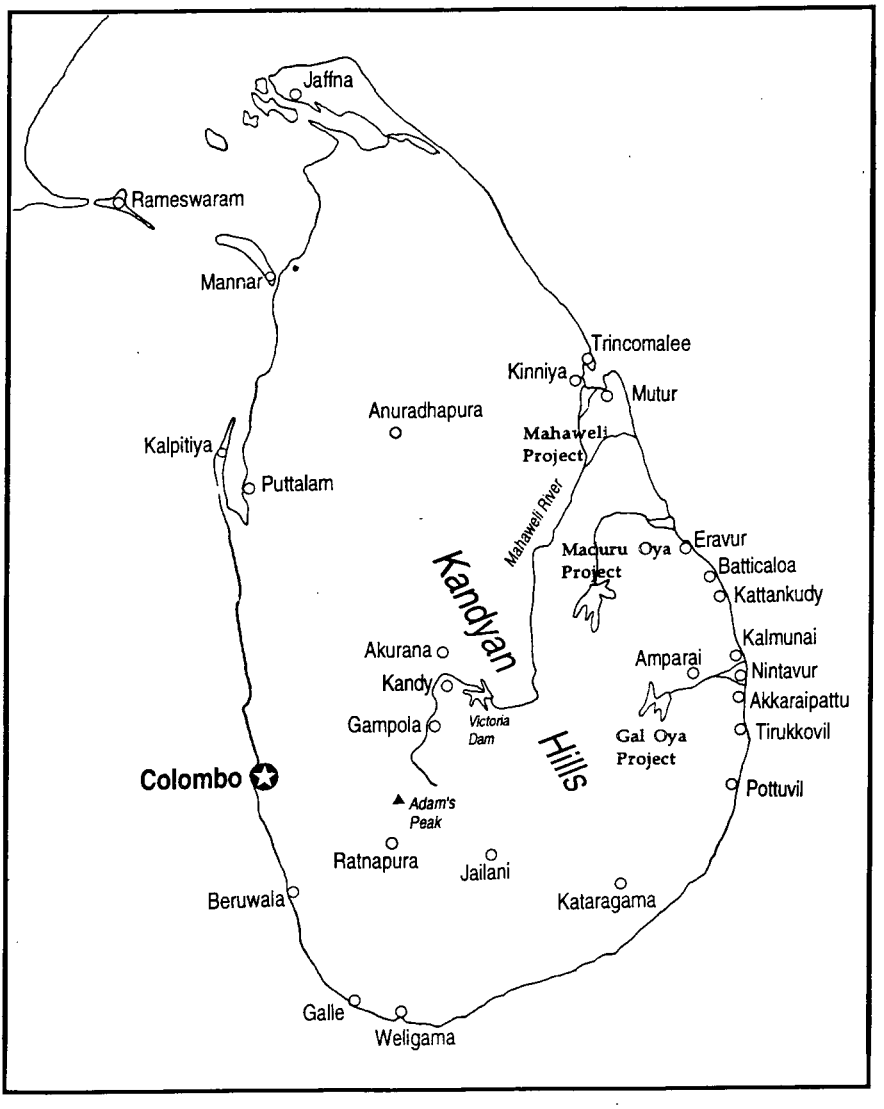
Figure 3
Map of Sri Lanka, showing locations of some of the major Moorish (Muslim) settlements referred to in the text.



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II
Divergent development of Muslim ethnicity in Kerala, Tamilnadu, and Sri Lanka

Both in Sri Lanka and in Tamilnadu, Christians whose native tongue is Tamil generally think of themselves as Tamil Christians, but among Sri Lankan Muslims such a parallel does not hold. In their aversion to identifying themselves as Tamils who happen to follow the Muslim faith,[8] the Moors of Sri Lanka stand in striking contrast to the Marakkāyar Muslims of Tamilnadu who, apart from their Islamic theology, have regarded themselves as fully contributing members of the Tamil literary and cultural tradition. If we include one more Muslim group, the historically militant and rebellious Māppiḷas of Kerala, we have the opportunity to conduct an interesting three-way comparison of Muslim ethnicity in South India and Sri Lanka. All three Muslim communities preserve elements of matrilineal and/or matrilocal social structure which suggest close connections (involving both intermarriage and conversion) with the matrilineal Hindu castes of the Malabar coast, and possibly also with the matrilineal Hindu Maravars of Ramnad. Malayalam, the language of Kerala today, was 'effectively a dialect of Tamil until the fourteenth century'—700 years *after* the advent of Islam and the expansion of Arab trade in the Indian Ocean (Shackle 1989: 405). Communication and social interaction between Muslims of Calicut, Kayalpattinam, and Colombo were once a great deal freer than they are today, part of a more widespread 'traffic in commodities, bodies, and myths' from South India into Sri Lanka over the last 700 years (Roberts 1980).

As a world systems or macro-economic history approach might predict (Bose 1990; Wallerstein 1976; Wolf 1982), there is a striking similarity in the historical circumstances under which these three Muslim communities came into existence. They were all largely founded by Arab and Persian traders who supplied the Mediterranean market for spices and Indian textiles. From the late 15th century onward, all three Muslim communities experienced similar conquest and repression by the colonial Portuguese, Dutch, and British empires, which were then expanding from the European core to exploit the resources of the African and Asian periphery. Yet despite these initial similarities, a comparison of Muslims in Kerala, Tamilnadu and Sri Lanka reveals some striking divergences in the way modern Muslim ethnic identities developed in these three geographically adjacent regions.

The Māppiḷas of Kerala

The Muslims of Kerala, known as Māppiḷas (Mappilla, Moplah)[9] were originally the mixed descendants and religious converts of Arab Muslim spice traders who had been actively patronised by the Hindu rulers of the Malabar coast, especially

[8] Ismail discerns a 'terror' of being viewed as Tamils in elite Muslim discourses (1995: 66 fn 26).

[9] Miller (1976: 30–32) reviews eight etymologies for the term, settling upon 'bridegroom, or new husband' (Tamil *māppiḷḷai*) as the most plausible, given the historical pattern of marriage between Arab traders and local Kerala women. The term was once also used for Christian and Jewish settlers in Malabar (Thurston and Rangachari 1909, v. 4: 460).

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the Zamorins of Calicut. They constitute 23 per cent of the population of the state (Hasan 1997: 2–3), making them a much more substantial political bloc than Muslims in Sri Lanka or Tamilnadu. Today the Māppiḷas are not only traders and coastal fishermen, but they also form a large segment (25–60 per cent) of the impoverished rural agrarian tenant class in some of the inland districts of northern Kerala, especially in the south Malabar region (Gabriel 1996; Miller 1976). As with local Hindu castes, some Māppiḷas are matrilineal and some patrilineal in tracing their lineage ancestry, but the pattern of residence after marriage for all Māppiḷas is matrilocal. There are also several clearly ranked, endogamous, caste-like subsections within the Māppiḷa community, ranging downwards from *Thangals* (or *Taṇṇals*, descendants of the Prophet), to *Arabis* (who claim 'pure Arab' descent), to *Malabaris* (the bulk of ordinary Māppiḷas), to *Pusalars* ('new Muslims' who are more recent converts from lower Hindu castes, especially Mukkuvar fishermen), to *Ossans* (hereditary barber/circumcisers and midwives) (D'Souza 1959, 1973; Ibrahim Kunju 1989: 178–80).[10]

In coastal centres of Māppiḷa power such as Cannanore and Ponnani, Muslim rajas and naval pirates enjoyed a semi-autonomous, if brittle, position under Hindu rulers until the Portuguese upset the balance. Under the Mysorean invasions of Hyder Ali and Tippu Sultan in the late 18th century, the Māppiḷas were briefly allied to fiercely anti-Hindu rulers who carried out temple desecrations and forced circumcisions of Hindus on a vast scale (Gabriel 1996). Of all the coastal Muslim groups in South India and Sri Lanka, the Māppiḷas were by far the most militant and rebellious during the British colonial period, sustaining a tradition of Islamic martyrdom through violent, suicidal outbreaks (*jihād*) against colonial authorities and dominant high-caste Hindu landlords, the last of which, in 1922, vainly sought to establish an Islamic theocratic sultanate in south Malabar. A few charismatic Sufi holy men actively encouraged these suicidal attacks against the infidel authorities, and annual *nērcca* mosque festivals today still commemorate slain Māppiḷa martyrs (Dale and Menon 1978). After a vain effort to forge a separate state of 'Mappilastan' at the time of Indian Independence, the Māppiḷas effectively focused their political power through the Muslim League and offered grassroots support for Kerala's successful land reform movement (Gabriel 1996; Herring 1991). Since then, Māppiḷa political tactics have been brilliantly pragmatic, switching coalition partnerships between Congress and Communist parties at various times (Miller 1976: 158–72; Wright 1966). A major achievement of the modern era was the creation of Mallapuram District in 1969, the first Māppiḷa-majority electorate in Kerala (Dale 1980: 225–26).

The Marakkāyars and Labbais of Tamilnadu

Unlike Kerala, where many coastal Māppiḷas spread directly inland and created a large population of tenant farmers, the Muslim community of Tamilnadu has two

[10] The Muslims of the Lakshadweep Islands 200 km west of the Kerala coast are similarly caste-stratified, with *Taṇṇals* at the top, followed in descending order by *Koyas, Malmis, Melacheris*, and *Ossans* (Gabriel 1989; Kutty 1972).

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points of origin, and two major internal subdivisions corresponding to the Shāfi'ī versus Hanafī legal schools (Fanselow 1989). The earliest Arab settlements developed into tightly-knit Muslim trading enclaves on the Coromandel coast, while later Muslim armies from the Deccan established a Mughal-style court under the Nawābs of Arcot in the 17th and 18th centuries, who patronised a small Urdu-speaking Deccani Muslim administrative and trading elite (MacPherson 1969; Vatuk 1989). The prosperous Muslims of Kayalpattinam, Kilakarai, Karaikal and other early Indo-Arab port settlements along the coast of Tamilnadu call themselves *Marakkāyars* (var. Maraikkāyar, Maraikkār, probably from the Tamil word *marakkalam*, boat or 'wooden vessel'),[11] insist upon endogamous marriages, and claim the highest status among all Tamil Muslims (More 1991). A lower status group, the Kāyalārs, have been allied with the Marakkāyars but occupy their own streets (Mines 1972: 28; Thurston and Rangachari 1909). The numerically larger population of Tamil-speaking Muslim artisans, weavers, tanners, and merchants of the inland districts of Tamilnadu have been loosely termed Labbais, to which must be added a smattering of 'martial' lines such as Navāyats, Rāvuttars, and Pathāns (Bayly 1989: 71–103; Fanselow 1989; Mines 1973).[12] Overall, Muslims represent 5.5 per cent of Tamilnadu's population (Hasan 1997: 2–3). While the Labbais constitute the bulk of Tamil Muslims today, it has been the elite Marakkāyar traders who seem to have had the earliest historical connection with the Moors of Sri Lanka.

The Marakkāyars of Kayalpattinam have some shallow matrilineages but no formally organised matrilineal clans as in Kerala or eastern Sri Lanka. Post-marital residence is matrilocal for at least a year or so after the wedding, with the married couple eventually living either with the bride's parents in her natal home or in a newly built dowry house in the same *mohulla*, or corporate neighbourhood. Either way, every daughter receives a house at marriage, in addition to jewelry and other movable goods (personal fieldwork in 1983; Bayly 1986: 42; More 1991; 'Kayalar' in Thurston and Rangachari 1909, v.3: 267). Unlike the Labbais who generally follow Hanafī law, members of the Marakkāyar commercial and gem-trading elite, like the Māppiḷas of Kerala and the Sri Lankan Moors, all belong to the Shāfi'ī legal school. Like the Māppiḷas, too, the Marakkāyars have a long history of seafaring, but instead of a warrior tradition they cultivated a reputation for religious, philanthropic and literary pursuits. Marakkāyar towns are noted

[11] There is an enduring etymological debate about the origin of this word. Proponents of Arab ethnic identity prefer to derive the term from *markāb* (Arabic, boat). Others derive it from *mārkkam* (Tamil and Malayalam, religion). More (1997: 22) reports that Marakkāyars today favour an etymology derived from *marakkalarāyar* ('ruler of the boats'). Besides being a Sinhalese term for Indian 'Coast Moors', the term *Marakkala* is similar to a caste title found among the Moger coastal fishermen in South Kanara. See D'Souza (1955: 41–47) and Ameer Ali (1981a: 68–70) for exhaustive discussions.

[12] The Labbai/Marakkāyar distinction is not uniformly observed within Tamilnadu, nor is it more than three centuries old. The contrast dissolves among the Muslims of Pulicat north of Madras, where even the exclusive endogamous Arab-descended coastal traders are called 'Labbay' (Pandian 1987: 128–33). Rao et al. (1992: 265) assign the term Labbai to 'coastal fishermen, divers, weavers, artisans and husbandmen' who were not clearly differentiated from the Marakkāyars in the 17th century. J.B.P. More (1997: 21–25) notes that in the 15th and 16th centuries most Tamil Muslims were referred to as 'Turks' (*tulukkar*), a term which I also occasionally heard in Sri Lanka in the 1970s.

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for their profusion of mosques and tombs of Sufi scholar-mystics, some of which were also patronised by Tamil Hindu kings, as well as being famed for their wealth and smuggling activities (Bayly 1986; Fanselow 1989: 276). In the 17th and 18th centuries, a line of Marakkāyar regents wielded great power under the Sētupatis, the Hindu Maravar kings of Ramnad. The most famous of these, Cītakkāti (Abd al-Qādir, also known by the royal title Vijaya Raghunātha Periya Tambi Marakkāyar), patronised Tamil poets and typified the mature cultural idiom of Tamilised Islam (Rao et al. 1992: 264–304).

Marakkāyars take pride in having authored many commentaries and religious works in Arabic–Tamil, including the *Cīrāppurāṇam*, an epic poem on the life of the Prophet commissioned by Cītakkāti and modelled on the Tamil version of the Hindu Ramayana (Casie Chitty 1853–55; Mahroof 1986a: 87; Mauroof 1972: 67–68; Richman 1993; Shulman 1984; Uwise 1990). The most renowned regional pilgrimage centre for Muslims in Tamilnadu and Sri Lanka, the *dargāh* (tomb-shrine) of the Sufi mystic Abdul Qādir Shāhul Hamīd at Nagoor, is a Marakkāyar foundation (Bayly 1986, 1989: chs 2–3). Although some urban 'Islamisation' is now occurring, over the centuries most Muslims in Tamilnadu have identified strongly with, and have been recognised as contributing to, the Tamil literary and cultural tradition (Cutler 1983: 280, 286; Uwise 1990). The leadership challenge from a vocal Urdu-speaking Deccani Muslim faction, and an odd alliance between Tamil Muslims and the atheistic non-Brahmin Self-Respect Movement in the 1920s and 1930s to oppose mandatory schooling in Hindustani, appears to have reinforced this Tamilising tendency (MacPherson 1969; Mines 1983: 112; More 1993a, 1997). Their politics, quite unlike that of the Māppiḷas in Kerala, has not been conspicuously communal or confrontational. They have often supported the Dravidian nationalist parties (DMK, ADMK) or the Congress and have not shown great loyalty to the Muslim League (MacPherson 1969; Mines 1981: 72–74; Wright 1966). Overseas Muslims from Tamilnadu who migrated to Singapore over the last 150 years likewise identify strongly with Tamil culture and ethnicity there, even contributing on occasion to Tamil Hindu temples (Mani 1992). A recent outbreak of Hindu and Muslim fundamentalist violence in 1997–98 in Coimbatore may signal a breakdown in the Dravidian solidarity of the Muslims of Tamilnadu (Gopalan 1998), but it is worth noting that Hindu–Muslim violence has so far not spread from the inland centres of the Labbai and Deccani population to the coastal towns of the Marakkāyars.[13]

The Moors of Sri Lanka

There are many cultural similarities between the Māppiḷas of Kerala, the Marakkāyars of Tamilnadu, and the Moors of Sri Lanka which point to common origins. All three groups are Sunni Muslims of the Shāfi'ī legal school, a shared legacy of their earliest south Arabian forefathers (Fanselow 1989). All

[13] My sources are the South Indian newsmagazines *The Week* (1 March 1998) and *Frontline* (20 March 1998).

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three groups began as Indian Ocean trading communities patronised by local Hindu and Buddhist kings, and commerce remains one of their chief occupations today. The influence of Sufi saints and scholars has been quite strong, first linking the Malabar and Coromandel coasts, then spreading to Sri Lanka (Ali 1980: ch. 4; Bayly 1989; Ibrahim Kunju 1995; Mauroof 1972; Shukri 1986c). In fact, two of the most widespread devotional cults of Sufi saints among Sri Lankan Muslims have clear connections both with Kerala and with Tamilnadu. The first is that of Shaykh Muhiyadeen Abdul Qādir Jīlānī (d. A.D. 1166), popularly known in Tamil as Mohideen *Āṇṭavar* ('Lord Mohideen'), Persian-born founder of the Qādiriyya Order whose popularity extends throughout the South Asian Muslim world (Sanyal 1994: 48). He is the subject of the earliest (A.D. 1607) and most highly regarded Muslim *malappatt* or saintly praise-poem in the Arabic–Malayalam literature of Kerala (Ibrahim Kunju 1989: 198–200), and his *dargāh* shrines are the most widespread in Tamilnadu (Mines 1981: 69). He is believed to have visited the popular cave-mosque of Daftar Jailani at Kuragala near Balangoda, Sri Lanka, while on a pilgrimage to Adam's Peak (Aboosally 1975).

A second devotional cult popular with Sri Lankan Moors is that of 16th century saint Shāhul Hamīd, sometimes referred to in Sri Lanka as Mīrān Sāhib, whose impressively-endowed tomb-shrine on the Coromandel coast at Nagoor attracts Muslim pilgrims from both South India and Sri Lanka to witness the death anniversary festival (*kantūri*) at which the saint's tomb is ritually anointed with cooling sandalwood paste from a special container (*cantanakkūṭu*) which is brought in a grand procession (Bayly 1986; Nambiar and Narayana Kurup 1968). The Nagoor saint is believed to have traced the footsteps of Abdul Qādir Jīlānī to Bagdad and to Balangoda, visiting the Maldive Islands and Southeast Asia as well (Shaik Hasan Sahib 1980). Several physically empty but spiritually filled 'branch office' tomb-shrines in Sri Lanka and Singapore celebrate Shāhul Hamīd's death anniversary with flag-raising and *kantūri* celebrations timed to coincide with those at Nagoor (McGilvray 1988b; Shams-ud-di'n 1881). The saint is renowned for his magical power to plug leaks in sinking ships at sea, precisely the sort of boon which would prove useful to his major patrons and devotees, the Marakkāyar sea-traders of Kayalpattinam and Colombo (Sharif 1921: 199; Van Sanden 1926: 31).

All three groups under discussion—Māppiḷas, Marakkāyars, and Moors—as well, in fact, as the coastal Navāyat Muslims of Bhatkal in North Kanara (D'Souza 1955), follow, or at least prefer, some form of matrilocal marriage and household pattern, and many of them also recognise some type of matrilineal descent. The nature of the Sri Lankan Moorish matrilineal system is best documented for the east coast Moors of the Batticaloa and Amparai Districts, where a system of exogamous ranked matriclans, matrilocal residence, and *de facto* pre-mortem matrilineal transmission of houses and lands to daughters through dowry is followed by the Tamil Hindus as well (McGilvray 1989; Yalman 1967). Published research on Moorish kinship in central and western Sri Lanka is still meager, but matrilocal residence has been reported in a Moorish village in Wellassa (de Munck 1993, 1996; Yalman 1967: ch. 13), among the upper class Moors of late 19th century

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Galle (Bawa 1888), as well as in eight out of twelve Moorish households in modern Colombo studied linguistically by Raheem (1975: 59).[14] On trips to Colombo and Galle in 1993 I found matrilocal residence in almost all of the middle-class Moorish families I visited. Some Moors were also well aware that other Muslims, such as the Gujarati-speaking Bohras, follow a contrary patrilocal rule.

The title of *Marakkār* or *Marakkāyar* is found among Muslim maritime trading groups from the *Navāyats* of the Kanara coast (D'Souza 1955: 43ff) to the Moors of Sri Lanka. It was borne by the daring Muslim Kunjali admirals of the Zamorin's fleet as well as by more humble Hindu Mukkuvar boatmen of Kerala (Gabriel 1996: 121 ff; Narayan 1995: 94; Thurston and Rangachari 1909 v.5: 112). In Sri Lanka, the term is often rendered as *Maraikkār* (Marikar, Marcar, etc.); it appears both in leading Moorish family names as well as in the customary title of the office of mosque trustee, a leader of the local Moorish community (Ali 1981a; Mahroof 1986a; McGilvray 1974). Commercial, cultural, and even migrational links between the Marakkāyar towns of southern Tamilnadu and Sri Lankan Moorish settlements are attested in the historical traditions of Beruwela, Kalpitiya, Jaffna, and other coastal settlements where some Muslims have lived for centuries (Ali 1981a; Casie Chitty 1834: 254 ff; Denham 1912: 234). Such connections may continue even today: during my early fieldwork in Akkaraipattu (Amparai District) in 1969–71 my Moorish landlord mentioned that he had spent several years as a youth apprenticed to a Marakkāyar merchant in Kayalpattinam, a fact I personally verified on a visit to South India in 1983. Evidence of long-term migration and presumed intermarriage between the Marakkāyars (and Kāyalārs) of Tamilnadu, the Māppiḷas of Kerala, and the Moors of Sri Lanka is also found in the fact that all three groups share a set of distinctive Tamil kinship terms for parents and elder siblings which are not found among the Labbais or other Tamil-speaking Muslim groups in Tamilnadu (Mines 1972: 26–27).[15]

The traditional institution of Moorish community decision-making on the west coast of Sri Lanka was a sort of village or neighbourhood assembly (*ūr kūṭṭam*) under the leadership of the chief mosque trustee, who bore the title of *Maraikkār, Matticam*, or *Nāṭṭāṇmaikkārar* (Mahroof 1986a).[16] Such a pattern of local assemblies was also characteristic of medieval Kerala, where they formed a hierarchy of increasing political authority from the village *(tārā kūṭṭam)*, to the district (*nāṭṭu kūṭṭam*), to even broader territorial units (Padmanabha Menon 1924: 250–69).

[14] Formal matrilineal descent units (matrilineages, matriclans) have not been documented among Moors outside of the east coast. One author briefly alludes to patrilineal kinship among the Moors of Kalutara and Mannar (M.Z. Mohideen 1965: 25).

[15] Father, *vāppā*; Mother, *ummā*; Elder Brother, *kākkā*; Elder Sister, *rāttā* or *tāttā*. For the Māppiḷa kin-terms see Gough (1961: 439–42) and Puthenkalam (1977: 228–32). In the absence of a full list of Marakkāyar kin-terms, I do not know what other kin-terms they may share with the Moors of Sri Lanka. Muslims in Colombo and south-western Sri Lanka recognise as a substitute for *kākkā* (Elder Brother) the term *nānā*, which is also a Singaporean term for the wealthier Tamil Muslims who come from coastal *Marakkāyar* towns such as Karaikal and Nagapattinam (Mani 1992: 341).

[16] Mattisam is derived from the Tamil word *mattiyam* or *mattiyastam*, adjudication or mediation. *Nāṭṭāṇmaikkārar* is a term for certain regional caste headmen in Tamilnadu.

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Even today, the oral tradition of district assemblies (*nāṭṭu kūṭṭam*) is still recalled by the matrilineal Tamils of the eastern coast of Sri Lanka, part of a pre-colonial political legacy which they apparently share with the west coast Moors. The likelihood that a prior 'Kerala connection' accounts for many of these matrilineal and maritime Muslim traits among both the Marakkāyars of Tamilnadu and the Moors of Sri Lanka—as well as among the matrilineal Hindu Tamils of the east coast, and even the 'Malabar inhabitants' of Jaffna—seems quite strong (Raghavan 1971: 199–217).[17]

However, there are other respects in which the Moors of Sri Lanka are historically and sociologically distinct from their closest Muslim neighbours in India. In terms of ascriptive status, the Sri Lankan Muslim community as whole is more egalitarian and homogenous than its South Indian counterparts. Although the wealth and class structure descends steeply from elite gem-trading millionaires, to urban entrepreneurs, to rural farmers and boutique keepers (Mauroof 1972), there do not appear to be the sorts of hereditary, endogamous, caste-like divisions among the Sri Lankan Moors which have been documented among the Māppiḷas and between the Marakkāyars and Labbais in South India.[18] Also, as Fanselow (1989) has pointed out, the Māppiḷas, Marakkāyars, and Deccani Muslims of South India either supplied local Hindu kings with strategic military technologies (naval squadrons, cavalry horses) or were themselves part of the Urdu-speaking political elite under the Nawābs of Arcot.[19] The Moors never played such a strategic military or political role in the history of Sri Lanka (Ali 1981a; Dewaraja 1986), and as a result they did not become identified with the state nor did they develop their own political or military ideology of sovereignty.

One must consider, too, the distinctive features of Sri Lankan Moorish geography and demography. In the districts of northern Malabar, the Māppiḷas form a single Muslim population stretching from the urban coastal cities well into the agricultural hinterlands, whereas in Tamilnadu the coastal urban Marakkāyar trading elite has erected endogamous barriers separating them from the inland Labbai population. Neither of these Tamilnadu Muslim groups incorporates a large rural

[17] According to a Māppiḷa tradition, the Marakkāyars themselves were originally a merchant group in Cochin (Nambiar 1963: 59). Some Sinhalese cultural patterns, too, are historically of Kerala origin (Obeyesekere 1984: 425–552; Roberts 1980).

[18] Mines (1973) reports relatively open and egalitarian relations between different Labbai subdivisions in a suburb of Madras, and other writers have pointed to important ways in which Muslim social divisions are *unlike* Hindu castes (Fanselow 1996; Mauroof 1986; Mujahid 1989). Still, the evidence of endogamous status barriers between Marakkāyars and other Tamil Muslim groups remains quite strong (Bayly 1989; More 1991; Pandian 1987; chs 6–8; my own fieldwork in Kayalpattinam 1983). Both the Māppiḷas and the Sri Lankan Moors have traditionally assigned the task of circumcision to a hereditary low-status group of Muslim barbers called *Ossan* in northern Kerala, *Ostā* in Travancore and in Sri Lanka (McGilvray 1974: 306–12). The existence of smaller endogamous marriage circles—possibly even the perpetuation of Marakkāyar pedigrees from Kayalpattinam—among the wealthy Muslim gem-trading families of Colombo, Beruwela, and Galle has been asserted by Mauroof (1972: 69–80), but without supporting data.

[19] For a brief period in the mid-18th century a coastal Navāyat dynasty held the Nawābship (Fanselow 1989: 273).

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peasantry. Among the Sri Lankan Muslims, in contrast, there is both an urban Muslim elite and a rural Muslim agrarian population, but each is found on opposite sides of the island, separated by the Kandyan Hills. The numerous Moorish farmers on the northern and eastern coast are not only distanced geographically, but separated socio-economically and culturally as well, from the more affluent and cosmopolitan centres of Muslim trade and political influence in the central and western parts of the island (Figure 3). The west coast and up-country Muslims are a widely dispersed minority except in certain well-known enclaves (Beruwela, Akurana, Puttalam/Kalpitiya, Mannar, some neighbourhoods of Colombo and Galle, for example).[20] The east coast Moorish paddy farming towns, on the other hand, which are more substantial and concentrated—but also more agrarian-based and integrated into a distinctive regional subculture—represent nearly one-third of all Sri Lankan Muslims (Figure 5). At Mutur and Kinniya south of Trincomalee and in some of the major towns and paddy-growing areas of Batticaloa and Amparai Districts (e.g., Eravur, Kattankudy, Kalmunai, Sammanturai, Nindavur, Akkaraipattu, Pottuvil), half to three-quarters of the population are Moors, making this eastern region the only demographically feasible site in the entire island for a Muslim-dominated electorate (Kurukulasuriya et al. 1988: 94–102).

III
Moorish political ethnicity in the 20th century

In the modern era, the Muslims of Kerala and Tamilnadu—despite their cultural diversity and internal social divisions—have felt reasonably secure about 'who' they are. In contrast, the leading spokesmen for the Moors of Sri Lanka from the late 19th century onwards seem to have been perennially vexed by questions of their biological and cultural origins and the most advantageous formulation of their ethnic identity within an increasingly communalised political arena. Cut off from major South Indian Muslim centres of learning to some extent during 300 years of Portuguese and Dutch colonial repression, the Moors were grateful to be emancipated from feudal obligations in the Sinhalese areas of the island in reward for their loyalty to the British crown during the Kandyan Rebellion of 1817–18. In the first half of the 19th century they took advantage of gradually liberalised British policies permitting freedom of commerce, urban property rights, purchase of Crown land, and the appointment of local Moorish headmen. However, the degree to which the Sri Lankan Moors in the late 18th and early 19th centuries constituted a self-conscious and internally organised minority community is difficult to judge. It is only clear that the Moors formed a visible and distinct census category for British colonial administrators and the compilers of local gazetteers such as Simon Casie Chitty (1834).

Ironically, according to Ameer Ali, whose unpublished Ph.D. thesis offers the most insightful and detailed interpretation of the Muslims in 19th and early 20th

[20] The largest single urban concentration of Sri Lankan Muslims (18 per cent of the total Muslim population) is within the municipal district of Colombo (Phadnis 1979: 29–32).

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Figure 4
Ultramodern mosque in Beruwala, an affluent Muslim coastal settlement south of Colombo which is a centre for Sri Lanka's gem trade. Photo taken in 1993.

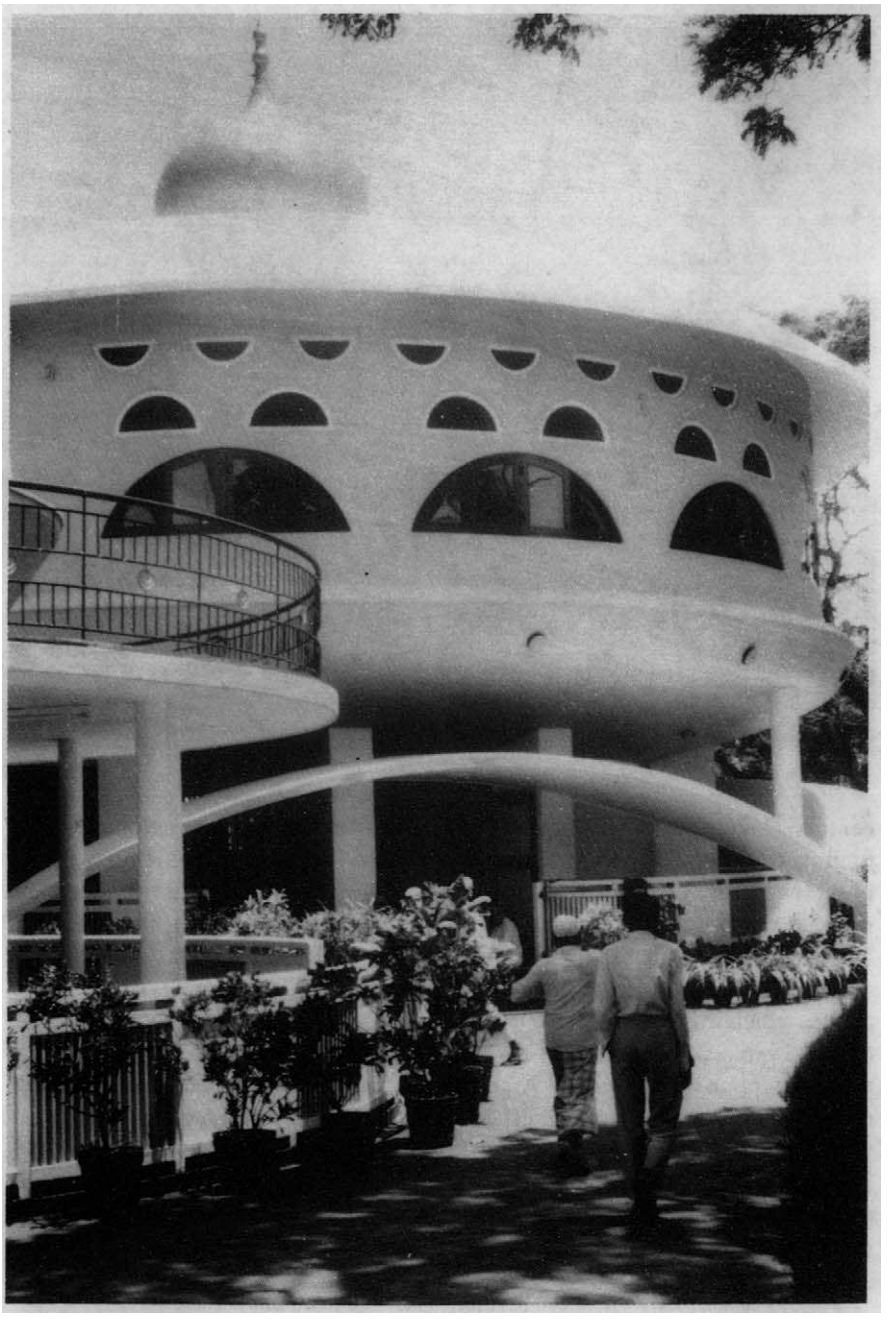

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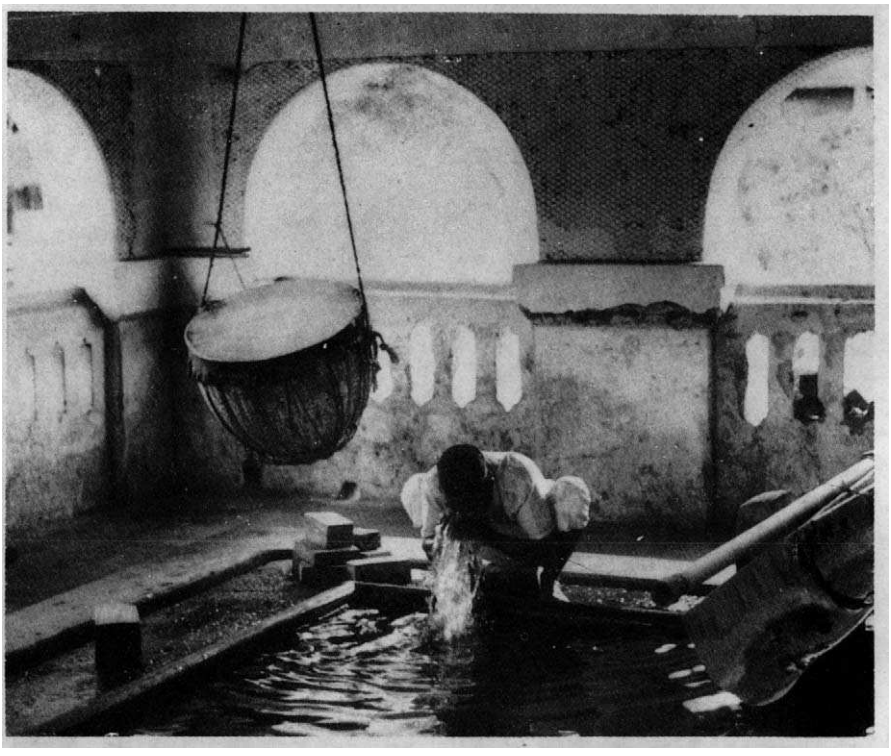
Figure 5
A Muslim man performs ablutions at the older style Small Mosque (Cinnappaḷḷi) in Akkaraipattu. The drum, possibly unique in Sri Lanka, helps summon the faithful to prayers. Photo taken in 1971.



century Ceylon, the indigenous Moors seized upon these new colonial opportunities to become even more aloof and inward-looking as a community.[21] He observes that they remained absorbed in their customary modes of livelihood and mosque-based institutions, influenced by Sufi disciples and ritualistic *ālims* and pious Indian Muslim trader/missionaries from Kayalpattinam and Kilakarai, and strongly averse to mass-literacy, the printing press, and English-medium education, which was then available only through Christian mission schools (Ali 1980; Shukri 1986c: 348ff). The British-imposed exile to Sri Lanka in 1883 of a charismatic Egyptian revolutionary, Arabi Pasha, finally served to catalyse an Islamic revival and a movement to establish Muslim schools offering a secular western curriculum (Mahroof 1986b, 1986c), but this still placed them far behind the Sinhalese, and even farther behind the Tamils, who had begun to enroll in Christian mission schools in Jaffna sixty years earlier. In any case, the Muslim educational movement was religiously exclusionary and aimed solely at the west coast urban elite;

[21] Another author, M.M.M. Mahroof, has called it the 'Kasbah mentality' (1990: 91).

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not a single Muslim school was founded for the children of the Moorish farmers of the east coast (Samaraweera 1978: 471).[22]

The mid-to-late-19th century Tamil Hindu and Sinhala Buddhist cultural revivals spurred by Arumuga Navalar, Anagarika Dharmapala, and the European Theosophists were well under way before the Muslims had even begun to organise. By the end of the century, however, the west coast urban Muslim elite had begun to promote their unique identity as 'Ceylon Moors' in response to several factors. In the first place, being 'Ceylon Moors' established their legitimate claim for seats in the formal system of communal representation which the British instituted and maintained for 100 years (Nissan and Stirrat 1990: 28–29). Muslim representatives (some elected, some appointed) had begun to serve on local Municipal Councils as early as 1866 (Asad 1993: 82), but until 1889 the Moors had been tacitly represented on the all-island Legislative Council by a government-appointed Tamil member, the last of whom was (later Sir) Ponnambalam Ramanathan, a highly influential figure among both Sinhala and Tamil nationalists. By the 1880s, however, the Moors as well as the Sinhala Buddhists had begun to press for separate representation so as to forestall the appointment of better educated or more influential Hindus and Christians to represent them (Wagner 1990: 67).

The underlying colonial discourse in the 19th century assumed 'race' as the criterion for political representation (Rogers 1995). In a strategically calculated speech to the Legislative Council in 1885, Ramanathan marshalled linguistic and ethnographic evidence to argue that, apart from religion, the Moors and Tamils shared a great many cultural and linguistic traits resulting from conversion and intermarriage over the centuries. When he published it three years later as an academic essay on 'The ethnology of the "Moors" of Ceylon' in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Ceylon Branch*, Ramanathan's views might have appeared to gain the imprimatur of the British colonial establishment (Ramanathan 1888). His well-argued but politically motivated conclusion, that the Moors were simply Muslim members of the Tamil 'race', was immediately perceived by Moorish leaders as 'planned sabotage' of their hopes for the appointment of a separate Muslim Member of the Legislative Council and as an academic excuse for the continued domination of the Moors by the Tamil leadership (Ali 1980: 102n). Ironically enough, Ramanathan was promulgating a more inclusive definition of 'Tamilness' than many high-caste Hindus of Jaffna and Batticaloa would have liked, given their aristocratic reluctance to recognise members of the lowest castes as 'Tamils'.[23]

Ramanathan's strategy abruptly failed when the British Governor appointed a Moor to the Council a year later. However his essay seemed to embody the

[22] A similar picture emerges with respect to the older, more traditional madrasas or Arabic Muslim seminaries, which were primarily founded in the southernmost Galle-Weligama region (Asad 1994).

[23] I found in the 1970s that high-ranking Vēḷāḷars and Mukkuvars in the Batticaloa region still generally referred to members of low castes such as Washermen (*Vaṇṇāṉ*) and Drummers (*Paṟaiyaṉ*) by their specific caste names, reserving the collective term 'Tamil' (*Tamiḻaṉ*) solely for the highest castes. I am grateful to John Rogers for reminding me that this was true in Jaffna as well.

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patronising Tamil outlook found in many rural areas of the island, where even today high-caste Hindus look down upon the Moors as their inferior and uneducated neighbours. In the narrow rhetorical space of colonial politics, the logic of Ramanathan's aggrandising ethnological thesis forced the Moors to further repudiate their Tamilness and to claim they were 'an entirely different race of Arab origin'. Indeed, from that point onward, the Ceylon Muslim leadership embraced the label of 'Ceylon Moor' with great tenacity (Ali 1980: 102). Twenty years later, in 1907, the Moorish editor I.L.M. Abdul Azeez finally published a lengthy rebuttal acknowledging that the Moors' Dravidian traits had resulted from conversion and intermarriage with Tamil women, but insisting that the very earliest forefathers of the Ceylon Moorish 'race'—who may have numbered 'not much more than 100'—had certainly not come from Kayalpattinam in South India and were 'purely Arabs in blood' (Azeez 1907: 22, 46).

Qadri Ismail has provided an insightful deconstruction of Azeez's strategically composed text, with its portrayal of the Moors as peaceful Arab traders (not warlike Tamil invaders) of high religious rank (members of the Prophet's own Hashemite tribe) who thought of themselves virtually as natives (because Adam had fallen from Paradise to earth in Ceylon),[24] tracing exclusively patrilineal descent from Arab males (thereby ignoring all affinal and maternal connections with their Tamil wives and mothers), and conversing in Tamil only as a 'borrowed' language of mercantile convenience (Ismail 1995: 69–70). To keep the story simple, no mention was made of the Persian traders and pilgrims in Sri Lanka reported by Ibn Batuta in the 14th century, much less the vestigial evidence of 19th century Persian influence or Shi'ite Muharram festivals in Puttalam (Ali 1981a: 74–76; Macready 1888–89). The essential subtext of Azeez's historical treatise was that the Ceylon Moors would refuse to be patronised or subsumed as 'Muslim Tamils' in the 20th century. Thus, a hypostatised Arab 'racial' pedigree was promoted to separate the Moorish from the Sinhala and Tamil 'races'.[25] The claim of a shared Tamil ethnic identity for both Tamils and Muslims has continued to be rejected by Moorish leaders throughout the 20th century, notes K.M. de Silva, 'because of its implications of a subordinate role for them vis-á-vis the Tamils, and the assumption of a Tamil tutelage over them' (1994: 43). As we shall see, Muslim/Tamil acrimony over Ramanathan's 'ethnological' thesis has been festering for over a century now, coming visibly to the surface several times in the post-Independence era.

In their determination to foster a unique Ceylonese–Arab identity, however, the Moorish leadership ignored a growing public resentment of their 'extra-territorial allegiance'. As Ameer Ali has noted, the Ceylon Moorish elite at the turn of the century—miming the theatrical loyalism of that exiled dissident, Arabi Pasha,

[24] Although it is not widely recounted in Sri Lanka, there is an extra-Quranic tradition that Adam, having rejoined his wife Eve at Arafat near Mecca, returned with her to Sri Lanka where they gave birth to the human race (Wadood 1976). Any acknowledgement of the many alternative legends which place Adam's fall in India (al-Ṭabarī 1989) would have been awkward from Azeez's point of view.

[25] For critical examination of the Sinhalese and Tamil 'racial' constructions, see Gunawardena (1990); Hellman-Rajanayagam (1995), and Rogers (1995).

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who was yearning to return to Egypt (Asad 1993: 42–43)—was so conspicuously devoted to the British monarch, so flattered by the attentions of the Ottoman Caliph, and so proud of their financial donations to build the Hejaz Railway from Damascus to Medina, that their credibility with Ceylonese nationalist leaders was deeply compromised. Even the celebrated 'fight for the fez', in which a prominent Moorish lawyer secured before the Privy Council his right to plead in court wearing a Turkish fez instead of a barrister's horsehair wig, was defined as an exclusively Muslim issue, not as a Ceylonese nationalist cause around which Sinhalese and Tamils could also rally (Ali 1980: ch. 7).

Like the Ceylon Moors, both the Marakkāyar Muslims of Tamilnadu and the highest-status Māppiḷas of Kerala boasted of their primordial Indo-Arab ancestry, but the Moors were reluctant to amalgamate with such a South Indian 'race', fearing it could undermine their rights as fully enfranchised natives of Ceylon. Reinforcing this aversion was the Moors' resentment of the immigrant South Indian Muslims (the so-called 'Coast Moors') who had effectively displaced the Ceylon Muslim traders from the export/import sector, and from other local markets as well, during the expansion of the plantation economy in the second half of the 19th century. The Ceylon Moors showed marked ambivalence toward the Coast Moors, looking to these successful Indian Muslim 'brothers' for a model of wealth and piety, sometimes even defending them in the Colombo press,[26] but resenting at the same time their exclusionary trading practices, their ascetic overhead expenditures, and their sharp business dealings (Ali 1980: chs 6–7,1981b: 14). Echoes of this rivalry can be found in references to jealous quarrels over the congregational rights of the Coast Moors and the Malays in Colombo mosques in the early 20th century.[27]

At the beginning of the 20th century other Ceylon ethnic groups were likewise crafting their identities in terms of 'race' and patrilineal 'blood', two familiar European colonial discourses of the period. I.L.M. Azeez himself pointed to the Parsees of Bombay as an economically and politically successful ethnic-cum-racial minority to emulate (Azeez 1907: 15). In the final analysis, the Ceylon Moors pursued a strategy very similar to that of the Burghers (Eurasians) of Ceylon, who emphasised distant patrilineal Dutch 'racial' pedigrees while downplaying their much stronger maternal Luso-Ceylonese ancestry, extolled a moribund linguistic patrimony (Dutch) while speaking and singing a much livelier vernacular (Portuguese Creole) at home, and all the while lobbied for favourable political treatment through an ethnic association which published historical footnotes and

[26] Indeed, only three years prior to publishing his racially exclusivist rebuttal of Ramanathan, I.L.M. Abdul Azeez had defended the Coast Moors in his Tamil newspaper, the *Muslim Guardian*, arguing that, in addition to their shared bonds as loyal British subjects, 'the Northern Coast [Indian] Moors and the Ceylon Moors are related in terms of their religion and to an extent in terms of their race'. His Tamil word for race was *cāti*, which could also mean caste. 'Northern Coast Moor' is my translation of the phrase *vaṭakarai cōṉakar* (cf. Ameer Ali 1981b: 14, 20n).

[27] *Ceylon Legislative Council Debates*, 21 August 1924, pp. 277–301. 'History of the Maradana Mosque' (anonymous), 38 pp. typescript. Catalogue #297.3595493/1187 in the library of the Moors Islamic Cultural Home, Bristol Street, Colombo. For the Malays see also Asad (1993: 80, 90); Ossman (1990).

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northern European family trees. Eventually the Moors Islamic Cultural Home, founded in 1944 by Senator A.R.A. Razik (later Sir Razik Fareed), began to publish the same sorts of historical articles and genealogical pedigrees for the Moorish community as the Dutch Burgher Union had been publishing for the Burghers since 1908 (Jackson 1990; Marikar et al., eds. 1976; McGilvray 1982a; Moors' Islamic Cultural Home 1965, 1970, 1978, 1983, 1994; Roberts et al. 1989).

In the 20th century, however, the social construction of the 'Ceylon Moor' identity has not gone unchallenged, nor has it remained stable (Ismail 1995). Despite the Moors' obviously complex and plural origins, a simplistic dichotomous racial debate over 'Arab' versus 'Tamil' was sustained for many years, with more or less the same political subtext of ethnic estrangement and rivalry. However, by mid-century a long-standing quarrel had intensified within the community itself as to whether 'Moor' or 'Muslim' was preferable as a group designation, nativistic 'Moor' partisans incorrectly asserting that the Portuguese applied this term only to racially pure Arabs (Azeez 1907: 4; Mohan 1987: 27–31, 117; Yule and Burnell 1903: 502), and 'Muslim' adherents emphasising a broader pan-Islamic religious identity which would ignore race and language, and incidentally make room for the Malays and Coast Moors. This discursive debate was reflected in the names of rival 'Moor' versus 'Muslim' political and cultural associations which from the turn of the century served as political fronts for two rival west coast gem-trading dynasties, both of recent Kerala origin, that of M. Macan Markar (Ceylon Moors' Association) and that of Abdul Caffoor (Ceylon Muslim League).[28] Leaders of these two wealthy families also vied jealously for British knighthoods, litigated over control of the Colombo Maradana mosque, and cultivated rival Sufi brotherhoods, with Macan Markar heading the Sri Lankan Shazuliya order and Abdul Caffoor leading the Qādiriyya order (de Jong 1986; Mauroof: personal communication; Samaraweera 1979: 252; Wagner 1990: 84–117, and personal communication).[29] At one point in 1945 the leaders of the Muslim League threatened to pronounce a *fatwa* expelling anyone who called himself a 'Moor' from the Muslim faith, a political ploy clearly intended to discredit the rival Moors' Association under the leadership of Razik Fareed (Wagner 1990: 143). Perhaps one of Fareed's cleverest strokes is seen in the omnibus name he chose for the Moors' Islamic Cultural Home, a title which proclaims at once a domesticated, racial, religious, and ethnic identity for the Moors.[30]

In the period between World War I and Sri Lankan Independence in 1948 the Moors fluctuated in their political stance, a consequence of the most terrifying episode of their pre-Independence history, the 1915 Sinhala–Muslim Riots.[31] The

[28] Michael Roberts asserts that 'the Macan Markars and the Abdul Cafoors' migrated to Sri Lanka in the 18th or 19th centuries from Kerala (1980: 38, 46 fn).

[29] The possibility of something like a dynastic moiety system within the west coast Muslim elite remains strong, as evidenced by the nearly simultaneous publication of two independently sponsored scholarly collections of essays on the history and culture of the Sri Lankan Muslims. One of these volumes enjoys the patronage of a third and newer Moorish gem-trading dynasty, that of Naleem Hadjiar (Mahroof et al. 1986; Mauroof 1972: 69; Shukri 1986a).

[30] Fareed's Tamil name for the MICH is *Cōṇaka Islāmiya Kalācāra Nilaiyam.*

[31] Six papers in the Ceylon Studies Seminar 1969/70 Series are devoted to this event, four of them

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multiple causes of this island-wide outbreak of Sinhalese violence against Muslim shopkeepers and workers are still hotly debated. Whether conditioned by Sinhala Buddhist revivalism and anti-British sentiment (Roberts 1994a), or fuelled by resentment against Muslim business practices and triggered by confrontational Islamic zealotry on the part of Coast Moors from Kayalpattinam (Ali 1980, 1981b), the rioting was staunchly repressed by the British, giving Moors good reason to be grateful for British protection and muting their support for the anti-British Khilāfat movement to restore the Sultan of Turkey as the Caliph, or leader, of all the world's Muslims. Indeed, given the Moorish leadership's fawning display of loyalty to the British Raj—a pattern seen in other Sri Lankan communities as well—it is difficult to imagine that the most violent and bloody of the anti-British, anti-Hindu 'Māppiḷa rebellions' was occurring only 400 miles away in Kerala in roughly the same period (1922). The 1915 violence also embittered the Moors against the Tamil elite, still led by Ponnambalam Ramanathan, who sought to retain his prominence in the Ceylonese nationalist movement by rising to defend the Sinhalese rioters against harsh British justice. In Muslim eyes, Ramanathan's stance revealed the hypocrisy of 'Tamil-speaking' solidarity, and this event was later recalled bitterly by Moorish politicians at crucial moments in the 1950s and 1960s (Hassan 1968: 101; Sivathamby 1987: 204).

In the 1920s and 1930s the Moors—divided between the two rival dynastic political organisations, the All-Ceylon Muslim League and the All-Ceylon Moors' Association, and unable to rally behind the leadership of both a Malay (T.B. Jayah) and a Moor (Razik Fareed)—initially followed the Ceylon Tamil leadership in vainly seeking guaranteed '50–50' minority representation under new constitutional reforms (Russell 1982: ch. 12). However, after the disastrous defeat of all their candidates in the 1936 election, which they correctly interpreted as an omen of Sinhalese majoritarian domination on the horizon, the Moorish leadership strategically transferred their support to the Sinhalese-majority parties, explicitly denying any necessary link between Moorish ethnicity and the Tamil language.[32] This accommodating gesture guaranteed both senior Muslim leaders (T.B. Jayah and Razik Fareed) their charter memberships in the leading Sinhala-dominated party at the time of Independence in 1948, the United National Party (K.M. de Silva 1986a, 1986b).[33] Just as most leading Sri Lankan Tamil MPs in the newly established parliament, hoping to salvage some goodwill from the Sinhalese majority in parliament, eventually broke ranks and voted with the UNP MPs to disenfranchise the 780,000 Indian Estate Tamils working on upcountry tea plantations, so the Muslim MPs voted to disenfranchise the 35,000 Indian Muslims still doing

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also published in the *Journal of Asian studies* 29, 2 (1970). See also Ameer Ali (1981b), and Roberts (1994a).

[32] Note, however, that as late as 1930 there was a daily Colombo newspaper for Muslims, *Tina Tapāl* (Daily Post), published in Tamil (Mahroof 1990: 94).

[33] At the very same time, an Indian Muslim radical who had agitated for an independent 'Mappilastan' in Kerala was proposing to create 'Nasaristan' for the Moors in eastern Sri Lanka and 'Safiistan' for west coast Moors. Because of their strategic decision to work within the Sinhalese nationalist parties, the Moorish leadership paid no attention to his efforts (Gabriel 1996: 294 ff; Rahmat Ali 1943).

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business in Sri Lanka. Both measures testified to the success of D.S. Senanayake in fostering divisions between the Tamil-speaking communities of the island and thus increasing Sinhala electoral dominance in the post-Independence era (Ali 1986–87: 155–56; Ismail 1995: 71–72, 84–85; and especially Shastri 1998).

Apart from an ephemeral east coast Tamil–Moor Federal Party alliance in the 1956 elections, the Moors from Independence up to the mid-1980s consistently opted for a strategy of coalition politics within the two major Sinhalese nationalist parties, the UNP and the SLFP, in the course of which certain Moorish politicians earned a legendary reputation for switching tickets and crossing the floor to join whichever party had come to power (Mohan 1987: 47; Phadnis 1979). Sir Razik Fareed, who emerged as the leading Moorish spokesman in the early decades of Independence, conspicuously endorsed the Sinhala Only national language policy in 1956 and railed against what he called 'political genocide' of the Moors under 'the Tamil yoke'. His speeches accused the Tamils of discrimination against the Moors in education and in local administrative appointments, as well as apathy and indifference wherever Moorish voters were politically underrepresented. During the Official Language debate in 1956, a Tamil MP sarcastically accused him of being a Sinhala defector. Fareed rhetorically turned the tables by asserting that he and the Moorish community could never be considered 'Tamil converts'. A heated replay of the old Ramanathan–Azeez 'ethnological' argument of 1888–1907 immediately ensued on the floor of Parliament (Hassan 1968: 96–106).

As Kingsley de Silva forthrightly notes, 'Tamil–Muslim rivalry in Sri Lanka is a political reality, and the Muslims themselves have responded with alacrity to Sinhalese overtures to back them against the Tamils' (K.M. de Silva 1986a: 449). In this sense, Moorish politics in independent Sri Lanka coupled the mainstream majority party strategy of the Tamilnadu Muslims with the shrewd communal opportunism of the Kerala Māppiḷas, but all under the rubric of a carefully constructed 'non-Tamil' Moorish ethnicity which was orchestrated from Colombo. De Silva and others have approvingly viewed the Muslims' cultural assimilation into Sinhalese society, and their pragmatic accommodationist politics, as the mark of a 'good' minority, implicitly contrasting them with the troublesome and uncooperative Tamils (K.M. de Silva 1986a, 1988; Dewaraja 1995). A tangible reward for this pliant behaviour, and a token of the government's desire to maintain strong economic ties with the Muslim countries of the Middle East (Ali 1984), was the establishment of a separate system of government schools for Muslim students in the 1970s and the training of a corps of Muslim teachers to staff them. Apart from standard academic subjects, the curriculum in the Muslim schools includes Islam and optional Arabic language, and in recent years a distinctive Muslim school uniform has been introduced (Figure 6). This has improved Muslim educational success (Ali 1986–87, 1992a), but has arguably worsened ethnic tensions by restricting direct face-to-face contact between students and faculty from different ethnic communities. It also represents a unique political concession to the Muslim community which 'vitiates the principle of non-sectarian state education which has been the declared policy of all governments since 1960' (K.M. de Silva 1997: 33).

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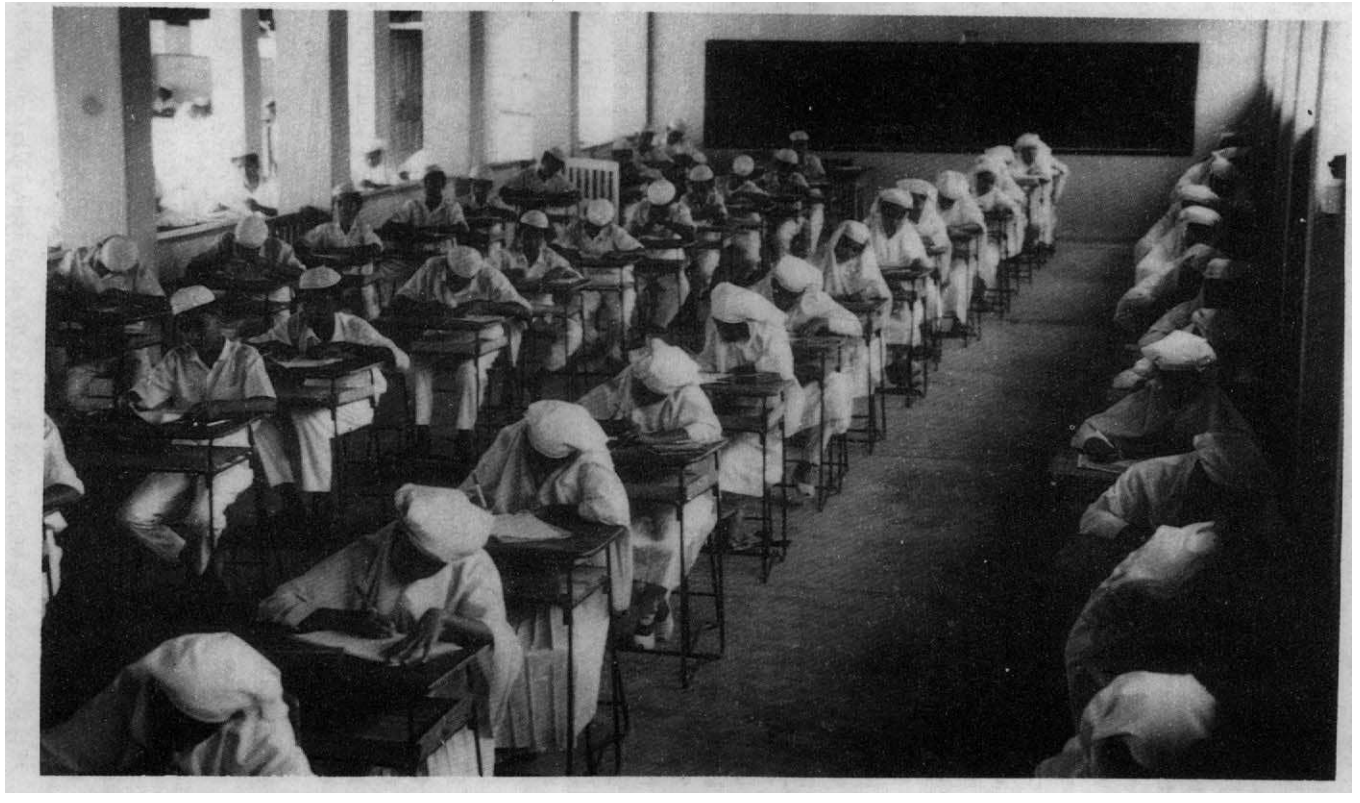
Figure 6

Boys wear white embroidered caps and girls wear 'purdah' (partā) head coverings at a Muslim government school in Akkaraipattu. Photo taken in 1993.



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As Christian Wagner has documented in detail, this effort to extract rewards from the Sinhala-majority parties for a geographically divided and class-stratified Muslim minority depended upon rural east coast Moorish farmers and fishermen electing back-bench Moorish MPs, while a few rich, well-connected west coast Moorish politicians—whose private interests did not often coincide with those of the rural east coast Moors—received influential cabinet appointments. This continued even while Muslim shops, shrines, and paddy fields were periodically threatened by local Sinhalese mobs (M.I.M. Mohideen 1986: 42–44; Roberts 1994b: 283; Wagner 1990: 136–84, 1991).[34] As an educated Muslim middle-class began to emerge in the 1970s and 1980s, its demands for practical socio-economic concessions (university admissions and job quotas, for example) were placated with a broad array of Islamic religious and cultural self-esteem programmes, some of them funded by rival Sunni and Shia regimes in the Middle East, which cost the government nothing (O'Sullivan 1997).

This imperfect arrangement, which privileged the western Moorish elite politically just as it disempowered the eastern Moorish peasantry socio-economically, might have continued indefinitely, if not for the fact that after 1983 the government could no longer guarantee the lives and property of Moors in the east coast Tamil guerrilla combat zone. In the mid-1980s, when President Jayawardene's UNP government employed Israeli military advisors and proposed submerging the key Moorish parliamentary constituencies of Amparai District within an enlarged Sinhalese-dominated Province of Uva, the Moors, led by east coast sentiment, finally broke with the UNP and SLFP, organising the first distinct Muslim political parties in independent Sri Lanka. These included the East Sri Lanka Muslim Front (ESLMF), which later became the Muslim United Liberation Front (MULF), and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC). When in 1989 the SLMC won four parliamentary seats, the political initiative within the Moorish community had been seized for the first time by leaders self-consciously representing the Eastern Province (Ali 1992b; Hennayake n.d.; Wagner 1990, 1991). More recently, however. the success of UNP Muslim candidates from central and western districts in the 1994 elections may signal a growing political cleavage between the assertive policies of the SLMC defending the territorial interests of agricultural Muslims concentrated in the north-east region and the non-confrontational desires of a prosperous and vulnerable Muslim middle class living interspersed with Sinhalese in the island's Wet Zone (O'Sullivan 1997).

IV
A crucial test: Moors and Tamils in the eastern region

Today, in response to the cues of their political leaders and in reaction against the neglect and disrespect they have suffered from the Tamils, the Moors of Sri Lanka

[34] In recent decades the Muslim cave-shrine at Daftar Jailani referred to in section II above has been the scene of volatile confrontations between Muslim devotees and Sinhalese monks and politicians who wish to reclaim it as an ancient Buddhist site (Hon. M.L.M. Aboosally, M.P., Chief Trustee of the shrine, personal communication 27 Aug. 1993).

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have acquired a clearer image of themselves as a distinct ethnic and religious group. Since the outbreak of the Eelam conflict in the early 1980s, communal interests represented by the Sinhalese majority parties have sought to deepen this schism by deliberately provoking and exacerbating local violence between the Moors and Tamils in order to prevent the formation of a unified Tamil-speaking front comprised of both groups (Ali 1986–87: 164; UTHR Report 7, 1991; personal fieldwork data 1993 and 1995). From 1990 onward, the LTTE guerrillas themselves have committed massacres of Muslims at prayer as well as the forced expulsion of the entire Muslim population from Jaffna and the north of the island (Hasbullah 1996; Sivaram 1992). All of this has drawn attention away from the historically-rooted commonalities of language, social organisation and cultural practices which the eastern Moors and Tamils continue to share at the village level. It is especially in the Trincomalee, Batticaloa, and Amparai Districts of the east coast that large numbers of Muslims and Tamils live as paddy-farming neighbours, competing strongly for the same economic and political resources, testing the limits of their shared cultural heritage. It is here that one of the pivotal issues of the Tamil separatist movement must be decided: will the east coast Moors eventually agree to join the Tamil-led movement for a Tamil-speaking homeland, perhaps with a constitutional provision for Muslim-majority subregions to safeguard their minority rights? Or will they prefer to remain an even smaller and more submerged minority within the Sinhalese-dominated districts?

Based upon my fieldwork (1969–71, 1975, 1978, 1993, 1995) among Tamils and Moors in Akkaraipattu, a large Muslim and Hindu farming town east of Amparai (pop. 37,000 in 1981), as well as shorter fieldwork in other parts of Batticaloa and Amparai Districts, I can sketch some of the cultural background to Tamil–Muslim relations in this suddenly strategic region of the island. Although written in the 'ethnographic present', the description I offer is largely based upon fieldwork I carried out in the 1970s. On two short research trips to the region in 1993 and 1995, I was able to verify that, despite more than a decade of war and strife, the major patterns of Tamil and Moorish matrilineal social organisation and popular religiosity are still honoured wherever possible. However, economic hardships, deaths, disappearances, militant recruitments, and diasporic emigrations abroad have all significantly disrupted normal marriage patterns and public acts of worship. More detailed fieldwork will be necessary to determine what long-term social and cultural changes may emerge as a result of the Eelam Wars. In any case, my baseline ethnographic data from the 1970s can help us to understand the tense but relatively stable pattern of Tamil–Moor relations that existed prior to the radical and bitter communal polarisation of the late 1980s.

History, economy and settlement of the eastern Moors

Apart from King Senerat's poorly documented 1626 resettlement of exiled Moors to Batticaloa, there are no firm dates for the earliest Moorish communities on the east coast—although the preponderance of Muslims in medieval coastal trade leads me to assume they long predate the Portuguese arrival—and very little Sri Lankan

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scholarship on the subject.[35] I heard about direct Arab origins here mainly from miraculous tales of Muslim holy men who 'floated ashore on a plank (*palakai*)' directly from the Middle East. There is also a widespread folk tradition, known to both Tamils and Moors, which recounts a caste war between the Tamil Mukkuvars and their rivals, the Timilars, for regional dominance, in which the Mukkuvars are said to have enlisted the aid of the local Muslims. As their reward for victory, it is said, the Muslims shrewdly chose Tamil wives, knowing that under the local system of matrilineal inheritance, their spouses would bring land with them as well (Kadramer 1934).

Although its historicity is problematic, this popular legend does tacitly acknowledge that, in the past, there had been a good deal of intermarriage between local Tamils (especially the dominant caste Mukkuvars) and Muslims. Certainly the fact that the marriage and descent systems of the Tamils and Moors today are identically matrilocal and matrilineal—even to the point of some identical matriclan (*kuṭi*) names—lends popularly-agreed support to this view (Saleem 1990: 29). There is also the possibility that some Hindu Tamils converted to Islam, especially the more impoverished and oppressed members of the Mukkuvar community. Although I have no historical proof of this, a tendency toward Muslim and Catholic conversion has been noted among the Mukkuvar fishing caste in Kerala and Tamilnadu (More 1993b: 78; Ram 1991). Under the pre-colonial Mukkuvar chiefdoms of the Batticaloa region, the Moors appear to have occupied a subordinate, or at least somewhat circumscribed, social position. Although mercantile trade, bullock transport, handloom weaving, carpentry, and coastal fishing appear to have been successful Moorish specialties from an early date, their overall rank and influence within the Tamil-dominated social system was below that of the high-caste Vēḷāḷar and Mukkuvar landowners (*pōṭiyārs*). Vestiges of the hereditary incorporation of Moors into the hierarchical caste and matriclan-based rituals of major Hindu temples continued well into the 20th century in some areas (e.g., Kokkatticcolai, Tirukkovil), before the awakening of Moorish religious and ethnic consciousness led to a renunciation of these duties. From the high-caste Tamil Hindu point of view, of course, such Moorish 'shares' (*paṅku*) in temple ritual should be seen as a privilege and honour rather than as a burdensome or degrading service obligation.

Along the east coast, the present-day pattern is one of alternating Tamil and Moorish towns and villages, as well as some internally divided Tamil/Moorish settlements, with the bulk of the population living within a mile or two of the beach. The mainstay of the economy is irrigated rice cultivation, with many Tamil and Moorish farmers commuting daily to their fields from homes in the coastal towns. The east coast Tamils and Moors cultivate adjacent tracts of paddy land, but their houses are located in ethnically segregated residential neighbourhoods. Tamils and Moors may sometimes live on opposite sides of the street, but their houses

[35] An exception is the recent local history of Akkaraipattu by Saleem (1990). See also Kandiah (1964).

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are almost never interspersed one beside the another. This ethnic partitioning generally coincides with electoral wards or local Headmen's Divisions, sometimes separated by no more than a narrow sandy lane. Among the Tamils, a pattern of Hindu caste segregation is found as well, with certain streets, wards, and even separate outlying hamlets, reserved for specific hereditary professions such as the Untouchable Paraiyar Drummers (McGilvray 1983). However, apart from a small, endogamous, low-status group of hereditary Muslim barber-circumcisers (*Ostā*, from Arabic *ustād*, master), the Moors have not created a parallel caste hierarchy of their own. The only religious elites are some *Maulānā* families (Sayyids, patrilineal descendants of the Prophet) and some local *Bāwās*, who are members of ecstatic Sufi orders (Aniff 1990; Mahroof 1991; McGilvray 1988b). Fieldwork in 1993 and 1995 revealed that Sufism itself is growing in popularity among middle-class Moors, with itinerant sheikhs from Kerala and the Lakshadweep Islands teaching the distinctive *dhikr* of the Rifā'ī order, among others, to Muslims in Kattankudy, Kalmunai, Akkaraipattu and elsewhere in the island (McGilvray 1997a).

To the west, once largely a Dry Zone jungle thinly inhabited by Veddah hunters and poor Sinhalese chena cultivators (Pieris 1965), there are now well over 150,000 Sinhalese peasants who have been resettled onto lands adjacent to the ancient Digavapi Buddhist stupa watered by the Gal Oya project, Sri Lanka's first post-Independence peasant colonisation scheme. Here, as in all the ethnic frontier districts farther north, the government's use of internationally-funded irrigation projects (see Figure 3) to resettle major Sinhalese populations in immediate proximity to well-established Tamil-speaking districts has been 'successful' but highly incendiary from the standpoint of both Tamils and Moors (Manogaran 1987; M.I.M. Mohideen 1986; Peebles 1990; Shastri 1990; UTHR Report 3, 1990). Profound demographic shifts have occurred in parts of Amparai and Trincomalee Districts, where the Tamils and the Moors have lost their majority status to the Sinhalese (Kearney 1987). This also means the Tamil-majority districts on the east coast are no longer geographically contiguous, so some kind of Tamil–Moor political accommodation will be necessary if a territorially unified Tamil Eelam or north-eastern provincial homeland is to be created.

Tamils and Moors: Similarities and differences

Residential neighbourhoods of Tamils and Moors often look quite similar to the eye. They are laid out along a gridwork of sandy lanes, each household lot guarded by perimeter walls or formidable barbed-wire fences and lushly planted with hibiscus, coconut, arecanut and mango trees. Ordinary Tamil houses tend to follow a traditional floor-plan oriented toward a carefully raked sandy yard to the east and incorporating a windowless interior Hindu shrine-room at the middle of the western wall. Moorish houses show more variation from this basic floor-plan. For example, Moorish families usually allocate the windowless centre room to the husband and wife as their bedroom, and they generally make some provision for female seclusion, such as a high masonry wall extending from the house into the front

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garden and interior walls or curtains to block the view of male visitors. (For more details and floor-plan drawings see McGilvray 1989: 195–98.) Newer Moorish houses also display more external ornamentation and use of colour than Tamil homes. This tendency is even more strongly marked in the way Moors decorate their bullock carts and fishing boats with colourfully painted floral designs and protective '786' numerology (Figure 7).[36] For reasons no one could explain to me, Tamil carts and boats are devoid of ornamentation of any kind.

As with the popularly alleged 'racial' differences between Sinhalese and Tamils, outward physical differences between Tamils and Moors are often difficult for an outside observer to detect. Local people would occasionally point out Moors with lighter skin and aquiline features as evidence of their Arab ancestry. However, the most reliable marks of Tamil versus Moorish identity 'on the street' are the cultural ones: dress, occupation, and to some degree vocabulary and dialect.[37] Although western-style shirts are nearly universal, Moorish men tend more often to wear as a lower garment a tubular stitched cotton sarong (*cāram*), typically in a plaid or check pattern, sometimes with a wide black belt, while Tamil men more often wear a plain white unstitched cotton *vēṭṭi* and never a belt. Both Tamil and Moorish women wear a sari and blouse, but Islamic modesty requires Moorish women to cover the head and part of the face with the end of their saris in public, a practice locally known as *mukkāṭu* (Figures 8 and 9). Hindu Saivite face and body markings (sacred ash, sandalwood paste, vermilion powder, male earrings) are unmistakably Tamil. Simple white kerchiefs, embroidered skullcaps, or the rare fez may be worn by Moorish men, especially as the hours of prayer approach (Figure 10). However, ambiguity and disguise are always possible: during anti-Tamil riots in Sinhalese areas, Moorish men have sometimes escaped mistaken slaughter only by displaying anatomical proof of circumcision.

Within their ethnically homogeneous wards and neighbourhoods, the Tamils and the Moors maintain places of worship, which are usually managed on a matrilineal basis. Both temples and mosques are governed by boards of male trustees (called *vaṇṇakkars* by the Tamils and *maraikkārs* by the Moors), each trustee representing one of the major matrilineal clans (*kuṭi*) found among the local temple or mosque congregation, and each seeking to preserve the honour and status of his matriclan at annual rituals, whether Hindu temple festivals or Muslim *kantūri* feasts (Figure 11). In the course of fieldwork, I was struck by the difference in religious styles between the Tamils and the Moors. Most of the Tamils I knew enjoyed ritual, and they often encouraged me to enter temples and attend pujas without any doctrinal commitment, whereas the Moors were sometimes more

[36] The number 786, frequently painted on sea-going fishing craft, is numerological short-hand for the Islamic invocation *Bismillāhi 'l-Rahmān 'l-Rahīm* ('In the Name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful').

[37] The Tamil spoken by the Moors of the Batticaloa region contains a number of Islamic and Arabic-derived words as well as alternative Tamil expressions and kin-terms which are distinctive to Muslim usage. Their pronunciation, however, is broadly similar to the Tamils of the eastern region, as compared, for example, with the notably different Muslim Tamil speech patterns around Galle and the southern coast.

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Figure 7

A Muslim bullock cart in eastern Sri Lanka is decorated with yellow and green floral motifs and a crescent moon. Photo taken in 1970.

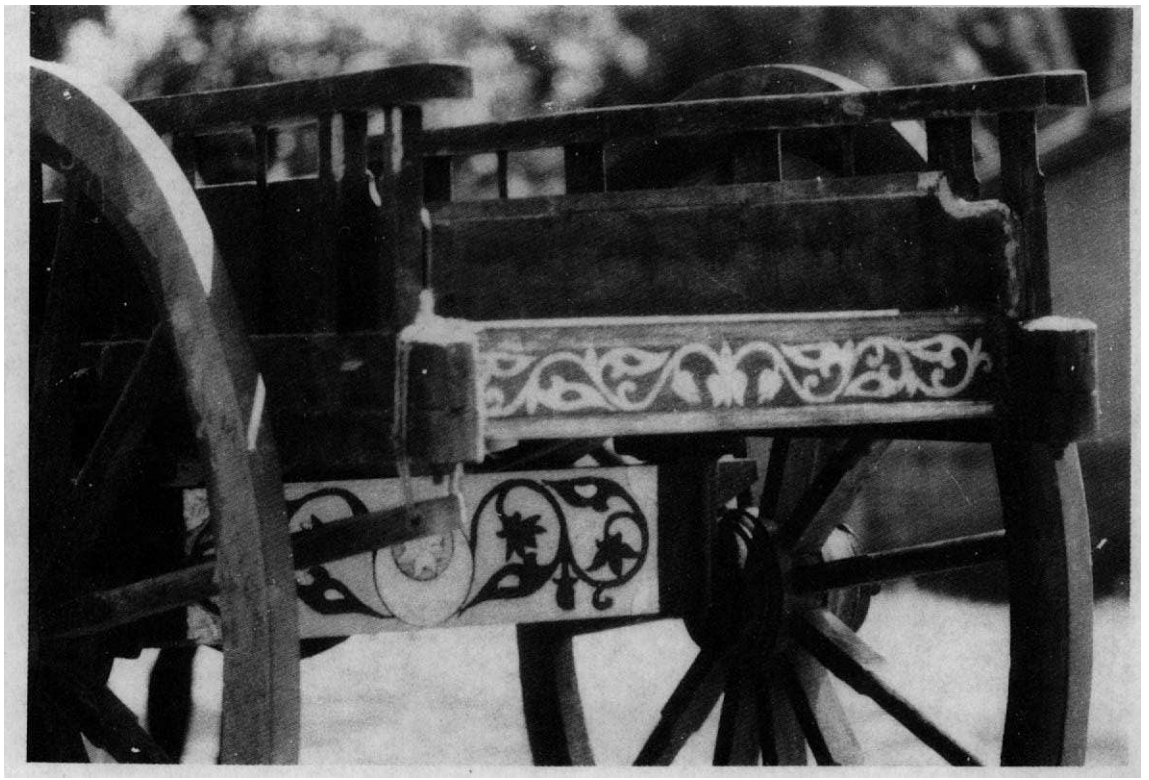

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Figure 8

Akkaraipattu Muslim school teacher K.M. Najumudeen standing in a checked sarong with his daughter, who is modelling a new Indian-inspired Muslim clothing style. Photo taken in 1993.

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Figure 9
A Muslim woman with her daughter in Akkaraipattu uses the end of her sari to partially cover her face in public. Photo taken in 1970.

protective of their sacred spaces and more eager to engage in theological debates concerning my personal religious beliefs. As a first approximation, the distinction between Hindu 'orthopraxy' and Muslim 'orthodoxy' does seem to work pretty well, although the east coast Tamil Hindus tend to be less Sanskritic in their rituals

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Figure 10

Mr Kaleel, a Batticaloa Muslim merchant who lives in Kattankudy, wears the embroidered cap and white shirt which is common among younger generation Moorish traders. Photo taken in 1993.

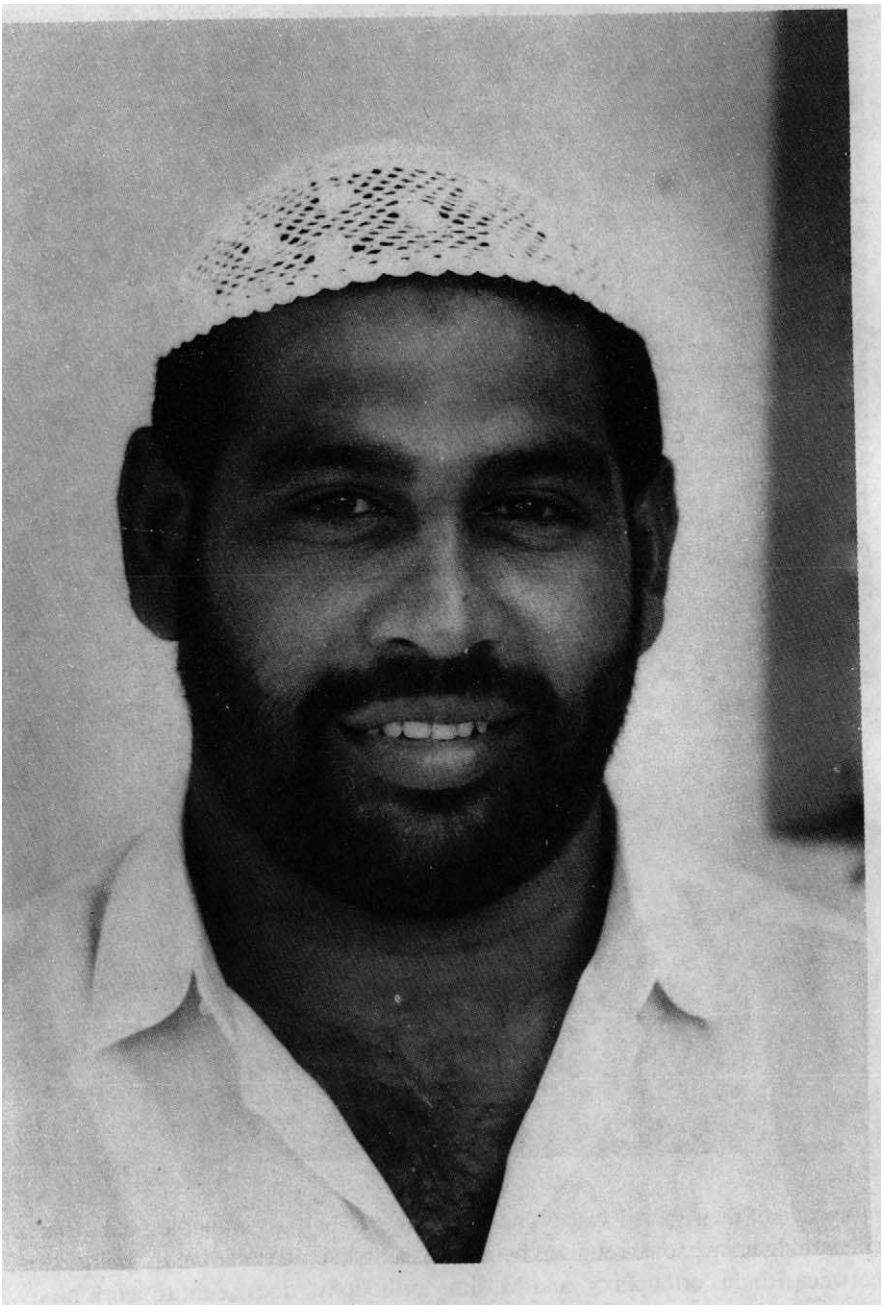

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Figure 11

Matrilineal clan trustees* (maraikkārs) *of the Grand Mosque* (Periyappaḷḷi) *in Akkaraipattu illustrate some of the older styles for Moorish men in the east coast region. Several men in the centre have shaven heads, and two at the right are wearing the fez. Photo taken in 1970.

than one would find in the agamic temples of Jaffna (McGilvray 1988a). In the sphere of public worship, there is now very little crossover or joint participation by Hindus and Muslims. The only exceptions I noted were some Tamil Hindus who made vows and offerings at the tombs of Muslim saints (*auliyā*) located in mosques (*paḷḷi*) and small chapels (*taikkiyā*).

Moors and Tamils share very similar cultural understandings of sexuality and the body, of heating and cooling foods and substances, and of folk medicine derived from the Siddha and Ayurvedic traditions (McGilvray 1998). Local specialists in both communities are called 'curers' (*parikāri*; colloq. *paricāri*); no one in Akkaraipattu uses the title of *hakīm* or identifies with the Arabic Ūnāni medical system. At the level of ghosts and malevolent spirits (*pēy, picāsu*, Muslim *jinn*), the Tamils and the Moors have a similar construction of the supernatural. There are both Tamil and Muslim *mantiravātis* (experts in the use of mantras to control demonic forces), and there is a propitiatory cult of local female spirits (*tāymār*, 'the mothers') conducted by Moorish women. Until venturing outside of one's own ethnic neighbourhood became a dangerous undertaking as the Eelam 'problems' progressively worsened, some Moors would consult Tamil astrologers concerning

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marriage, career, and other personal problems. Similar guidance remains available from Moorish numerologists and ink-readers.

Young Muslim children of both sexes continue to attend traditional neighbourhood Quranic 'recitation schools' (*ōtuppaḷḷikkūṭam*) to memorise Arabic scripture, but the agents of modern pan-Islamism are nowadays more visible, particularly young ālims and maulavis, college and seminary-trained teachers of Islam in the Muslim government schools. Their efforts to suppress local traditions and practices as 'non-Islamic' have met with mixed success, and it is sometimes difficult to differentiate the pro-Islamic from the anti-Tamil motives which may lie behind such actions. For example, many Moorish women continue to publicly attend a regional festival celebrating the South Indian saint Shāhul Hamīd of Nagoor at the 'Beach Mosque' (*kaṭaṟkaraip paḷḷi*) near Kalmunai, despite efforts to impose purdah restrictions. For practical reasons, poorer Moorish women still work as members of female weeding and threshing teams in the fields, bringing home cash or a share of the paddy harvest for their families. At the same time, Moors in many areas have stopped employing Hindu caste musicians at local ceremonies and circumcisions because this Islamic 'purification' also enables an anti-Tamil economic boycott. During my visits to Akkaraipattu in 1993 and 1995, many Moors still employed Tamil Washermen for domestic laundry services, and Tamil Blacksmiths still forged agricultural tools and bullock cart wheels for Moorish farmers, despite the heightened ethnic tensions of Eelam War III.

Despite the lifeways they have in common, there are barriers to direct social interaction between the Tamils and the Moors, such as the bifurcated school system. There seem to be virtually no Tamil–Moorish intermarriages today, although they must have occurred widely in the distant past. Similarly, contemporary Tamil converts to Islam are rare; I came across only one or two in my entire fieldwork, always by Tamil women who married Moorish men. I observed very few Tamil–Moor inter-household visitations, gift-giving relationships, or food exchanges except those associated with landlord/tenant obligations or with hereditary low-caste Tamil service to Moorish landowners. Women are generally shielded from contact with the opposite community more than men, and Moorish women are shielded most of all.

The remaining opportunities for direct Tamil–Moor social interaction are largely vocational and economic. In the 1970s, before the escalation of the Eelam conflict, Tamils and Moors might cultivate paddy on adjacent tracts of land, in which case they would also participate together on irrigation committees. Tamil and Moorish landowners would also recruit tenant cultivators and field labourers from the opposite community. As a result of violence starting in the 1980s, paddy cultivation and land tenure patterns have been severely disrupted, and farmers in some areas have lost control of their fields to members of other ethnic communities, or to the LTTE itself. I do not know whether joint Tamil–Muslim irrigation committees continue to function today, but many Tamil labourers are still reported to be employed by Muslim landowners in Akkaraipattu (UTHR Bulletin 11, 1996). In the 1970s, shoppers could choose to patronise Tamil or Moorish or Low Country Sinhalese merchants in Akkaraipattu, depending upon a complex set of considerations (price,

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selection, convenience, credit, and personal trust). However, ethnic resentment and suspicion was often noted, particularly among the Tamils, because the majority of retail establishments in a town such as Akkaraipattu were owned by Moors or Sinhalese or 'Jaffnese' Tamils. Public markets and shops are culturally defined as a male domain into which respectable women should not venture without a chaperone. Tamil women may shop together or with a male relative, but Moorish women must dispatch men or boys to fetch merchandise samples to view at home. Nowadays the purchasing power of Tamils in a town such as Akkaraipattu has been drastically reduced by the Eelam conflict, while the Muslims are visibly more prosperous (UTHR Bulletin 11, 1996).

At the level of popular culture and day-to-day problem-solving, the Tamils and Moors still have a great deal in common, although they rarely stop to reflect upon it. In addition to a common language, their farming practices, matrilocal marriage and household patterns, matrilineal kinship rules, rites of passage, dietary and medical lore, and magical beliefs are identical or closely related in many cases (McGilvray 1982c, 1989). These are the sorts of everyday patterns which, from an anthropological perspective, give the whole Batticaloa region its distinctive cultural identity in contrast to Jaffna or Tamilnadu, and frankly my own bias would be to read these data optimistically as evidence of consensus rather than conflict. Unfortunately, as the examples of Lebanon, Bosnia, and Northern Ireland prove, in a politically-charged situation these elements of shared regional culture are not necessarily enough to forestall bitter political schism legitimated by history and other markers of cultural difference.

Ethnic stereotypes and self-perceptions

The high-caste Tamils with whom I became acquainted expressed at least a vague awareness of being heirs to a Tamil cultural tradition, a Dravidian civilisation with plausible claims to linguistic roots going back to the pre-Vedic Indus Valley culture—and therefore much older than either Buddhism or Islam (Fairservis and Southworth 1989). Yet, although the linguistic and cultural chauvinism which has characterised Tamil politics in the 20th century has clearly been felt on the east coast, there is also a tinge of ambivalence about the arrogance and presumed cultural authority of the Jaffna Tamils who have led this movement. My Tamil friends were not outspoken on these issues, but they prided themselves on adhering to a coherent and time-tested set of rules for living, including standards for Tamil food and attire, Tamil family patterns, Tamil religiosity, Tamil language and manners. They did not expect me, as a *veḷḷaikkāran* ('whiteman'), to follow the same regimen, but they were appalled when I seemed to have no systematic rules of my own. My blatant dietary promiscuity and my groggy morning regimen seemed particularly lax to them, and the American kinship system struck both the Tamils and Moors as appallingly flaccid. When the postman brought a wedding invitation from my mother's brother's daughter in California, I was admonished for not having closely scrutinised her fiancé, obviously a rival for my cross-cousin's hand.

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Many of the very same elements are found in Moorish self-perceptions, especially the concern to evince a well-ordered cultural system for living. However, the Moors have the option of drawing upon both the Islamic and the Tamil traditions, and sometimes there can be debate over which one to emphasise. From the religious point of view, the Moors enjoy a robust, unequivocal self-definition as orthodox Muslims; indeed some of my friends urgently referred me to locally respected treatises on *sunnā* and *hadīth*, especially the 19th century Arabic–Tamil work of 'Māppiḷḷai Ālim' (Ahmad Lebbai 1873/1963). Among some of the young educated Moorish men who became my close friends during fieldwork in the 1970s there was some concern about their own 'hybrid' cultural traits, which they sometimes humourously caricatured as consisting of an Arabic religion, together with a South Indian language, and a mixed programme of clothing and cuisine. Shouldn't the Moors have their own unique 'national dress', some of them asked, instead of just borrowing a Sinhala–Malay sarong and a Tamil sari? A further complication in the 1970s was the official adoption of a Pakistani school uniform, the 'Punjabi costume' of *salwar kameez*, for Moorish high school girls, more recently augmented with an Iraqi-inspired white hooded head-covering (referred to as *partā*, purdah, see Figure 6). With grudging admiration, a Moorish friend of mine remarked that, regardless of where in the world she might live, a Tamil woman would unhesitatingly prefer to wear a traditional Kanchipuram sari and tie the customary jasmine blossoms in her hair. Lacking such a strong cultural identity, a Muslim woman, he felt, would be more inclined to adopt local, or more western, dress.

In agriculture and business, however, the Moorish identity is strong and unequivocal: they see themselves as—and are acknowledged by the Tamils to be—shrewd, hardworking and successful. In the 1970s, east coast Moors readily admitted to me that their MPs would 'reverse hats' (*toppi tiruppuvān*), i.e., switch party affiliations, to ally themselves with the party in power, a manoeuver perfected by the late Gate Mudaliyar M.S. Karaiyapper of Kalmunai, his son-in-law M.M. Mustapha, and his nephew M.C. Ahmed (Mohan 1987: 47; Phadnis 1979: 45–46; Wagner 1990: 157). It should be noted, however, that several east coast Tamil MPs also learned to emulate this tactic quite well (UTHR Report 7, 1991: 45–46).

There are many different perceptions and opinions of Tamil/Moor cultural difference, but some basic themes emerged in offhand remarks I heard from members of each group. Tamils generally concede that the Moors are extremely energetic and hardworking, a fact visibly reflected in their improved houses and growing material wealth. In fact, the increasing prosperity of the Moors is of acute concern to many high-caste Tamils, because it challenges their traditionally dominant position in society. Not only are the Moors getting richer, they are also accused of having too many children. It is true that the Moors have maintained the highest birthrate of any ethnic community in the country over the past fifty years (Kurukulasuriya et al. 1988: 191), a trend which is also true among Muslims in India. With demographic and electoral trends in mind, many Tamils and Moors—and nowadays some Sinhalese as well (Schrijvers 1998: 12)—view such persistent fecundity as a political act.

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I also encountered a more covert level of ethnic stereotyping which was constructed from private beliefs and suspicions, a more concealed discourse among younger men with whom I spent time which reflected both their curiosity and anxiety about matters of the body. Whether these ideas have had any real impact at all upon Tamil–Muslim communal politics is impossible for me to say, but at some level they form part of the symbolic web of cultural images which separates the two groups. I found that the more intimate domains of Muslim diet, sexuality and hygiene, because they are blocked from public view, typically generated the most Tamil gossip. Some Tamils theorise that the Moors' vigour and fertility come from their consumption of beef, in Hindu eyes a polluting and highly 'heating' meat that energises the body and the libido. Indeed, according to Māppiḷḷai Ālim's influential 19th century Arabic–Tamil treatise on Islamic teachings, Muslims are encouraged to consume meat and flesh for this purpose (Ahmad Lebbai 1873/1963: 255–67). One inventive Tamil informant hypothesised that Moorish circumcision dulls male sensitivity, prolongs intercourse and allows more Moorish women to achieve orgasm, thereby promoting conception (McGilvray 1982b). I once also heard some Tamil youths jokingly refer to the Moors as 'three-quarters' (*mukkāl*), revealing their muddled fantasies of what was actually severed during male circumcision, an operation which in Akkaraipattu is usually conducted around the age of 9 or 10 with considerable domestic celebration and formal hospitality. The Moorish male circumcision ritual itself is colloquially referred to as a 'circumcision wedding' (*cunattu kaliyāṇam*), and it parallels in interesting ways the Tamil and Moorish female puberty ceremony, which is also referred to as a 'wedding', i.e., an auspicious rite of passage (McGilvray 1982b). The Moorish practice of female circumcision was, however, completely unknown to the Tamils with whom I spoke in Akkaraipattu. This mandatory (*wājib*) operation (Ahmad Lebbai 1873/1963: 479) conducted by the circumciser's wife (*ostā māmi*) within forty days of birth was described by my male friends—who had to turn to their wives and elder sisters for specific information on the topic—as a symbolic cutting of the skin over the baby's clitoris sufficient to draw a drop of blood, but not as full scale genital excision or clitoridectomy.[38]

There are some other grooming and adornment practices as well which serve to distinguish the Moors from the Tamils. It is considered good (*sunnat*) for Moorish men and women to shave or clip their armpit and pubic hair every forty days in order to ensure that all parts of the body are moistened during bathing to remove

[38] The *Fat-Hud-Dayyān* instructs:

> What is necessary to be done in the case of a male is to have the entire foreskin cut off. What is necessary to be done in the case of a female is to cut off a small bit of the flesh of the cock's-comb-like clitoris that lies above the urinary duct. It is *sunnat* to have the circumcision of a male known, and the circumcision of a female kept secret (Ahmad Lebbai 1873/1963: 479).

A recent wire service story (IPS, 19 Aug. 1997) claims that radical female genital mutilation (clitoridectomy) is practised on forty-day old Muslim girls by *ostā māmis* in the Colombo neighbourhoods of Dematagoda, Maskade, and Maradana, but my information from Colombo Muslim sources does not corroborate this report.

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ritual pollution (*muḻukku*).[39] Some informants also told me there was a *hadīth* against body hair long enough to grasp. I knew a number of older, more traditional Moorish men in the 1970s (e.g., see Figure 11) who had their heads and armpits shaven monthly by a Moorish barber (*ostā*), while there was no corresponding tonsorial practice among the Tamils apart from shaving the head to fulfil personal Hindu vows. While women of both communities wear pierced earrings, and Tamil women wear nose ornaments, it is *harām* (forbidden in Islam) for Moorish women to pierce the septum. Similarly, unlike traditional Hindu Tamils, Moorish men must not pierce their ears or wear earrings (Ahmad Lebbai 1873/1963: 480).

In the sort of intimate observation which only a few of my closest male Moorish and Tamil friends ventured to offer, it was suggested that the substantive focus of everyday pollution anxiety is somewhat different among the Tamils and Moors. While both communities share an aversion to contact with blood, semen, menstrual and childbirth substances, the Tamils have a marked aversion to saliva (*eccil*) which is not reciprocated as strongly among the Moors. Indeed, some ecstatic Sufi rituals conducted by local Bawas involve the transfer of sacred power to implements of self-mortification from the breath and saliva of the presiding *kalifā* (Bayly 1989: 127–28; McGilvray 1988b). The Moors, on the other hand, seem to have stronger taboos on contact with excreta, especially urine and sexual fluids. Moorish men are taught to take special precautions when they squat to urinate so that no urine touches their sarong or other clothing, a form of contamination which would bar them from the mosque and from Muslim prayers. Some male friends of mine said they would use a porous piece of brick to absorb the last drops of urine. Islamic rules also require a full head-bath not only after, but *between*, all acts of sexual intercourse, a fact which can make it something of an embarrassment when the sound of the well-sweep is heard late at night in Moorish neighbourhoods.

The most frequent complaints I heard from Tamils concerning the Moors as a group were that they were politically unreliable, that they were relatively less educated (which was true earlier in the century, but not now), that they lived in unhealthily overcrowded houses and neighbourhoods (for example, in Kattankudy, the most densely-inhabited town in Sri Lanka), that they ate beef (a source of Hindu regret but not anger), and—admittedly a minor point—that they had a fondness for asphyxiating scents and perfumes (*attar*). The latter is obviously a case of selective criticism, for the Tamils burn strongly aromatic camphor and apply sweet-smelling sandalwood paste in all their Hindu rituals. Māppiḷḷai Ālim's treatise on Muslim practices commends the use of perfume before attending Friday prayers (Ahmad Lebbai 1873/1963: 274), and I found that long-lasting, concentrated *attar* scent was also routinely applied to guests and participants at many other Moorish events in order to enhance the sense of ritual occasion.

[39] *Muḻukku* (a Tamil word which also means 'immersion') is the Moorish equivalent of *tutakku*, the common Tamil term for ritual pollution in the Batticaloa region. Arabic Islamic terms such as *najīs* (filth), *janāba* (sexual pollution), and *nifās* (childbirth pollution) are available (Ahmad Lebbai 1873/1963), but are rarely used.

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Moorish stereotypes of the Tamils reflected much less voyeuristic concern with the details of grooming and sexual practices. Instead, Moors complained to me about the monopoly of Tamils in the professions and the civil service, a charge more properly directed against the Jaffna Tamils, who have far outnumbered the local Batticaloa Tamils in these career paths. Moors would acknowledge that, until recent decades, the Tamils had been better educated, both in traditional Tamil culture as well as in the modern professions, but they resented the Tamils' unnecessary arrogance and ingrained attitudes of superiority. Moors attributed much of this to the rigidity of the Hindu caste system and to the inegalitarian hierarchical frame of mind upon which it is based. All Muslims, they assured me, are equal before Allah. Although my fieldwork eventually turned up some very small hereditarily ranked endogamous Moorish sub-groups (*Ostā* barber-circumcisers, *Maulānā* Sayyids), the claim of broad ritual equality among the Moors is indeed valid. In a town like Akkaraipattu, however, wealth differences seem more pronounced among the Muslims than among the Tamils.[40] Tamils are stigmatised in the eyes of the Moors for their propensity to waste time and money drinking alcohol, although some Moors are also known to imbibe surreptitiously on occasion. Finally, although they had little eyewitness knowledge of these matters, the Moors' opinion of Hindu religious practices was uniformly negative. Tamil Saivism was criticised for being polytheistic, idolatrous, and demonic, and for not being a prophetic Religion of the Book. On this issue, the local Muslims and the Christians definitely saw eye to eye.

Communal disturbances in the Batticaloa region

Popular memory recounts the many localised Tamil–Moor riots and disturbances (*kuḻapppam*, 'mix-up', *caṇṭai*, 'fight') which have plagued communal relations on the east coast throughout the 20th century and probably earlier.[41] Although I directly witnessed no local Tamil–Moor violence, I did gather oral accounts of such outbreaks. One type of incident was the post-election reprisal, typically an attack upon members of the opposite community for failure to deliver blocs of votes which had been purchased in advance with money or arrack (and sometimes purchased twice, by different candidates!). A second type of conflict would arise from an individual provocation, which was perceived as a generalised insult to the entire Tamil or Moorish community. When, for example, in the late 1960s a drunken Moorish man allegedly snipped off the braided hair of a Tamil woman who had spurned his advances in public, an innocent Moorish bystander soon lost his ear, and there were communal ambushes and roadblocks for a week. A year or so later, Moorish youths organised Akkaraipattu's very first Gandhian-inspired Shramadana community self-help project: a new road allowing Moorish cultivators

[40] Neighbouring Muslim towns such as Nintavur and Sammanturai are said to have even greater concentrations of landed wealth in the hands of Moorish *pōṭiyārs*.

[41] Interestingly enough, E.B. Denham, the Government Agent in Batticaloa, reported 'no trouble of any kind in this Province' at the time of the 1915 Sinhala–Muslim riots (Denham 1915: E5).

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to circumambulate Tamil villages to evade ambush whenever they travel to their fields during future communal riots.

A third type of violence was related to a growing competition for land, including residential building sites. The historical tendency over the last 150 years has been for successful Moors to expand their agricultural landholdings and businesses, while upwardly mobile Tamils have favoured education and a career in the professions. Recognising the gradual decline in Tamil-owned paddy fields, the Tamils are now chagrined and resentful. Because of the determination of Moors to reside together in established Muslim enclaves, the pressure on adjoining Tamil neighbourhoods has resulted in both irresistible buy-outs and violent evictions of Tamil residents by their Moorish neighbours. For example, lower-caste Tamils have been forcibly driven out of their neighbourhoods in the Kalmunai–Sainthamaruthu area, and Moors have quickly moved in (UTHR Report 7, 1991: 49–55; and my own fieldnotes).

Based upon accounts of Hindu–Muslim rioting in North India, I had initially assumed that Tamil–Moorish conflicts in Sri Lanka would be sparked by religious provocations: Muslim cow slaughter, Hindu processions near mosques, and the like. However, the actual incidents I recorded suggest that 'religious' issues have never been a frequent trigger, not even a major underlying cause, of local Moorish/Tamil violence on the east coast. Even when religious sites have been targeted, such as the destruction of the Bhadrakali Hindu temple in Akkaraipattu by Muslims (with the acquiescence of the Sri Lankan Army) after the withdrawal of the Indian Peace-Keeping Force in 1989, the underlying motive appears to have been a desire to expand the boundaries of the Moorish residential neighbourhood near which the temple was situated.[42] With the upsurge of warfare between Tamil guerrillas and Sri Lankan armed forces in the region since 1983, Moorish seizure of agricultural lands abandoned by fleeing Tamil refugees and reprisal depredation by Tamils of exposed Moorish fields have further enflamed the inter-ethnic situation (UTHR Report 7,1991; Report 11, 1993).

Difficult as it is to take a longer view of such events, they must nevertheless be understood as part of the gradual emancipation of the Moorish community from the thraldom of pre-modern Tamil Hindu political domination, caste hierarchies, and feudalistic land tenure systems in this region (McGilvray 1982c, and book manuscript in progress). Nowadays the Moors enjoy a degree of economic prosperity and political independence from the Tamils that would have been impossible to imagine a century earlier. The wealthier, higher-caste Tamils are particularly aware of this trend, which represents the loss—or the increasing irrelevance—of their hereditary status privileges. The Moors are fully aware that many high-caste Tamils still look down upon them as their recent inferiors, and this has spurred the younger and more professionally-oriented Moors to strive for modern careers and avenues of self-respect quite independent of the Tamils.

[42] Fieldwork in Akkaraipattu in 1993 revealed that the temple I had studied intensively in the 1970s is now totally demolished. Cattle bones have been tossed into the temple well to pollute the site and to discourage the Tamils from rebuilding the temple at the same location. A land sale was one of the few options available to the temple trustees (McGilvray 1997b).

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More recently, the deliberate provocation of intercommunal violence by those seeking to block the creation of any east coast Tamil–Moorish political alliance, as well as massacres and reprisals against members of both ethnic communities arising from differences over Tamil Eelam and the future of the north-eastern region, have established a climate of hatred and distrust which may poison Tamil–Moorish intercommunal amity for years to come (UTHR Report 10, 1993). The depth of misunderstanding and miscalculation was illustrated by a speech given in 1990 by Tamil Tiger spokesman Y. Yogi, scolding the Moors for failing to properly identity themselves as Tamils and justifying the mass expulsion of Muslims from Jaffna and Mannar by the LTTE as punishment for their alleged ethnic betrayal. Tragically, this was Ponnambalam Ramanathan's 1888 'ethnological' thesis yet again, but this time enforced with Kalashnikov rifles and a brutal agenda of ethnic cleansing.[43]

V
Options for the future

A low point in Muslim–Tamil relations definitely occurred in 1990, but to leave the story there would be, I think, too pessimistic. Cultural membership is always contextual and historically conditioned, and a great deal of new history is presently being made in Sri Lanka. We have already seen that Muslims in three neighbouring regions of the subcontinent were capable of forging divergent cultural styles, ethnic identities, and political strategies over the past four centuries: violent *jihād* in Kerala, literary and spiritual synthesis in Tamilnadu, 'non-Tamil' political ethnicity in Sri Lanka. Several modern observers have suggested that for all the demographic, political, and cultural reasons enumerated above, the Moors of Sri Lanka are now starting to differentiate themselves into several distinct subregional identities within the island, the most significant of which would distinguish the one-third of all Muslims concentrated in the agricultural north-east from the remaining two-thirds who live widely dispersed in the Sinhalese areas of the south-west (Ali 1992b; Ismail 1995; Sivathamby 1987).

It was the 19th and 20th century British colonial regime which provided tangible political rewards for establishing a 'racial' distinction between Moor and Tamil, thus defining the competitive arenas within which modern communal politics in Sri Lanka would be forged. After Independence came the 'interactive ethnonationalism' of Sinhalese majoritarian politics (Hennayake 1992) and shrewd accommodations by the Muslim elite defending its west-coast urban interests within Sinhala

[43] 'Muslims claim that they are neither Sinhalese nor Tamils, but are Arabs. They use this in pursuit of their selfish aims.... They are Tamils. They study in Tamil at Tamil schools. Their culture is not Arab.... We did not rape them or loot their property. We only sent them out. ... We made several promises to the Muslims.... On the contrary, they joined forces with the Sinhalese army and the Sri Lankan state and set about destroying us.... The Muslims must accept that they are Tamils. They must understand that they are descendants of Arabs who married Tamil women' (UTHR Report 7, 1991: 42–43).
For a discussion of LTTE expulsion of Muslims from the Northern Province, see Hennayake (1993) and Hasbullah (1996). For an ominous reiteration of this ultimatum to the Moors, see Mohamed (1996).

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society. During the Eelam Wars of the past two decades, calculated acts of inter-ethnic sabotage by government forces and by Tamil militants have intentionally widened the division between the Moors and the Tamils into a political chasm. Yet, despite unforgivable atrocities on all sides, the general awareness of this sad history is by now so widely shared, and the sheer terror and exhaustion of the Eelam conflict is so desperately felt in the eastern war zone, that the basis for a pragmatic rapprochement between the Tamils and Moors of the Batticaloa region may still be possible (Lawrence 1997, 1998, and in press; McGilvray 1997b; Schrijvers 1998; see Krishna 1994 for a more pessimistic view).

The original Federal Party slogan of S.J.V. Chelvanayagam who sought to unite all of Sri Lanka's 'Tamil-speaking peoples' under one political umbrella was scornfully rejected by earlier Colombo-based Moorish leaders such as Sir Razik Fareed, even though there is a great deal of Tamil poetry, folklore, and religious literature by Sri Lankan Muslims from Batticaloa, Jaffna, Mannar, and elsewhere (Kandiah 1964; Saleem 1990; Sivathamby 1987; Uwise 1986, 1990). In fact, when the Eelam War first broke out in the 1980s, Tamil militant groups, including the LTTE, were able to recruit and train a significant cohort of Muslim fighters from the Eastern and Northern Provinces on the basis of regional loyalty to the idea of a 'Tamil-speaking' homeland. This militant collaboration between Tamil and Muslim youths, with its echo of the historic Moor–Mukkuvar alliance celebrated in Batticaloa legend, was shattered in 1990 when the eastern command of the LTTE, acting on local enmities and resentments, launched a series of attacks and pogroms against Muslims, including the well-publicised Kattankudy Mosque massacre (McGilvray 1997b; Sivaram 1991, 1992). Muslim cadres abruptly fled the LTTE organisation, and there seemed no hope for further dialogue.

Despite this profound Tamil betrayal, the pragmatic needs of local Muslim traders and the geographical vulnerability of both Tamils and Moors to mutual retribution soon resulted in a series of private contacts and locally-based understandings between the LTTE and Moorish village leaders and merchants which continue to the present. At the same time, working against the reestablishment of Tamil–Muslim cordiality are the various armed and thuggish 'ex-militant' 'Tamil groups (e.g., PLOTE, TELO, EPRLF) who implement the Sri Lankan Security Forces' strategy of divide and rule in the Batticaloa region (Krishna 1994: 312). At a broader level, one of the perennial obstacles to a parliamentary accord between the Muslim SLMC and the Tamil TULF parties has been the lack of minority safeguards and explicitly defined territorial rights for the Muslims within a larger federated Tamil region (Sivathamby 1987). Recently, in 1997, there were some signs of movement toward the creation of the first Moorish-majority district in Sri Lanka stretching from Kalmunai to Pottuvil in the south-eastern part of the island, just as the Māppiḷas of Kerala had carved out the newly created Mallapuram District for themselves in 1969.

At this late date, the distinct 'non-Tamil' ethnic ideology of the Moorish establishment and their fifty-year record of political collaboration with the main

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Sinhalese parties, coupled with the uncompromising, short-sighted, and brutal militancy of the Tamil guerrillas, have made a rapprochement based upon a recognition of Tamil and Moorish cultural affinities and common interests on the east coast extremely difficult to achieve. First colonially-engineered competition, then ethnic party politics, and eventually civil war, have preempted whatever goodwill might have developed between the two groups under more foresighted leadership. However, because their common geohistorical destiny offers them little choice, the Tamils and Moors in the eastern Batticaloa region may eventually come to a renewed appreciation of their shared cultural roots, as well as an honest appraisal of their past prejudices. The cultural, political, and economic basis for a lasting inter-ethnic community of interest between the Tamils and the Moors is still there, at least in the geographically delimited eastern coastal region, but in the wake of massacres and reprisals, expulsions, displacements, land thefts, and masked betrayals, both deep compassion and true ethnic statesmanship on all sides will be needed to nurture it.

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