

## **Singing Tradition among the Bawa Community of the Eastern Province in Sri Lanka**

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The oral tradition of the Bawa community of the Eastern Province in Sri Lanka began 200 years ago when the first Bawas arrived from Nagoor (India) and settled down in Beruwala, Batticaloa and Akkaraipattu. At present, members of the community live in coastal areas including Jaffna. A unique feature of this community is their tradition of singing Islamic Devotional songs referred to as “Bawa Paatu”. It is believed that in the 1980s over 5000 Bawas were engaged singing, but today the number has dwindled to 80 or 100. This unique style of singing was adopted and popularized by Mohideen Beig. Although mainstream Islam in Sri Lanka today does not accept devotional singing, *BawaPaatu* is not forbidden by Moulavis. Bawas maintain their own mosques in the coastal areas of Sri Lanka where devotional songs are sung. During the flag hoisting ceremony (*KoḍiEṭṭam*) in the Sufi Mosques of for example, The practice of mosque trustees inviting Bawas to perform at flag hoisting ceremonies in Sufi mosques, such as Kecchimalai in Beruwala, Jailani in Katharagama, and Kadakara in Kalmunai). Bawas also visit homes to collect alms, or “Kaanikai” from those who have taken vows (“Nercchai”). They organize pilgrimages to the tombs of Sufi Saints. In the Eastern Province, at special events such as “*Kanthoori*” which is held to evoke rains, Bawas are invited to sing at mosques maintained by the Sufi Community. Bawas are also known to sing the famous song “*Sahar, Sahar*” to wake up the community for early morning “Sahar Meal” during Ramazan fasting. Accompanying on the Rabana called “*Dahara*”, Bawas are known to sing “*Moulooth*” at Sufi Mosques when the congregation of Sufis join in the group song. This study seeks to describe, analyse and document the cultural role the Bawas play in contemporary Sri Lanka within the Muslim Community. Interviews were conducted with members of the Bawa community in Akkaraipattu and Thampalagamam in the Eastern Province. Participants also included the oldest member of the community who provided valuable information. This presentation focuses on the different singing Traditions of the Bawa communities centered around two families. In addition to in-depth interviews, audio and video recordings were also made in order to document the participants of the study singing devotional songs. Documentation of this discourse community is important as the tradition of singing among the Bawas is dying, with many members of the community seeking other occupations. Today they move into other occupations, and the singing tradition is fast dying. The overall objective is to document this tradition which was once popular among the Muslims of Sri Lanka.

Key Words: Bawa Community, Devotional Songs, Islam in Sri Lanka, Sufi Community in Sri Lanka