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# Music and Song Traditions of the Muslims of Sri Lanka: An Overview



NADINE VANNIASINKAM



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**International Centre for Ethnic Studies**

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**Nadine Vanniasinkam\***

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# **Music and Song Traditions of the Muslims of Sri Lanka: An Overview**

*This article stems from research conducted to organise a public performance of the different music and song traditions of the Muslims of Sri Lanka in March 2020, as part of the International Centre for Ethnic Studies' Festival of Music for Social Change. The event had to be cancelled due to the outbreak of Covid 19. Since then, further research was conducted during lockdown through a review of primary sources and through telephone interviews with academics, artistes, and individuals from the Muslim community, using the purposive and snowball sampling methods.*

*There are scant sources of information on the music traditions of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka, with the exception of studies on the Eastern Muslims, and few opportunities for sharing music traditions with other communities in the country. This article, written from an etic perspective, is a modest attempt at documenting and understanding the devotional, cultural, and popular song and music traditions of the Muslims of Sri Lanka and is intended to spark further discussion on the subject.*

## **Introduction**

The Muslims of Sri Lanka are a very diverse community consisting of Sri Lankan Moors, Malays,<sup>1</sup> Borahs, and Memons, who differ greatly on the basis of class, regional location, political affiliation, and religious practice. Attendant to such diversity are unique musical, artistic, culinary, and cultural practices, which enrich and add variety to the Sri Lankan identity. Historically, the Muslims are known for their involvement in trade, medicine, administration, the military, and diplomacy (Dewaraja 1994). However, little is known or written about Muslim communities' cultural and religious practices which are predominantly performed within enclaves and in the private spheres of home and religion.

This article explores some of the facets of Sri Lankan Muslims' music traditions and illustrates how Muslims have historically participated in a very vibrant and

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<sup>1</sup> While the Malay community share religious song traditions with Muslims, they have their own unique cultural music traditions stemming from their Indonesian, Malaysian, and Burmese roots. This is the subject for a separate article and beyond the scope of this paper.

rich music culture which spans the devotional, the cultural, and the popular. It also illustrates how music among Sri Lankan Muslims exemplifies not only their link to the global Ummah but also their relationships and linkages with other ethno-religious communities in Sri Lanka and abroad. In doing so, the article commences with a discussion on the status of music among Muslims in Sri Lanka, followed by a description of the role of song and cantillation within the religious sphere. It then moves on to illustrate cultural music and song practices, borrowings, and adaptations, and finally, the engagement of Muslims in Sri Lankan popular music.

### **Islam and Music in Sri Lanka**

When asked what music traditions are observed by their community, the immediate reaction is that of confusion. “Muslims don’t have a music tradition!” or “Music is not permitted in Islam” is the popular response of mostly young and middle-aged Muslims from different regions of the country. On further inquiry, the response shifts to “But, we have devotional verses which are recited as songs at various occasions, particularly when celebrating the birth of the Prophet”. This confusion is owing to the controversy over the permissibility of music in Islam, where interpretations of hadith allow Qur’an cantillation, the singing of unaccompanied hymns and simple functional folk tunes that mark individual and community life events, but prohibit any form of music that distracts from one’s religious obligations or encourages immoral conduct (Shiloah 1997). Hence, the term ‘music’ is not used.

Indeed, music lies at the heart of Islamic worship, ritual, and ceremony, primarily among the Sufi Muslims, particularly Tarika groups, in Sri Lanka. Music and song are also an integral part of the cultural lives of Muslims, exemplified by their engagement in popular music and the unique folk tradition of the east coast Muslims. However, some of these cultural music traditions and engagements have succumbed to time and live only in the memories of the older generation, and some are fast losing their currency, with the rise of Islamic religious revivalism and purist<sup>2</sup> movements, which consider music, dance, theatre, and film as un-Islamic.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The terms ‘purist’ and ‘reformist’ are used interchangeably in this article

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 5 of M.A. Nuhman’s book ‘Sri Lankan Muslims: Ethnic Identity within Cultural Diversity’ for a history of Islamic revivalism and reform in Sri Lanka.

Reminiscing about her past, Deshabandu Jezima Ismail notes,

*In my time in Sainamarathu [sic] as elsewhere in the East, there were village festivals, songs and dance. There was vibrancy in social life just as there was in the time of the Prophet. There was no fetish about things being 'haram.' Of course we were all God-fearing Muslims and we knew right from wrong (Vishwa 2019).*

*And they said that we shouldn't sing – that Islam was against singing. But this was ridiculous because the tradition of songs in the Eastern Province, folk singing, was very, very common. And, I sort of grew up on those (Personal communication, February 3, 2021).*

M.S.M. Anes, an academic at the University of Peradeniya whose nostalgia for lost music traditions is not only reflected in his writings on Muslim culture but also in his expression, shared a personal anecdote of witnessing a travelling merchant's performance which provides a glimpse into the past musical engagements of his community:

*The Pottani Viyabari [travelling merchants mostly from Galle and Beruwala who carried their wares in a bundle on their heads] always had a mandolin and kanjira [small raban-like instrument] in their box. If anybody like that comes, my father would organise a bajan. On two occasions I was at home and my father organised with those people. We had a nice village music session. They sing semi-classical songs, perani Sinhala gee, Tamil songs inspired by Hindi songs – not cinema songs (Personal communication, October 21, 2019).*

These travelling merchants from the South were also famous for singing Qawwali songs (Abdul Haq 2017).

The use of musical instruments and dance is also contested in Islamic scripture, the earliest document recorded being the Ibn abi'l-Dunya's 9<sup>th</sup> century treatise which consisted of 68 hadiths. The ma'zif hadith prohibits the use of the reed-pipe, lute, and other stringed instruments and different types of drums including the tambourine (Shiloah 1997). Nevertheless, musical instruments such as the tabla, dolak, dolki, kanjira, and the harmonium were favoured by Muslims in Sri Lanka who also contributed to both Sinhalese and Tamil popular music

and continued to engage in musical pursuits until the 1970s, after which their popularity waned.

The key factors that contributed to this decline are socioeconomic change, urbanisation, the absence of Islamic art and culture in the national curriculum for primary and secondary education, and the rise of nationalism in state institutions which previously supported Muslim artists. The drive towards purism in practice and the move away from Sufi influence has also led to a majority of the Muslim community eschewing artistic and musical pursuits. Debates exist on whether or not music and song are permitted for Muslims and norms related to music are often determined by the stronger of two “antagonistic conceptions of Islam: the first is a traditional Sufism which blends Islamic belief with practices of saint worshipping and Tamil Hindu culture<sup>4</sup> ... The second conception has often been labelled as Islamic revivalism or reformism, although this broad movement has been fragmented into many schools” (Hasbullah and Korf 2013, 39). This results in different norms around music and song in different locations, and sometimes, deviance from regional norms leads to hostility and on rare occasions to violence.<sup>5</sup>

However, M.S.M. Anes argues that today, what people really fear is that engagement in musical pursuits (particularly popular music) may lead youth to alcohol and drug abuse, and that it is important to reach out to parents and educators regarding the importance of having a well-rounded education and developing good taste for music (Personal communication, October 21, 2019).

## Devotional Song Traditions

The most familiar everyday Islamic ritual one encounters is the melodic and often captivating *adhan* (call to prayer), sung in Arabic by a trained *Muazzin*, that one hears five times a day, if in the vicinity of a mosque. Connoisseurs of music associate Islamic devotional music with the mesmerising and hypnotic Qawwali and Ghazal popular in India and South Asia.<sup>6</sup> According to Uzman Anver from

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<sup>4</sup> The mention of Tamil Hindu Culture is particularly in relation to the Muslims from the East coast.

<sup>5</sup> Sykes (2013) notes an isolated incident of a Sufi leader M.S.M. Abdullah from Kathankudy in the East who died of natural causes, but whose burial in the village cemetery was violently challenged as his musical and theological leanings were considered unacceptable by reformist groups in the village. In addition to his Islamic teaching, Abdullah, known as “Payluvan” composed religious poems which he set to music in the *sarala gee* (light classical music) style and broadcast them over the loudspeakers of his mosque, sometimes instead of the call to prayer. This could have been viewed as borrowing from the Hindu temple tradition of playing sacred music over loudspeakers.

<sup>6</sup> The Ghazal originated in Arabia and spread to other parts of the world. It is popularly known to be sung

Galle Fort, devotional song and chanting are an integral part of Islamic worship and festivities among the Sufis of Sri Lanka. However, he states, unlike in India, where Islamic artistes received a lot of patronage which allowed the art to evolve into its refined form, devotional music in Sri Lanka is very raw and has its own beauty. Anver explains that there are two types of devotional song – *Zikr / Dhikr*,<sup>7</sup> choral songs in remembrance of God and *Mawlid / Maulood* songs of praise either of the Prophet or a Sufi saint around commemorations of their birth. These songs are intended to bring one closer to God and invoke love for the Prophet (Personal communication, August 6, 2020).

Delving deeper into the song traditions, particularly of the Sufi Muslims in the South of Sri Lanka, one learns that each month of the Islamic lunar calendar is dedicated to either a feast or a festival, each involving the recitation or chanting of sacred verses in the form of song. The most important songs are the *Hasan-Husain mawlid*<sup>8</sup> and the *Thalai fathiya* chanted during the first month of Muharam (commemorating the death of the Prophet's grandson Husain), the *Hareed mawlid*, *Subahna mawlid* and *Berzanji mawlid* recited during the third month of Rabi ul awal (Prophet's birthday), including the *Rasool malai* and *Mubarak malai* which were composed by an Indian and Sri Lankan respectively. These songs recount the life story of the Prophet. Important songs in praise of Sufi saints are the *Meera Sayhid Nagore*, in honour of the patron saint of the Bay of Bengal and of navigation, and popular in India and the east coast of Sri Lanka. The *Muyideen Chisti maulood* is also a popular song in praise of the Sufi saint Muyideen Chisti<sup>9</sup> whose *dargha* (shrine) is in Ajmer, Rajasthan, India (Anver, Personal communication, August 6, 2020). These songs link Sri Lankan Muslims to the global Ummah and their histories also highlight regional linkages with India and India's influence on Islam in Sri Lanka.

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in the Indian classical tradition.

<sup>7</sup> “*Dhikr* begins with the recital of the *shahada* (the first pillar of Islam): ‘*Ashhadu Alla Ilaha Illa Allah Wa Ashhadu Anna Muhammad Rasulu Allah*’ (‘I bear witness that there is no god but God, and Muhammad is His Prophet’). The refrain ‘*Alla Ilaha Illa Allah*’ is repeated for a time, after which other aspects of God are recited. When reciting these aspects of Allah, worshippers control their breathing by focusing the first breath on connecting the navel to the brain, the second on connecting the chest to the brain, and the third on connecting the brain to the heavens. The sequence is reversed to form one cycle that is repeated throughout the *dhikr*. Some verses, such as the *shahada*, are recited repeatedly. Those that are most frequently repeated are said to be the most meritorious and able to induce tranquility. Thus the practices are said by the participants to lead to a shared emotional state of calmness in which they feel the vibration of Allah – or feel some sense of His existence.” (de Munck and Manoharan 2019, p. 13)

<sup>8</sup> In commemoration of the anniversary of the death of the Prophet's two grandchildren.

<sup>9</sup> His student Amir Kushro is the father of the Qawwali tradition. A.R. Rahman composed the popular ‘*Khwaja Mere Khwaja*’ in his honour and it is also popular in Sri Lanka.

## Sufi Orders and Devotional Music

It is important to note that devotional music traditions among the Muslims vary regionally or are based on the Sufi order. For example, the Refai Sufi<sup>10</sup> order has a tradition called the *Refai ratib* which is a “devotional Sufi call and response performance genre” (McGilvray 2014, 251) sung in a mixture of Arabic and Urdu and performed with tambourines (McGilvray 2004). This performance is also executed by the Faqir Bawa community (who are part of the Refai order) in the Eastern and Southern Provinces and the Puttalam District. Both the *Refai ratib* and the *ratib* performed by the Faqir Bawas are an integral part of the famous Jailani shrine festival.

Music and song are also essential to the livelihood of the Faqir Bawa community which has its own tradition of singing [spiritual](#), narrative, masala and drama [songs](#). Their songs, locally referred to as *Faqir Baith*, draw from Indian and Persian influences, are sung in Tamil, and derive from “Mislamic Tamil Literature, i.e., classical poetry written according to traditional Tamil prosody, but treating Islamic themes” (Mahroof 1991, 505) such as devotion to God, Sufi religious principles, aspects of faith, and social themes such as violence against women and problems within families (Aabith 2018). Mahroof (1991) notes that

The traditional occupation of the Faqirs is to go from house to house, singing didactic and hortatory songs and seeking alms from Muslim householders. For this purpose, the Faqirs use the tambourine (or tabor), the one-sided drum with side insets of brass and round pieces. On their daily rounds, two Faqirs with a child Faqir are the usual number. While one sings the quatrain, the others keep up the chorus, one Faqir relieving the other in singing the quatrains (505).

The Faqirs also play a significant and much anticipated role as “putters up” during the holy month of Ramadan where they parade through Muslim locales

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<sup>10</sup> “The Rifai bawas are known by Sri Lankan Muslims for their ecstatic and extreme forms of devotional practices. Led by a *Kalifa* (one of many titles for a leader of a Sufi order), the bawas perform a *ratib*, a more energetic, intense, and physically exhausting *dhikr* ceremony first documented in the Rifai order in 1258 (Fremben 2008: 116). Tambourines (and occasionally drums) are played at an ever-increasing beat, rising to a crescendo, falling, and then repeating. Swords, maces, kris, and various ‘weapons’ are laid out, which the Rifai devotees and, later, members of the audience take up to slash and pierce themselves. Rifai devotees dance in elaborate military-like fashion that gradually transforms itself as the tambourine playing and chanting become ever more intense. At a certain time, the dancers enter a trance state and begin to slash and pierce themselves in a controlled fashion with swords, maces, and long, sharp metal skewers. Members of the audience may also participate in the *ratib*” (de Munck and Manoharan, 2019, p. 14).

usually at 2 a.m. in the morning to wake Muslim households to observe *sahar*<sup>11</sup> (Mahroof 1991, 506). Thus, they are known locally as ‘Sahar Bawas’. Mohamed Mowsil from Maradana describes his experience thus:

*The Sahar Bawas or Pakkeer Bawas have been visiting densely populated Muslim areas in Colombo city for several decades during the month of fasting. They come after midnight with a raban and sing Islamic devotional songs to wake up those who are fasting to take their last meal before they fast until sunset. They come even now and I missed them only last year due to quarantine curfew imposed in the city after the Covid outbreak. During my childhood, I used to wake up when they visited our neighbourhood at midnight. They carried a kerosene lamp those days and a raban, a circular percussion instrument that they beat with their hands to provide melody and rhythm to their Islamic devotional songs. I understand they are from the Eastern Province and they perform this task during the month of fasting. The Pakkeer Bawa in my neighbourhood has been visiting for nearly 30 years, and before him, he was accompanied as a little boy by his late father who did this work for about 25 years. They are easily identifiable and are usually clad in shirt and sarong with a turban. They have pleasant and audible voices. He visits on the Eid day and is rewarded for his services in cash and kind by each and every household in our neighbourhood. Different Sahar Bawas continue this tradition even now in several areas where Muslims are densely populated, like Hulftsdorp, Keselwatte, Grandpass, Maradana, Dematagoda and Mutwal (Personal communication, April 3, 2021).*

This tradition is not unique to Sri Lanka, but is also performed by the Misaharatis in Jordan, the Sahar Khans in Kashmir, the Munaadis in Delhi and Qasida singers in Bangladesh (Maqbool, Pathak and Mahmud 2021; Abuqudairi 2014). While urbanisation and settlement of Muslims in multi-ethnic locales has limited the role of the Sahar Bawas in Sri Lanka, they still continue this traditional occupation in Muslim villages<sup>12</sup> and in urban areas where there is a Muslim concentration.

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<sup>11</sup> Last meal before fasting from dawn to sunset.

<sup>12</sup> Their role in the South has somewhat diminished in the last decade and it would be interesting to explore why.

## Women and Devotional Music

Song and chanting also play an important role in Muslim women's worship. The *Thalai Fatiha* is "an intercessory prayer recited by women to the wives of the earlier Prophets and to Prophet Mohammed's daughter Fatima and was especially composed for the Muslim women of Sri Lanka by the influential nineteenth century South Indian missionary scholar from Kilakkarai known popularly as *Mappillai Lebbe Alim*" (Shu'Ayb Alim 1993 cited in McGilvray 2004). This prayer is recited on the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Ramadan and 10<sup>th</sup> day of Muharram, and is also recited during pregnancy and on other special occasions (Shu'Ayb Alim 1993, cited in Anver 2020). Religious verses and *qasidas* are also chanted by women within the sphere of the home and private women's gatherings/prayer circles.

Speaking of these traditions in the East, especially in Akkaraipattu and Irraikkamam, Lareena Haq notes that women's religious practices involving song have been affected by purist movements,

*Around twenty years ago, before Wahabism<sup>13</sup>, the women used to put up awnings, spread white cloth beneath and sing the Thalai Fathiha and Mawlid on holy days such as Ashura [10th day of Muharram] and Milad [Prophet's birthday]. Wahabism stopped women's freedom and there is no outlet for women to release their worries and stress (Personal communication, March 3, 2021).*

Women belonging to Tarika groups also gather to sing religious songs at *ziyaratthu palli* (shrines of worship) which provide them the space to do so. This practice too has been affected by reformist interventions. Nevertheless, women of the older generation in the East and women in parts of the country where the influence of reformist groups is weak still continue these practices.

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<sup>13</sup> It is important to note that 'Wahabism' is a relatively new term popularised in Sri Lankan political and public discourse in the last decade. It is often used to refer to reformist movements in general, but is in fact represented by the Thowheed Jamaat. There are other older and more popular purist movements in Sri Lanka such as the Tableeq Jamaat and the Jamaate Islami.



The Ladies Shadhili Sufi Zaaviya during the Prophet Muhammed Birthday Celebration, Galle Fort – 12 days of *Mawlid* recitals. Photograph by Aamina Nizar



The Men's Shadhili Sufi Order Zaaviya, Galle Fort – a scene from the ritual *Halara* from outside. Photograph by Aamina Nizar

## Songs Commemorating Life Events

Song is also a very important part of life events such as birth, circumcision, marriage, housewarming, and death. Thus, devotional songs/recitations in the form of *qasidas*, greeting songs, wedding poems, eulogies, and *halara* (*dhikr/zikr/thikr*) are also traditionally performed and chanted. Of particular significance here is the *qasida* which is a poem of some length, whose original Arabic form consists of verses divided into hemistichs, a single metre and a monorhyme (Sperl and Shackle 1996, 3). This form, however, has been adapted by various other global Islamic cultures, resulting in the formation of distinct regional traditions. Qasidas can be described as “cultural commodities” composed and recited to perform social functions and are related to cultural norms. Thus, the poems “...extol, uphold or call for allegiance to, a code of moral values, often religious in nature [and] are usually intended to be recited, chanted or even sung in a public setting” (Sperl and Shackle 1996, 3).

In Sri Lanka, the *qasida* is sung in Arabic and Tamil<sup>14</sup> and mostly associated with religious poetry. Farzan Mursi, a representative of the Shadiliya Thareeka (a distinct Sufi order) in Beruwala notes that qasidas were originally sung to welcome the Prophet when he returned to Medina from Mecca. In Sri Lanka, they are sung to welcome guests to events such as school prizegivings and almsgivings held in honour of the Prophet’s birthday (Personal communication, October 27, 2020).

Another traditional practice he mentions is the celebration of the birth of a child with a *pillai pettha sappadu* or more formally a *peyar suttum nihalhchi* (naming ceremony) during which Muslim women, who have been trained, sing *qasida*, the *Thalai Fathiha* and lullabies.

Song also figures at Muslim weddings and the *mapillai vazthu* (welcome of the bridegroom) is another cultural practice where the *Thala Al Badru Alaina* is sung to welcome the groom. A *qasida* is also sung at the registration of the bride and groom. Jezima Ismail notes a newly developing tradition influenced by India and Pakistan of singing songs for the bride during the traditional *marathondi* (hena) ceremony. Another eastern tradition of bringing the wedding trousseau

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<sup>14</sup> While the Arabic qasidas sung are those from the poems of old, newer Tamil qasidas have also been composed by Indian and Sri Lankan poets, particularly from the east coast.

in woven baskets also involved song, but is not practised the way it was used to (Personal communication, February 3, 2021).

Funerals also involve song and traditional Sufi rituals around death include funeral songs in the form of solemn *dhikr* recitals, but after 40 days, a memorial service is held and songs take the form of *mawlid*. Today, it is mostly choirs or bands that are hired to perform song recitals at weddings, festivals, and funerals.

## **Folk Music Traditions**

As a diverse ethno-religious group that places importance on its religious identity, many Muslim communities also espouse neighbouring cultural practices which are reflected in their cultural and folk song traditions. Particularly on the east coast, these traditions reflect a strong connection with their Tamil neighbours, but also a unique Sri Lankan Muslim identity.

In the East (Trincomalee, Batticaloa, and Ampara), music and song were a part of the daily lives of both Muslim men and women. Muslim women not only engaged in spiritual song and singing religious *padam* (verses) at special functions, but were also skilled at singing debate songs, harvest songs, *kummi* (a folk dance with song), *kuravai* (sung at weddings and circumcisions), and *oppari* (lamentation) (Anes 2011).

Reminiscing about her time in Sainthamaruthu, her mother's village, in the 1940s, Jezima Ismail recalls:

*Now my grandmother ... was one of these matriarchs and everybody, the whole village, was around her. When they pound paddy ... there are more than 25 women. And, you know, with their ural and ulakkai, mortar and pestle, they used to sort of ease it and sway a little... and then also when they made oil, coconut oil, they used to sing a lot of songs. I used to sing with them ...*

*Mostly the houses were made out of wattle, daub, some of it of course were stone. Fences were all cadjan and you could hear, by the time it reached about 10.30 or 11 in the morning, all the voices, different types of voices behind the fences, singing lovely lullabies ... calling to the hens,*

*you know, simple songs based on their daily lives to the babies to lull them to sleep* (Personal communication, February 3, 2021).

Music was also popular in Muslim villages in the East during election time and a popular tradition when the elections were won was to stage scenes from the Ramayanam and Mahabaratham. Another genre influenced by their Tamil neighbours is the *villu paattu* which involves storytelling through music. This was adapted to suit Muslim culture whereby a crescent instead of a *villu* (bow – weapon) is used as the main instrument. The *kalikambu* dance or *polladi* involving tapping sticks to maintain a rhythm and make music is also popular among Muslims in the East.

These music traditions exemplify the strong influence and cultural cross-fertilisation between Muslims and Tamils in the East coast. However, folk music among Muslims is not limited to the East coast but is also present in the Upcountry and Dikwella in the South.<sup>15</sup>

## **Popular Music**

Muslim artists are no strangers to the world of cinema and popular music and have made significant contributions to music traditions and the music industry in Sri Lanka. E.W. Marasinghe and K.N.O. Dharmadasa (1996) in their article on the Muslim influence in Sri Lankan music mention Abdul Aziz of Kollupitiya, Mohamad Ghouse of Grandpass, Ismail Rauther of Moor Street, and Lakshmi Bai, an idol of Nurti theatre in the 30s and 40s, who contributed their musical talents to Sinhala theatre in the early 1900s. After the decline of Nurti theatre, prominent artistes and music directors such as Ghouse Master, Peer Mohamed, Mohideen Baig and Abdul Haq defined and pioneered Sri Lankan music and cinema together with their Sinhala protégées and contemporaries including Amaradeva in the early 1930s to mid-60s. To date, the devotional songs sung by Mohideen Baig in the *sarala gee* and *qwwaali* styles shape the Buddhist imagination and sentiment. Muslim musicians and singers, notably Mohamad Sali, Ibrahim Sali, A.J. Karim, M.A. Latif and K.M.A. Zawahir, also contributed significantly to radio broadcasting, serving in the orchestras of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC). Today Ishaq Baig and Nilar. N. Kasim

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<sup>15</sup> There is a need for research on folk music in these locations.

continue this tradition as singer and lyricist respectively. Sisters Umara and Umaria Sinhawansa are also popular music artistes.

In the East, Muslim artistes/communities were also greatly influenced by Indian cinema which resulted in the formation of music groups such as the Oriental Music Group (1972-1996) and Kattai Vellai Kosti in the 1960s which were influenced by modern Indian cinema songs (Anes 2011). *Bajanai* or music parties also became popular after the 1940s and these performances involved skilled musicians favouring the *kanjira* (hand drum), *tabla*, *dolak*, *dolki*, flute, Japanese mandolin, and harmonium (M.S.M. Anes, Personal communication, October 21, 2019).

### **Islamic Songs**

Another distinct genre of music, *Islamiya Geethangal* (Islamic songs), developed and became popular among Muslims in Sri Lanka from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. According to M.A. Nuhman “The SLBC Muslim service was the cradle of this genre in Sri Lanka and hundreds of songs were broadcast and a number of singers, males and females, from the Muslim community emerged and became popular in this field” (Personal communication, December 19, 2020). Among the popular Sri Lankan singers are Peer Mohamed, Fauzul Ameer, Noor Deen, K.M.A. Nizar, sisters Vishwa and Najeema Abdul Cader, Kursith Ghouse (Ghouse Master’s wife), Noor Jahan, Mazahira Illyas, Kairiya Ismail and Mohina Baig (Mohideen Baig’s daughter). Furkan B. Ifthikar, an announcer at the SLBC, notes that *Islamiya Geethangal* were introduced to Sri Lanka from India by artists including E.M. Haniffa and Hussein Deen. The songs, similar to Hindu *bakthi paadalhal*, conveyed social messages to the community. The subjects of these songs range from child rearing to codes of conduct and duties of a Muslim. She notes that between the 1950s and 90s, several Sri Lankans composed *Islamiya Geethangal* and 15 minutes was allocated for these songs on SLBC once a week. Today, it is only the old songs that are sometimes broadcast as fillers on the SLBC service and, according to Ms. Ifthikar, since 2010, there has been neither interest nor the funds to record and produce new songs and build on the genre. Though individual artists still perform *Islamiya Geethangal*, they are mostly confined to private functions of those who can afford it (Personal communication, February 1, 2021).

## **Non-Mainstream Muslim Artistes and Choirs<sup>16</sup>**

Despite debates over its permissibility in Islam, music is evolving among young Muslims in Sri Lanka who mainly feature their music on social media platforms such as YouTube or perform at private events and/or local and international concerts. [Lareena Abdul Haq](#), author, poet, translator, songwriter, singer and academic, focuses on issues of reconciliation, peace and harmony, the experiences of teachers, and social injustices in her music. [Shafni Awam](#), a young Muslim rap artist, draws influence from the age-old Sufi traditions of love poetry and embodies Sufi mysticism in his modern music. More recently, the Muslim Choral Ensemble, previously known as [Aswatuna](#), organised as a choir to break the stereotype that Muslims do not have a music tradition and use their music as a form of inter-cultural dialogue to promote coexistence. The [Maadhihur Rasool](#) ensemble, is a multilingual Sufi music group which performs music within the “permitted space Islam gives to music”. Their original compositions are devotional, sometimes set to the tunes of popular cinema and baila music, and are sung in English, Tamil, Arabic, Malay, and Sinhala. The [Naqshbandi Sufi Ensemble](#) which formed in 2013 mention that their aim is to revive lost music traditions and promote love through their Sufi music. These are mostly Colombo-based groups formed for the purpose of both inter- and intra- cultural sharing. However, there are regional music groups such as the [Halara Jamath Ashiqur Rasool Ensemble](#) formed by the Shadhili Sufi Order in China Fort, Beruwala, which practices and performs religious songs and recitations.

## **Conclusion**

This article sought to outline the different music and song traditions of the Muslims of Sri Lanka. In doing so, it finds that music and song are certainly important facets of the spiritual and cultural identity of Sri Lankan Muslims. Furthermore, their music exemplifies a historical engagement with not only the local music traditions of their Sinhalese and Tamil counterparts, but also with global (Arabic and Persian) and regional (South Asian) music cultures.

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<sup>16</sup> This list compiles individuals and groups who overtly identify as Muslim and/or whose music engages with themes related to Islam and Muslim identity.

The decline in engagement with music, which commenced in the 1980s and early 90s, is attributed to various factors including the rise of ethno nationalism at state level and Islamic reformism at community level. As a result, today, there is minimal engagement of Muslims in the sphere of popular music and some of the rich folk and cultural music traditions are succumbing to time and social change.

However, music survives within the spiritual realm and is part of religious ritual, ceremony, and worship and, to a certain extent, of cultural events. There also seems to be an awareness in the last decade among the Muslim community, particularly Sufi Muslims, of the need to revive and preserve music traditions and protect them from the pressure of purist<sup>17</sup> groups which has led to the emergence of religious choirs and choral groups. However, these efforts seem to be limited to the religious sphere. There is a need for more opportunities for inter-generational sharing of music traditions of the past, and accessible platforms (beyond the academic) for cross sharing and engaging with different music traditions and cultures. It is hoped that this article contributes to this conversation and sparks further exploration.

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<sup>17</sup> One of the earliest efforts was a concert in the early 1980s 'Our Growing Years' at the Lionel Wendt organised by Deshabandu Jezima Ismail when she was serving at Muslim Ladies College. The concert featured the students singing qawwali songs, religious songs on the Prophet, and folk songs in Urdu, Tamil, and Sinhala. Some of the religious songs were especially composed by Jezima Ismail and her colleagues for the event.

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# **Music and Song Traditions of the Muslims of Sri Lanka: An Overview**

**Nadine Vanniasinkam**

This article draws from personal interviews with individuals from the Muslim community and secondary sources and outlines the devotional, cultural, and popular music and song traditions of the Muslims of Sri Lanka. It discusses local, regional, and international influences on Muslim music trends and reasons for the decline in musical engagement around the turn of the century. The article calls for wider discussion on and cross-sharing of the different music traditions of the Muslims of Sri Lanka.

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