

DO SUFIS DREAM OF ELECTRONIC SHEIKHS?
THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY WITHIN AMERICAN RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

By

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My guiding objective in this M.A. project is to forge linkages between two academic domains: the anthropology of religion on the one hand and visual/media anthropology on the other. In the United States, the application of media technology within religious communities is becoming increasingly sophisticated. Through the means of a specific anthropological case study, I address the general questions of how and why contemporary religious communities record, preserve, reproduce, and playback electronic media. The thesis addresses the intersections of evolving cultural, religious, and technological systems through the examination of a Sufi community known as the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship in Philadelphia that is devoted to studying and disseminating the teachings of their spiritual leader.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Anthropology, religious science, the sociology of religion, and theology share the task within academic discourse of enlightening the public about the transformations, shifts, and remolding of religion and religious forms. This specific enlightenment may of course be carried out in spite of itself; that is, at least in those cases in which religious aspects are discovered precisely where one is concerned with things that apparently have nothing to do with religion. In undertaking this task, public discourses about religion have to move beyond commonsense knowledge, as well as beyond the accepted common sense within the respective field. (Thomas 2005:84)

My guiding objective in this M.A. project is to forge linkages between two academic domains: the anthropology of religion on the one hand and visual/media anthropology on the other. In the United States, the application of media technology within religious communities is becoming increasingly sophisticated. Through the means of a specific anthropological case study, I address the general questions of how and why contemporary religious communities record, preserve, reproduce, and playback electronic media. The thesis in short will address the intersections of evolving cultural, religious, and technological systems through the examination of a Sufi community known as the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship in Philadelphia that is devoted to studying and disseminating the teachings of their spiritual leader.

The leader in question is Bawa Muhaiyaddeen and he was born in Sri Lanka near the turn of the century. There he established a community of followers who considered him as a guru and a saint. At the request of a small group of interested Americans, Bawa visited the United States in 1971. Within a year, he and several of his closest Sri Lankan

followers immigrated to the United States and in a western suburb of Philadelphia he founded a new fellowship of followers devoted to understanding and spreading his teachings. For the next fifteen years, his live explanations were recorded on over 1,200 hours of videotape and nearly 12,000 hours of audio tape. The content of these tapes ranges from informal question-and-answer sessions, to formal discourses on a broad range of topics. As part of the transformation of the community since he passed away in 1986, specific tapes have been integrated as central elements in both organizational and spiritual/religious contexts. What began as multiple simultaneous recordings by individual members of the Fellowship was transformed into a sophisticated audio/visual recording process. Transcriptions of these recordings are the basis for the community's self-published books, which are available over the Internet.

After Bawa Muhaiyaddeen passed away, members of the Fellowship continued to preserve and distribute his recordings. Whereas in the past they may have attended one of his talks, they now play a video of him speaking on a variety of topics. While Bawa was present, a follower may have sought a meeting with him to discuss a problem in their life, but now they might watch a video to reconnect and gain some insight. Within the Fellowship, there is a clear and consistent belief that Bawa Muhaiyaddeen's guidance did not end with his corporeal existence. His teachings still reverberate from the Fellowship he established and audio/visual media enhance a vivid post-mortem presence. The belief that Bawa is still present and involved in their lives may partially explain why, unlike most Sufi communities upon the death of their sheikh, the Fellowship has not established a new spiritual leader. Members still actively seek his guidance through prayer and visits to his burial site. In a very real sense, Bawa Muhaiyaddeen is still present at the

Fellowship. His face can be seen, his voice heard, and his followers can experience his presence at some level on a regular basis. In short, the religious system which I have researched heavily utilizes modern electronic media which permits the presence of a deceased leader in a manner not possible in the days before such visual recordings were available.

Fieldwork and Methods

I conducted fieldwork at the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania during an initial four day exploratory mission in June 2005 and a two week stay ending in September 2005. During my second visit, I lived with a family from the community. The principle objective of my fieldwork was the observation, recording, and analysis of the ways in which members of the Fellowship were involved with electronic media. This included the methods and techniques used by the community in the production and preservation of electronic recordings and the processes by which they are replayed and disseminated.

Though my approach was descriptive and qualitative, rather than quantitative hypothesis testing, I entered with the general guiding premise that electronic media operate as revolutionary actors within contemporary religious traditions. Just as print technology enabled the wide distribution of sacred teachings, electronic media are facilitating the dissemination of religious content on a massive scale. Interestingly, while print permitted individuals to possess sacred texts and to study and interpret them independent of religious leaders, electronic media are now enabling religious leaders to reach large audiences, including individuals in their homes. For example, Evangelical preachers at Christian mega-churches now preside over thousands of worshipers in

multiple churches via satellites, while others watch from the comfort of their homes. In addition to this general premise, I was also sensitive to the more specific hypothesis that electronic media play a primary role in the processes of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship. In effect, spiritual leadership of the community has in some way been transferred from a living human being to electronic recordings of his teachings.

During my fieldwork, I conducted seven formal interviews and twenty two informal conversations that specifically discussed my research. Formal interviews were recorded on both audio and video and I was able to obtain both casual and formal explanations from multiple individuals. I utilized techniques of participant observation – for example, I participated in many religious rituals and remained on the community grounds for the duration of my fieldwork.

Members of the community were generally very cooperative. My discussion of the Fellowship is as much about its American members as it is about Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, although they would prefer the focus to be on his teachings. At first, those I spoke with didn't appreciate my line of questioning, and some may not still. I was repeatedly reminded that the only purpose of the Fellowship was to spread Bawa's teachings and to focus otherwise was a distraction. How does the proverb go? *If you point at the moon, only a fool will look at your finger.* Having only been visited previously by religious scholars interested in Bawa's teachings and methods, perhaps an anthropologist's questions were unfamiliar to many members of the Fellowship. Why did I want to know how individual members came to be here? Why were the internal structures of any interest? Was it really important to know how decisions were made within the Fellowship? My emphasis on their use of electronic media only made things

worse. To them, this was a straightforward and logical way to preserve and transmit Bawa's messages. Surely the practical value in having and using such recordings was obvious, but for me to focus on audio and video tapes seemed out of place to many members I interviewed. Nonetheless, the recording, preserving, and replaying of these tape are major characteristics of the Fellowship.

My brief ethnographic fieldwork is only one element in this undertaking. I have applied both historical and collaborative perspectives in the processes and presentation of my research. Heavily emphasizing a historical analysis that contextualizes many of the community's characteristics, my objective is to provide the broadest possible understanding of this community. Members of the Fellowship were aware of and involved with my research and I have attempted to integrate many of their questions and concerns into this examination. This reflexive approach exposes many of my assumptions and agendas towards religious communities' use of media and contrasts and compares them with actual applications by the Fellowship. In terms of my strategy of presentation, I include excerpts from recordings and publications produced by Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, the Fellowship, and other related sources. These passages are usually applied at the beginning of the relevant sections and are deliberately used to let members of the Fellowship speak for themselves.

From a theoretical perspective, this evolving transformation of electronic media from a marginal, secondary status into a central element within this community can be viewed as a local replay of similar transformations that are occurring in other places and with other religious systems, especially within other American religious communities. The general focus is on the use of electronic media. A specific question to be addressed

in that regard is: what local circumstances or broader forces led this particular religious community to place such emphasis on the recording, preservation, reproduction and playback of audio and visual media?

In terms of the anthropology of religion, my concerns go beyond a simple focus on the use of media and I pose questions of affiliation and identity, such as the following: How has the location of this Sufi community in middle class America affected its relation to American Muslim communities at large? Are all Sufis Muslims? Does the Fellowship identify itself as Muslim? Have the original teachings of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen been recast into a mold with a new emphasis or even with content that differs from his original message?

Since the Fellowship clearly identifies itself as “Sufi,” I start in chapter one by orienting the reader towards an understanding of Sufism. A review of the origins of Sufism and its relationship with forms of Islam will precede discussion of the specific ideological and ritual characteristics of the Fellowship. Chapter two will outline the context of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen’s life, including the historical, political, and religious environments in which he lived. I will attempt to trace his path from the forests of Sri Lanka to the suburbs of Philadelphia. To illuminate this discussion, I will compare and contrast his teachings with those of previous Islamic and Sufis spiritual leaders. In chapter three, I describe the characteristics of the Fellowship, including its people, buildings, resources, and activities. Chapter four focuses on the Fellowship’s use of electronic media and describes a number of specific changes that have emerged in the Fellowship’s electronic strategies over the years. In my final chapter, I address the three main issues facing this community: religious affiliation, succession of leadership, and the

integration of electronic media. My conclusions reconcile this analysis with discussions in the fields of the anthropology of religion and visual/media anthropology.

CHAPTER 2 SUFISM

Remember that we are not assembled here to discuss religion, to attack religions or to destroy religions. We have to grope around and feel where the truth lies and stay with that truth and not get involved with religious differences... It is necessary to mention this first because what we are going to talk about now might be construed in religious terms. We should receive the truth that is within the discourse and not get upset or confused by the religious references in it... (Muhaiyaddeen qtd in Mauroof 1974:134)

Anthropological studies of religion focus on the histories, beliefs, rituals, and leaders of religious communities. I follow this approach and concentrate on aspects that contribute to an understanding of Sufism, especially as it anthropologically situates the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship within the wider Islamic community. There is no doubt that the Fellowship considers itself a Sufi community – an identity that may or may not be explicitly Islamic. The question “is the Fellowship Islamic?” surfaced during my research and will be addressed later in this thesis. To get at these issues, I examine how the beliefs of Sufism are similar to and different from those of Islam. I also describe the rituals practiced by Sufis and address how Sufi leaders are considered by their followers and examine how Sufism is expressed in the United States. My discussion of these issues provides a conceptual platform consisting of the more general historical relationship between Sufism and Islam before discussing the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship.

Since concepts of history are culturally situated and can be subtly influenced by ideological premises, I am aware that an anthropological quest for “objective truth”

should be taken with a grain of salt and a heavy dose of skepticism. My goals are more modestly empirical. I will attempt to understand the religious and cultural dimensions of American Sufis, who are often neglected in academic studies of American Muslims. As one scholar notes, while “the media attention on ‘radical’ and ‘militant’ elements of Islam continues to propagate a monolithic and one-sided image of Islam, the Sufi groups in America...have provided a crucial bridge between American culture and the traditional Islamic world” (Webb 1995:257). To better understand this bridge, I must review the paths leading to Sufism. In doing so, I treat Islam and Sufism as integrated clusters of beliefs, rituals, and leadership structures undergoing continuous transformation “in rhythm with changing historical conditions and local customs and practices with which it come into contact” (Khalidi and Tucker qtd in Simmons 2000, 205). This perspective furthers the understanding of how religious communities are continuously transformed by both their internal discourses and by integrating aspects from the larger societies in which they exist. The Fellowship offers an instructive testimony to this process with the unique integration of electronic media that facilitate specific Sufi beliefs and rituals. Before addressing these local characteristics, I discuss the origins and characteristics of Sufism and its relationship with Islam.

Islam and Sufism

Throughout the Muslim world, Sufism remains a vital part of the religious environment. The desire for an emotional aspect to religious life...has a substantial place in Islam and this is frequently provided by the Sufi tradition. Grouped around a spiritual leader and following certain practices designed to stimulate the experience of God, Sufi brotherhoods flourish throughout the Muslim world, even if they are not always condoned by governments or establishment religious forces. (Rippen 2003:147)

Of the issues faced by Sufi communities throughout history, those of Islamic identity and affiliation are of paramount significance. The treatment of Sufis has ranged from torture and execution for heresy by non-Sufi Muslims who oppose their focus on the esoteric aspects of Islam to veneration and annual pilgrimages to the shrines of Sufi sheikhs by millions of faithful followers. Those who situate Sufism within the Islamic tradition express frustration at the “practice of explaining Sufism away as some kind of alien influence within Islam,” and proclaim the “unbreakable link connecting Sufism to Islam” (Nasr qtd in VanDoodewaard, 1983). Those less sympathetic or hostile to Sufism – including of course the Wahabis of Saudi Arabia, who reject many expressions of Islam, not merely Sufism – decry the external and preexisting traditions they see as having “contaminated” Islamic theology and distrust how Sufis emphasize the internal and esoteric aspects of Islam. This issue has been raised more than once at the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, usually by non-Sufi Muslims visiting the mosque who are “concerned about Bawa’s explanations of the ‘inner’ dimension of Islamic belief and practice – that people might not do the ‘outer’ requirements” (Webb 1994:87). A response from Bawa regarding such concerns was recorded live and later transcribed into one of his books. To a visitor who argued that he was not emphasizing the Qur’an enough, Bawa replied that:

A Muslim must reflect upon the true meaning of Islam and the meaning within the divine words of the Holy Qur’an. People quote the Qur’an constantly. But is that enough? Some people can memorize thirty sections of the Qur’an in two or three years. Is that all that must be done? The Qur’an does not consist of only the words we memorize; there are countless meanings and explanations contained within those words. (Muhaiyaddeen 2004:118)

Because the issue of Islamic affiliation has affected Sufi communities for centuries, I examine the historical interactions between Muslims and Sufis in the next section. While answering questions about what Sufis believe and practice, I include passages written by Sufis, in order to communicate their words on these matters as much as possible. Again, the overriding aim here is to consider the teachings of Sufism so that we may understand the context of the teachings of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen.

Concepts and Beliefs

You are a Christian because you believe in Jesus, and you are a Jew because you believe in all the prophets including Moses. You are a Muslim because you believe in Muhammad as a prophet, and you are a Sufi because you believe in the universal teachings of God's love. You are really none of these, but you are all of those because you believe in God. And once you believe in God, there is no religion. Once you divide yourself off with religions, you are separated from your fellowman. (Muhaiyaddeen qtd in Barks and Green 2000:14)

To place this discussion anthropologically I would mention overriding beliefs that are common to both Islam and Sufism (and to Judaism and Christianity, for that matter). First, there is a belief in God (*Allah* in Arabic) at the top of the "pantheon". Next there are lesser beings such as angels like Gabriel (*Jibril*) who revealed the Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad. There are evil demons (*shaitan*) who seek to deceive and distract humans away from God's plan. There is belief that in some way the individual will survive the body after death and be judged by God at the end of the world. However, other concepts such as those regarding Jesus, his crucifixion or his status as the divine progeny of God, are not shared by Muslims.

The Sufis do not abandon this world, nor do they hold that human appetites must be done away with. They only discipline those desires

that are in discordance with the religious life and the dictates of sound reason. They don't throw away all things of this world, nor do they go after them with a vengeance. Rather, they know the true value and function of everything up on the earth. They save as much as necessary. They eat as much as they need to stay healthy. They nourish their bodies and simultaneously set their hearts free. God becomes the focal point towards which their whole being leans. God becomes the object of their continual adoration and contemplation. (Al-Ghazzali qtd in Fadiman and Frager 1997: 37)

The central teaching of these Sufis brotherhoods and present-day Sufi communities is the understanding of *tawhid*, the Islamic concept that existence is a manifestation of a single reality, God, who is a part of everything and impossible to measure. The main goal of Sufis is to let go of all earthly notions of duality and to realize a state of divine unity with God. One of Bawa's disciples (who is now one of two presidents of the Fellowship) explains:

Once we touch this understanding, time and space as we know them disappear, and we enter the realm of reality. When we enter, when the grace is given to allow us entrance to that reality, all that exists is reality. The drop returns to the ocean, the ocean alone exists. The drop is no longer differentiated, the vessel containing the drop is no longer of any moment or consequence. May God let us all understand this state. (Levin 2005:5-6)

For Sufis, the objective is to elevate the self to a state of constant awareness of God, in which all thought and actions are manifestations of this divine connection. This belief is directly acted upon during Sufi rituals in an effort to maintain a state of prayerful awareness of God's presence.

Much of Sufi belief is connected to the actions and words of the Prophet Muhammad. According to tradition accepted by all Muslims, the angel Gabriel manifested and spoke to the Prophet Muhammad in the year 610 of the current era (C.E.)

and commanded him to recite passages that would eventually become written as the Qur'an. For many Sufis, this mystical experience of the Prophet Muhammad - in which spiritual meditation afforded access to God - serves as the archetype for one "who dedicates him or herself to the quest after mystical union or reunion with the Creator" (Simmons 2005:3). Identifying the earliest Sufi community is difficult, but many sources (Schimmel 1975:28,) refer to a pious group of early converts (known as *the ahl-as-suffa* or "the People of the Bench") who lived in the mosque in the city of Medina where the Prophet Muhammad and his earliest followers sought refuge from persecution. Another early convert, Hasan al-Basri (d. 728 C.E.), established a community in the Iraqi city of Basra and is said to have exhibited mystical and ascetical qualities now associated with Sufism. These earliest spiritual communities flourished with the rapid expansion of the Islamic influence and by the 1100's large formally organized Sufi brotherhoods were established in Arabia, India, and Africa.

Rituals

There are several types of ritual activity within Islam. Individuals perform the five daily prayers as outlined in the Qur'an. Attendance to the communal Friday prayer at a mosque is also obligatory for Muslim men. Yearly Islamic rituals include a month of daytime fasting and annual holidays known as Eids. Eid-al-Fitr celebrates the end of the month of fasting (Ramadan) and Eid-al-Adha (observed at the end of the Hajj pilgrimage) celebrates Abraham's willingness to obey God even to the point of sacrificing his own son. The Hajj pilgrimage is required at least once in the life of every Muslim who is able to travel to Mecca,

with exceptions made for those who are physically or financially unable to make the journey.

The issue of adherence to these Islamic rituals is one of the primary areas of contention between Sufis and other Muslims. Whereas many Sufis participate in all of the same ritual activities mentioned above, some may not. Many Sufis believe that these ritual activities are only mechanisms to attain the state of total awareness of God. From this perspective, blind adherence to ritual without meaningful understanding is of no value. They might ask “is not the person who lives life each day in a constant state of prayerful awareness of God fulfilling the requirements set forth in the Qur’an?” Towards this end, the major Sufi ritual involves the practice of *dhikr* (pronounced like “zicker”). The meaning of the term implies a form of remembrance. For Sufis, the *dhikr* is the primary form of worshipping and invoking the presence of God in both the individual and the group (Simmons 2005:3). As one member of the Fellowship explains:

Dhikr is the prayer of the Sufi. It goes on with every breath. It must be practiced with focus and concentration. It will take us to that Power. The *dhikr* is like an electric current, necessary to light the bulb of wisdom. Once one’s intention is set with faith and certitude, this remembrance will flow automatically. But in order to have it flow correctly, it is necessary to conquer attachments, worldly connections, and the pull of mind and desire. (Toomey qtd in Muhaiyaddeen 1999: xv)

Although originating from the Qur’an, the practice of *dhikr* is not usually emphasized by non-Sufi Muslims and can be appropriately considered a Sufi ritual for the purposes of this paper. Variation exists between Sufi communities in the way they perform *dhikr*. Some prefer a “silent *dhikr*,” which is a rhythmic softly spoken repetition in Arabic of the Islamic declaration of faith “La ilaha illa Allah” (“there is no God but

God”), while others repeat a loudly spoken dhikr, in which the “ninety-nine most beautiful names of God” (the Compassionate, the Just, etc.) are chanted and recited hundreds of times. Some groups perform both types (Webb 1995:251).

Other Sufi rituals include initiation ceremonies, *sama* concerts that induce ecstatic states through the use of musical instruments in song and dance (think of the “Whirling Dervishes”), and pilgrimages to shrines. During the 1960s and 70s, some members of the Fellowship may have been familiar with ecstatic entheogenic states (i.e. psychoactive substances used in a spiritual context), but Bawa expressly forbid marijuana and alcohol and did not include the induction of ecstatic states in his teachings.

Authority and Succession

A true sheikh is one who shades and comforts the travelers crossing the desert of this world. In this barren desert of illusion all that exists is a mirage. You see this mirage and run towards it searching for water, but it is just a dream. However, at that very moment when you are confused and entranced by this mirage, you will find a tree nearby which can provide shade. That tree is the sheikh. (Bawa Muhaiyaddeen 1983:13)

One of the central issues of any religious community is that of leadership. The precedent for determining the transfer of leadership in Islam occurred when the Prophet Muhammad passed away. Immediately, there was a struggle to handle the succession of authority. Conflict arose between those who wanted to continue the Arabic traditions of patriarchal lineage and those who argued that the Qur’an called for community consensus in choosing leaders. No one could replace the Prophet Muhammad as spiritual leader, but the need for leadership within this minority community was urgently needed. A deep schism eventually resulted in the assassination of the Prophet Muhammad’s grandson and with two distinct manifestations of Islam, the Shi’a who base succession on lineage from

the Prophet Muhammad, and the Sunni who employ some form of consensus when choosing religious leaders¹ (this can result in patterns of patriarchal lineage, though not usually descended from the Prophet Muhammad). While the ways in which religious leaders were determined became increasingly institutionalized within these two major Muslim communities, a third form of leadership also exists - the spiritual leadership of Sufi sheikhs.

Sufi sheikhs are considered by their followers as “friends of God” (*wali-Allah* in Arabic), a concept that roughly corresponds to the status of sainthood in Catholicism, with the important distinction that Sufi saints attain this status before death. Many sheikhs were believed to be able to perform miracles after receiving divine grace (known as *baraka*) from God, which increased belief in their spiritual connections with God. However, a very few sheikhs are considered to have an even higher status, that of the “virtual center of spiritual energy upon whom the well-being of this world depends,” (Schimmel 1975:200) Known as the *qutb*, which means “pole” or “axis.” These Sufis were thought to be near-perfect manifestations of human spirituality and very rarely present on earth. Bawa Muhaiyaddeen was considered by his disciplines to be the *qutb* of the modern era. This status is especially significant for my later discussions of leadership within the Fellowship because it severely diminished the ability of potential successors to establish their own spiritual authority.

The foundation of all Sufi orders revolves around the relationship between the sheikhs and their disciples. As these leaders are considered by their followers to have knowledge and experience of divine truth, their guidance towards attaining similar

¹ It is important to note that the Sunni/Shi'a split did not begin immediately after the Prophet Muhammad's death. Over twenty years passed under four caliphs before the assassination of Hussein, Prophet Muhammad's grandson.

experiences is sought through constant devotion and teaching. This relationship of attachment and submission by an individual to a specific spiritual leader is one of the core elements that distinguish Sufism from exoteric forms of Sunni and Shi'a Islam. Bawa Muhaiyaddeen explained that "without a true sheikh as a mirror you would never be able to see your true self" (Muhaiyaddeen 1983:80).

From the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries, Sufism was transformed from various isolated communities emphasizing rituals of individual self-discipline and worship into well-organized international brotherhoods committed to devotion and obedience to charismatic leaders (Berhman 1968:61). Historically, Sufis were organized into "orders" or groups, called *tariqas*. These orders vary considerably in their practice and internal organization. Some are strictly hierarchical organizations with directives issued from the top down, while other orders allow their local branches considerable autonomy. Several modern orders have become completely independent through sheikhs who transformed the teachings of the original order. The four main Sufi orders are the Chishtiyya, the Naqshbandiyya, the Qadiriyya and the Suhrawardiyya. Other orders include the Mawlawis who are popularly known as "the whirling dervishes". Each of these orders maintains a significant presence across the world, including branches in the United States.

Sufis' practice of living together in isolation was often viewed with suspicion and criticism by other religious leaders, but it was most often their esoteric and mystical statements that provoked violent reactions (Trimingham 1971:9). An extreme example is the execution of the Sufi Mansur al-Hallaj in 922 C.E. reportedly for exclaiming "I am the Absolute Truth," a reference to one of the Islamic traits of God (Schimmel 1975:66).

Because Sufi sheikhs were often seen as threats to the political and religious authority of other leaders, they were ruthlessly suppressed as frequently by Muslim rulers as by frustrated colonial administrators (Eickelman 1981:289).

The methods of transferring Sufi leadership vary to this day. Many Sufis sheikhs appointed their most adept disciples as successors, but others chose the next leader from within their own families. What is most relevant to understand about succession within Sufi communities is that it had to occur. Since personal allegiance to a specific sheikh is one of the defining characteristics of Sufis communities, a new sheikh would have to be established for the community to continue.

The Fellowship is unique in that no new leader has replaced Bawa Muhaiyaddeen. Reportedly, other sheikhs came and tried to assert authority, but none was accepted and the group remains without a living spiritual leader. Combined with his status as the “qutb of this era,” the ritual integration of audio and video of Bawa at the Fellowship certainly diminished the ability for another leader to step in and take his place. There are precedents for the applications of media technology among historic Muslim communities and I review those before examining other manifestations of Sufism within the United States.

Use of Media Technology

Whereas all religions have spirit-beliefs, rituals, and leaders, only some religions have sacred scriptures. Islam belongs to a subset of religions that are based on holy writings. While Judaism and Christianity incorporated the use of the printing press almost as soon as it became available, Islamic societies did not integrate such technology quickly, primarily because traditions of oral recitation slowed its use by Muslims

(Robinson 1993:232). Oral traditions were the historically established transmitters of Islamic knowledge, and face-to-face recitations were considered more authentic than physical copies of words. It is universally accepted by Muslims that the first word uttered by the angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad was “Recite!” The angel directed The Prophet Muhammad to say aloud passages that would ultimately form the Qur'an, which means literally “recitation” in Arabic. The Prophet Muhammad transmitted these words orally to his increasing numbers of followers who wrote them on the materials available at hand, including papyrus, leather, and bone. After the Prophet Muhammad died and the Qur'an was collected from all the pieces that had been written down, the text was still considered as an aid to assist the memorization, recitation and oral transmission process (Robinson 1993:234). From Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad, from the Prophet Muhammad to his followers, and from those initial followers to the subsequent generations, the precedents for the transmission of religious knowledge in Islam was oral communication.

Since that initial period of Islamic history, many Muslims have learned the Qur'an by phonetic memorization (often without understanding a word) and those who commit the entire Qur'an to memory are awarded the title of Hafiz. The most fundamental reason for this tradition is the preservation of the Qur'an. This explanation is supported by the meaning of the word *Hafiz* – which is “guardian.” If all written copies of the Qur'an were destroyed, a Hafiz would have been able to recite and reconstruct the entire text from memory.

From the initial schism between those communities that would come be called the Sunni and Shi'a, to the persecutions of the Sufis, Muslim religious scholars (known

collectively as the *ulema*) have always presumed authority over other Muslims. Printed religious texts would have certainly undermined these claims and may partially explain why print was delayed for so long in Muslim countries. Things changed forever after the Ottoman Empire fell and colonialism took hold. Print began to be seen as a “necessary weapon in the defense of Islam” (Robinson 1993:239). When the traditional power of the *ulema* over the population was threatened by Western institutions, Islamic scholars began publishing and copying volumes of Islamic knowledge. No longer restricted to the religious elite, Islamic knowledge was printed and made available to all who could read and understand. Partially to combat Christian missionaries and their printed tracts and Bibles and partially to compensate for their loss of political power, the *ulema* hoped that “with better Islamic knowledge, Muslims would be able to create a proper Muslim life for themselves” (Robinson 1993:242).

These historical events directly influenced modern Islamic movements, which still maintain goals of opposition to the unchecked influence of the West and the restoration of an Islamic civilization. However, the assimilation of print technology was not a unidirectional phenomenon. Muslims could now read Islamic texts in their own languages and consider for themselves what meaning it had for their lives. Further, many individuals began to publish their own text and to spread their interpretations of the Qur'an, Hadith, and other religious texts. Islamic scholars were no longer the only access to these texts, explaining and constraining interpretations. The control of the *ulema*, unquestionable before print, was now receding. Anyone could now claim to speak for Islam and this is precisely what has happened. Muslims increasingly challenged traditional

interpretative practices and authority, especially those involving political agendas.

Robinson summarizes this phenomenon as follows:

...by breaking the stranglehold of the madrassa-trained ulema on the interpretation of Islamic knowledge, print helped to make possible an era of vigorous religious experiment. Print came to be the main forum in which religious debate was conducted; it was an era of pamphlet wars and of religiously partisan newspapers and magazine..." (Robinson 1993:246)

To understand how printing influenced and enabled the propagation of interpretations by Muslims individuals and movements with a variety of backgrounds and agendas informs the discussion of how this process transformed them into unique expressions of Islam. These individuals were able to communicate their thoughts and agendas to a wide audience weary of Western influence and internal corruptions. The proliferation of media technology is still in process, enabling Muslims to preserve and disseminate their messages in new ways. In the next section, I examine how the development of Sufism in the United States has transformed the transmission of Islamic thought via media technology.

Sufism in America

...there has been a tendency among academics, anticult groups, and traditional Muslims alike to lump the American-bred Sufi groups into categories such as "cults," "New Age," "popular," or "unorthodox," thereby dismissing Sufism as a serious topic in the study of religion. (Webb 1995:249)

When lumped in with studies of other American religious enclaves with charismatic leaders, Sufi communities are often considered as "ephemeral ahistorical products that arose in the immediate past, without significant roots in previous religious traditions" (Melton 1993:107). This ignores how American Sufis are descended from the larger Islamic and Sufi religious traditions with stable models for community

development. Webb (1995) reviews the characteristics of Sufi communities in America through three distinct phases of interaction. With the early 1900s came the first substantial and sustained contact by Americans and Europeans with Asian cultures. Although this period also marked the beginning of characterizations of “the Orient” as “the Other,” there was also a receptive audience for spiritual leaders like the Sufi teacher Hazrat Inayat Khan, who founded the Sufi Order of the West in 1910 (Webb 1995:252). Originally initiated into the Chishti Order of India, Khan sought to combine the East and West and replace a focus on doctrine with “the power of mysticism” (Webb 1995:345). His first initiate in America was Rabia Martin from San Francisco and when Khan died suddenly in 1927, she claimed to be his successor. This claim, however, was rejected by many who believed that the leadership of the group passed instead to his eleven year old son, Pir Vilayat Khan (Melton 1978:345). This succession created confusion between the American and European members of the order and the two remained separated until Vilayat reunited them in the 1960s, with the help of Samuel Lewis. Lewis was a former follower of Martin, who “traveled to Asia and received several independent initiations and recognitions” as a Sufi teacher in his own right (Melton 1978:346).

After Pir Vilayat Khan’s death in 2004, leadership was officially passed to his son, Pir Zia Inayat Khan. According to the organization’s website, Zia underwent training similar to his father and was prepared for succession by many spiritual teachers, including the Dalai Lama. For many reasons, including preventing another schism after their leader’s death, the Order established a board of trustees that controls its property and assets (Melton 1999, 1914). A council consisting of these trustees and representatives from the different branches of the Order coordinates all financial

transactions for the group. This form of organization and the relative stability it affords is common among many American religious communities, including the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, and is transforming the way both religious and temporal authority is situated and transferred within them.

The next wave of interest in Sufism in America occurred during the 1960s, when many Americans, disillusioned by civil inequality and the Vietnam War, looked to the East for spiritual wisdom. Many Sufi groups, including the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, founded American centers in the 60s and 70s (Webb 1995:252). Contributing to the American “domestication” of Sufism during this period was the strong African American involvement that manifested in Sufi communities (Westerlund 2004:5). These groups typically had diverse memberships including both immigrants and converts from a range of ethnic and religious backgrounds (Smith 1999:71). For example, the Naqshbandiyya Order was brought first to Western Europe and the United States in the 1960s by Irina Tweedie, who was trained in India by the Naqshbandi sheikh, Guru Bhai Sahib. She was born in Russia in 1907, and educated in Vienna and Paris. After World War II, she married an English naval officer. When he died a few years later she began a spiritual quest and traveled to India where she met sheikh Sahib. She kept a diary of her experiences with him, which became the book, *Daughter of Fire*. After his death in 1966, she returned brought his teachings to the West and founded the Golden Sufi Center in California. After her death in 1999, she was succeeded by Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, a Sheikh of the Naqshbandi Sufi Order who has followed the Naqshbandi Sufi path since he was 19. (Westerlund 2004:23). In this community, the rituals do not involve music or dance, instead they are known for their silent meditations and dream

work. Participants are encouraged to share their dreams, especially those with spiritual dimensions (Melton 1999:1902).

The current phase of Sufism's growth in the United States may be "characterized by the less-visible but continued existence of a number of Sufi groups established during the 1960s and 1970s, intersecting with the reality of increasing numbers of immigrants coming to the United States from traditional Muslim countries" (Webb 1995:252). The integration of Sufis into American society can be attributed partly to their accessibility, tolerance, equality, and a strong emphasis on individual experiential aspects of spirituality (Smith 1999:69 and Westerlund 2004:5). Additionally, because they are open and eager to utilize new forms of technology in their internal and external communications, these Sufi communities are perfectly situated to continue their growth within the United States.

Conclusions

Three clear and relevant connections emerge in this discussion of Muslim and Sufi communities and the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship. The first connection is the issue of identity and how people delineate and associate between those who consider themselves Muslim and those who consider themselves Sufi. Webb explains that the American setting of Sufism may affect this debate:

...to further complicate the situation, there are many Americans involved in Sufi movements who emphasize classical Sufism's goal of the transcendental unity beyond all distinctions (including religious differences) to the point of denying any essential connection of Sufism with the religion of Islam. (Webb 1995:249)

Some members of the Fellowship see and promote the Islamic perspective to Bawa Muhaiyaddeen's teachings, while others see the universality of his message as

unrestricted by specific religious formations. Some describe Sufism as an ideal state of being aware of God that has existed since the time of Adam, and not as a subset of Islam. Discussion of these issues at the Fellowship has been transformed by the use of media, which has enabled members to immediately access a recording and “settle” the debate. Or has it? In later chapters, I discuss how the context of these recordings may not end all internal debates, including the ever-present question of Islamic identity.

The second connection addressed in this chapter is the issue of succession of authority and how these communities continue once the founder has passed away. When Bawa Muhaiyaddeen was alive, the Fellowship had a leader who held both organizational and spiritual authority. When he died, the organizational authority was assumed by a board of directors and spiritual authority was no longer focused within a single human life. Instead, his disciples now focus on electronic recordings of his discourses and consider them as the permanent source for his spiritual guidance.

The third connection between the earliest Muslim community and the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship is the role of media in the preservation and dissemination of spiritual messages. While oral recitation was the main way to teach and remember the Qur’an, after the death of the Prophet the early community collected and organized the Qur’an and sayings into the format seen today. Just as the Qur’an became the primary source of spiritual authority for the earliest Muslim community, electronic recordings seem to have become the source of spiritual authority for members of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship. Just as the Prophet Muhammad was directly involved in the processes that led to the formation of the Qur’an, Bawa Muhaiyaddeen was very active in

the processes of publishing his words into books, including the electronic recording procedures.

CHAPTER 3 BAWA MUHAIYADDEEN

Duty seems to be my only purpose. I do not look for comfort in my life, I do not look for happiness, I do not try to make my own history. I care only that the qualities of my children be the qualities of God and the prophets that came before us. My purpose is to teach my children the ways of the prophets who advised us in the past. My dedication is to bring my children's qualities to the exalted levels that prophets have described. This is my history, this has become my history. (Muhaiyaddeen 2003:15)

This chapter introduces us to the person of Sheikh Muhammad Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeen and reviews his life and teachings as he moved from the forests of Sri Lanka to the suburbs of Philadelphia. Limited accounts of his early history combined with his penchant to deflect questions of his past have perpetuated a sense of mystery surrounding Bawa Muhaiyaddeen. Any hagiography emanating from the Fellowship focuses on his life after he arrived in Philadelphia. Since I am primarily looking at the ways in which Bawa's words have been recorded and processed and not specifically at their content, I limit my outline to his history and teachings as portrayed and described in his books published by the Fellowship, its members, and scholars. A portion of this information originates from the doctoral dissertation of one of the earliest members of the Fellowship, Mohamed Mauroof. His account is an invaluable first-hand narrative of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen's transformation from Sri Lankan guru/sheikh to American Sufi sheikh. Mauroof's personal involvement in the establishment of the Fellowship and his perspective of its members makes his dissertation a fundamental reference. He was a follower of Bawa in Sri Lanka and was instrumental in linking him with the interested

Americans who would eventually establish the Fellowship with Bawa. Mauroof served as one of Bawa's translators and his voice was often captured along with Bawa's on the Fellowship's recordings. He is not viewed favorably by many in the Fellowship because of his abrupt disassociation from the community and the content and conclusions of his dissertation. Using thinly veiled descriptions of members of the Fellowship, he included negative personal observations and allegations. Mauroof deemphasized characteristics that aligned the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship within the lineage of Sufi communities and his ultimate conclusion that members of the Fellowship were neither Muslim nor Sufi, but rather part of a new religious movement centered on Bawa Muhaiyaddeen reportedly devastated his former comrades. However, since his reports of the period before the establishment of the Fellowship in Philadelphia provide details unavailable elsewhere, they must be considered and compared with other accounts of Bawa's early history. Unlike the last decades of his life, which were consistently documented and recorded, Bawa's early decades remain, for the most part, a mystery even to his closest followers.

From Kataragama to Philadelphia

In spite of the theoretical impossibility of knowing who Bawa is, however, the logic of his existence in this world is an invitation and challenge to others to attempt to comprehend that reality. The sum total of the life and activities of Bawa is directed toward communicating the nature of that reality to others. (Mauroof 1974:31)

Bawa Muhaiyaddeen's autobiography entitled *The Tree That Fell to the West: Autobiography of a Sufi* was published by the Fellowship in 2003. In it, Bawa explains that he spent most of his first three decades of life searching for God, first studying under several gurus, but found that "they only taught me about the world ...and its magic and

tricks...” He wrote that he left the gurus and “went into the four religions” to study but he did not find what he was looking for among them either (Muhaiyaddeen 2003:1). He retreated to the jungle and lived alone for many years, meditating, praying, and continuing his search. It was in this jungle that a family of Hindu pilgrims first saw Bawa. Mauroof interviewed this family, who told him how they first met Bawa Muhaiyaddeen near a path leading to Kataragama, a multi-religious sacred city in southeastern Sri Lanka containing an Islamic mosque, a Hindu temple, a Buddhist monastery, and indigenous Vedda shrines. After seeing Bawa annually on the path to this holy city for three years, these pilgrims were convinced that Bawa was a holy man and invited him to their village. Bawa agreed and in 1942, he settled in their northeastern Sri Lankan village of Nallur.

For the next thirty years, Bawa lived in Sri Lanka and established his own community (known as an *ashram*), where he fed, sheltered, and taught his increasing numbers of followers. His reputation as a holy man and as a healer spread and his teachings were eventually collected into a book called *Guru Mani*. Bawa’s followers report many different types of healing, including instances where he cured their physical and mental illnesses by his touch. He also conducted diagnostic sessions in which he reportedly identified diseases in people who were not present, usually distant family members of his followers. Bawa also grew specific plants for use in healing recipes and salves and his healing activities continued after he established the Fellowship in Philadelphia. Belief in his healing abilities is directly related to descriptions of Bawa as the “qutb of the era.”

In 1955, Bawa began building a mosque in the nearby town of Mankumban, an act which firmly established his reputation as a Sufi sheikh (Webb 1995:254). Soon, his ashram employed a scribe, a translator, and a driver and had expanded its activities to include rudimentary farming (Mauroof 1974:52). By 1962, Bawa was making regular visits to the central and western provinces of Sri Lanka, where some of his followers had established groups dedicated to spreading his teachings. Whereas many of his previous followers may have been from predominantly Hindu backgrounds and called Bawa “guru”, his followers in the cities were almost entirely Muslim and referred to him as their “Sufi Master”. Mauroof was from this second group of people and in 1969 he traveled to the U.S. to attend graduate school in Philadelphia. There he met an American student who had been actively searching for spiritual guidance. When he told her of his Sufi master in Sri Lanka, she immediately began writing to Bawa, asking him to come to the United States. After several earnest letters, Bawa promised to visit her. Two years later, on October 11, 1971, he arrived in Philadelphia to meet the woman and other interested individuals who would soon establish the Fellowship. Ultimately, Bawa and several of his closest Sri Lankan followers immigrated to Philadelphia in late 1972.

Years later, when asked why he came to the United States, Bawa responded:

They formed a society for that purpose, to invite me here. I did not come to Philadelphia with the idea of establishing a fellowship. There is only one fellowship and that is Allah’s. There is only one family and one Fellowship. The whole world is one Fellowship. We are the children of Adam and Allah is in charge of that Fellowship. I came here to see my brothers and sisters, to see my children, this is the reason why I came. (Muhaiyaddeen 2003:17)

Bawa Muhaiyaddeen remained in Philadelphia until he passed away in 1986, teaching his disciples and spreading his message by publishing books that outlined his beliefs, teachings, and proscribed behaviors.

Beliefs, teachings, and rituals

Basically, what he laid out before us from the start was that the hunger for God and knowledge of Him are not to be satisfied institutionally, in the context of any religion, even though each of the major religions has a certain truth buried within it. The mystical longing for union with God, that love of Him is quite different from being in love with a specific religion, its doctrines, practices and rituals. (Marcus 2005:39)

Since Bawa's words have been processed through several people: the interpreter, the transcriber, the editor, and the publisher before I described it here, what follows can only be considered as an interpretation of his teachings. My objective is to describe the correlations between Bawa's teachings and those of historic themes of Sufi belief, including conceptions of the ultimate reality of existence and guidelines on how to achieve a mystical union or reunion with God. His teachings are presented through the books published by the Fellowship and are organized in the following categories: *Self-Transformation, Islam & Sufism, Mystical Explanations, Questions & Answers, Children's Stories, and Recipes*. Consistent with earlier descriptions of his teachings, the concept of "change from within" is Bawa's most prolific topic. His thoughts on the nature of the relationship between Islam and Sufism produced five books, followed by four books explaining the reality of existence. With a broad Islamic and Sufi cosmological backdrop, his books outline specific concepts and practices and often use metaphors and parables to illustrate them. For example, Bawa once described the world

as “a map, and you are the detective who must follow the clues and catch the thieves ...of mind and desire, attachments, cravings, religions, caste differences, racial and color differences, property, wealth and riches, status and exalted positions” (Muhaiyaddeen 1983:98). Webb (2006) identifies several distinct Sufi themes to Bawa’s teachings. The first is the mystical doctrine of the creation and connection of human beings to God via the “locus of Divine Wisdom in the inner heart (*qalb*) of the human being” (Webb (2006:93). Such concepts can be traced back to the writings of the Sufis Abu Muhammad al-Tustari in the late ninth century and Abu Ali al-Husain ibn Abdallah ibn Sina (Avicenna) in the tenth century C.E. Another traditional Sufi theme to Bawa’s teachings is the “emphasis on the journey to return to ‘islam’ through ‘remembrance’ (dhikr) of God, not only through ‘outer prayer and religion’, but ultimately by analyzing who we are [and] what separates us from God”(Webb 2006:94). Bawa also emphasized the Sufi belief in the need for a “true sheik” to “help one in the process of self-understanding [and] cutting away impurities to reveal the reality within and in guidance through the steps and stages of the journey and mystical-theoretical discourses” (Webb 2006:94). The overriding Sufi framework here is the belief that humans are tempted and distracted by the material world and need a special teacher to help them understand concepts and practice methods to overcome the deceptions of this world and maintain a constant awareness of God.

Throughout his books, Bawa describes seven levels of consciousness that must be understood in order to realize an individual’s potential: feeling, awareness, intellect, judgment, subtle wisdom, discerning wisdom, and divine luminous wisdom. In his model, all forms of life on Earth have some version of the first three levels: feeling or

sensory perception, awareness of self and location, and rudimentary intellect to apply the senses and awareness. According to Bawa, the other four levels are solely within the capacity of humans. First, *judgment* of the universe and self reveals the “consequences of earthly existence, such as its illusive character, its impermanence, the fleeting or temporary pleasures associated with it, its inevitable termination, its imbalance and unreality, and proclaiming therefore the need to achieve Perfection and Realisation” (Muhaiyaddeen 1972:2). Next, the *subtle wisdom* to apply judgment becomes activated only after “one’s mastery over the physical body, on the death of all desires for worldly attachments” (Muhaiyaddeen 1983:3). Once able to resist temptation, the *discerning wisdom* to distinguish right from wrong and to only choose right blossoms and “induces a reasoned self assessment, self analysis, self-criticism, and an all-revealing estimation” that restores a state of purity needed to ascend to the next level of consciousness (Muhaiyaddeen 1972:5). Ultimately, a state of *divine luminous wisdom* permits the realization that humanity exists within God, and God exists within humanity, and total surrender occurs within the individual reaching this “activated” state.

All of Bawa’s teachings are ultimately pointed towards reaching this state and he recommended specific rituals that would lead his disciples closer to it. He taught certain behaviors, such as specific forms of prayer and meditation, that he said helped evoke the states of consciousness that led towards a constant awareness of God. He said that:

The prayers you perform, the duties you do, the charity and love you give, the unity you have, and the lessons you learn are all equal to just one drop. But if you use that one drop and continue to do your duty and keep digging within, then the spring of Allah’s grace and His qualities will flow in abundance. (Muhaiyaddeen 1983:63)

He taught that through an individual's constant effort, attaining a permanent state of prayerful meditation was possible. Bawa said that this state was the "absolute and complete non-violence in thought, word and deed in relation to all created beings" (Muhaiyaddeen 1972:55). He introduced the dhikr (the Sufi practice of chanting passages from the Qur'an and attributes of God aloud in unison) at the Fellowship in Philadelphia on August 11, 1976. Explaining that while dhikr could be considered a practice to attenuate the consciousness towards God, he explained that in its truest form dhikr is the culminating expression of each of the seven states of consciousness activated and focused in prayer. He said:

...in this prayer every aspect of you must be focused on the one point – God – not straying to any other point... Your breath, your speech, your sound, the music that comes from your nerves, your blood vessels, and your bones – every one of these must be unswerving in its concentration on the one point. This is the state you have to be in when you are doing the dhikr. Then every one of the 43,242 breaths you take each day will be a prostration at the feet of Allah. It is not easy. (Muhaiyaddeen 1999:41)

Bawa's understated conclusion that the Sufi path was "not easy" may partially explain why he chose to slowly institute overtly Islamic rituals, such as the five daily prayers (*salat*), an annual month of daytime fasting during Ramadan, and undertaking a pilgrimage to Mecca (*Hajj*). Fasting was introduced to members of the Fellowship during the Islamic month of Ramadan in 1980. Of the significance of fasting, Bawa explained that:

When we understand and respect other's lives as our own, consider other's hunger as our own, look upon other's happiness as our own, and regard other's sorrow as our own; when we attain the wisdom, abilities, qualities, and actions to bring peace and comfort to all lives – that will be the grace and blessings of the fast. (Muhaiyaddeen 2005:440)

What may be regarded as “Islamic” rituals from today’s vantage point, were not instantly recognized as such when they were first introduced. In fact, Webb (1994) writes that:

Most of the early American members say they had no idea that the language [in Bawa’s discourses] had anything to do with Islam. Many American members have told me that in looking back now, they see that all along there was the language and imagery of the Qur’an, Hadith, and tasawwuf – but they did not recognize it as such, save a few members who were familiar with Sufi literature. As one member said, it was five years before Bawa said, “This is Islam.” (81)

Since most of the people in Bawa Muhaiyaddeen’s Fellowship were brought up in other religions, the transition into formal Islamic rituals caught some off guard. As one Fellowship member recalls, “when some people began to see aspects of formal religion, or things they thought of as formal religion being included, like reciting the names of God, talks on the prophet Mohammed or the five daily prayers, some people became uneasy... (Levin 2005:28). Another disciple of Bawa explains:

Take for example, the performance of *salat*, the ritual prayer of orthodoxy, which he was apparently not encouraging in the early years because most of us were supremely unready, unready to accept the possibility of some blessing, some value to be found in anything prescribed and formal, unready to hear it, unready to do it. Would we have stayed around for this in the beginning? How could we pray in a mosque of brick and stone before we had built an inner mosque, in the heart...? (Marcus 2005:230)

His method of gradually introducing Islamic practices while emphasizing tolerance among members of the Fellowship has resulted in “a ‘plurality’ of degrees of participation in events centered around Bawa and events centered around the mosque” (Webb 1994: 106). Was this plurality in participation influenced by a plurality of affiliation? Although there were no formal Islamic conversion ceremonies as such, the

fundamental phrase recited in Arabic during the dhikr ceremonies, “La ilaha il Allah,” is part of the *shahada* statement that converts to Islam recite. The key aspect of this statement is the declaration that “there is no god but God” coupled with the intention to convert to Islam. This meaning may not be applicable to members of the Fellowship, considering the reports that most claim they did not know that Bawa was establishing Islamic practices at this time.

Bawa Muhaiyaddeen also performed rite-of-passage rituals at the Fellowship, such as naming babies, conducting weddings, and overseeing burials. Bawa named all babies born to Fellowship members after his arrival and was thought to be able to perceive the true nature of these babies and to name them appropriately. Additionally, babies and their parents would receive a ritual blessing from Bawa after their fortieth day of life. Other ceremonial events included wedding ceremonies in which Bawa would take the bride’s and groom’s hands and place them together and give them each fruit and tea and remind them that they were to serve each other. While these events were not overtly linked with formal religious ceremonies, Bawa did institute strict Islamic burial rituals as explicitly outlined in the Hadith. Within twenty-four hours of death, deceased persons were to be ritually bathed, clothed in a white shroud and interred in the Fellowship’s cemetery. While they may have been some early ambivalence regarding the Islamic aspects of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen’s teachings, it seems clear that he wanted his followers to be treated as Muslims upon their death. In the next chapter, I examine just how he transformed the Fellowship established in Philadelphia from a small group of spiritual seekers communally clustered at the feet of an eastern guru into what some have called an example of “a twentieth century Islam that adhered to the foundations and to the

eternal and universal principles of the religion while it embraced the knowledge and understanding of this era” (Hermansen 2004, 60).

CHAPTER 4 THE BAWA MUHAIYADDEEN FELLOWSHIP

The Fellowship serves as a "pond" where individuals can gather to contemplate the truth and unity of God. Outwardly, this is done by studying the teachings and example of M. R. Bawa Muhaiyaddeen through the countless hours of audio and video cassettes of his discourses, many of which have also been compiled into books. Inwardly, this is done by slowly cleansing oneself through prayer and by bringing these teachings into one's daily actions. (Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship Website, 2006)

This chapter review's the formation and early history, the past and current organizational structure, the members and their roles, the buildings and places, and the rituals and meetings of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship. In his book *Guru Mani* published in the 1950s, Bawa Muhaiyaddeen referred to a "tree whose fruit would fall to the West," describing how he wanted to go to America to spread his teachings. Almost twenty years later in 1971, the entire tree fell and formed a bridge between Bawa and his followers in Sri Lanka and the emerging community he established in Philadelphia. Over the next few years Bawa would travel back and forth between his communities in Sri Lanka and Philadelphia, but would ultimately remain in the United States until his death in 1986. However, Bawa did not abandon his followers in Sri Lanka. They were organized and administrated in a similar fashion to his American Fellowship, and Sri Lankan leaders would frequently visit and consult with Bawa in the United States. In this fashion, Bawa was able to effectively manage the ashram and the Fellowship and maintain a high level of interaction between the two communities dedicated to understanding and spreading his teachings to the wider societies in which they existed.

Before issuing a visa to Bawa Muhaiyaddeen during his first visit in 1971, U.S. immigration authorities required the sponsorship of a “formally constituted legal organization” (Mauroof 1974:65). This process is partly responsible for the organizational development and structure of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship. In order to facilitate his entry, the earliest members of what would become the Fellowship pooled their resources and filed articles of non-profit incorporation with the Pennsylvania Department of State in August of 1971. Within a month of arriving in the U.S., Bawa began working on a charter for the Fellowship. As required of non-profit organizations, he established structures for governance, including a board of directors and an executive committee to make policy decisions (Webb 1994, 99). Bawa called regular meetings with the executive committee which consisted of ten to twelve people, including three presidents, three secretaries, three treasurers, and other members-at-large (Mauroof 1974:77).

While most members of the Fellowship maintained professions outside of the community, Bawa designated many individuals to perform specific duties within the Fellowship. He appointed the two imams for the mosque, a publishing department to print his books, and directed those who would cook and farm for the community. Many of these positions were salaried jobs with associated benefits like pensions, social security, etc, while others were strictly voluntary efforts without monetary compensation. Bawa also directed some members of the Fellowship to obtain training and education in specific fields. For example, he told some members to enter law school and others to learn computer systems. He was intimately aware of the activities of everyone involved

with the Fellowship and his guidelines - from the recipe for the khanji soup to the required burial rites - are still in place twenty years later.

People

Many of the members of the Fellowship were young and in transition when they met Bawa, and he insisted on their learning the skills to support themselves. The community today is represented by the widest array of professions – carpenters, doctors, psychologists, educators, and entrepreneurs, as well as full-time caretakers of the mosque and fellowship facilities. (Webb 1995:255)

On August 11, 1971, twenty-one people met Bawa Muhaiyaddeen at the airport when he first arrived in America. Of those, nine were already formal members who helped establish the Fellowship. These earliest members included both white and black middle-class Americans of Jewish and Christian backgrounds. However, at this point they did not consider involvement with the burgeoning Fellowship as “religious”. Many were involved with local yoga circuits and other “alternative” movements of the 1960s and considered themselves as “spiritual seekers”. They identified Bawa not as a Sufi sheikh, but “more as a guru in the early years, a ‘counselor-teacher’ with no formal spiritual practices, someone who manifested ‘pure-love’ and ‘got us cleaned up and off drugs’...” (Webb 2006:93).

By December of 1971, there were twenty-eight formal members and 469 interested persons. Because Bawa traveled extensively, giving talks and establishing small branches in other cities, word of the Fellowship grew and so did its regular membership. People from the surrounding neighborhoods, from all over Philadelphia, and from as far away as Montreal and San Francisco visited the Fellowship to see and hear Bawa speak (Mauroof 1974:70). By March 1973, over a hundred people packed the

Fellowship's main building each meeting. The Sri Lankans who immigrated with Bawa to the United States acted as his voice to his American followers and although several Americans became familiar enough with Tamil to assist with editing Bawa's books, very few translated Bawa on the fly during his discourses. Bawa did learn some English, but his translators almost always acted as intermediaries between him and his members of the Fellowship.

Although Mauroof estimates over 7000 people were involved at one time at all the various branches, most accounts report about a thousand members with varying levels of interaction (Webb 1994:98). Those who lived onsite were closely involved with the day-to-day activities, although many members lived further away and still maintain regular interactions with the Fellowship. Some resided within the main building and directly attended to Bawa and the various domestic functions of the Fellowship.

Places and Spaces

The Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship involves fourteen distinct locations. In addition the main building in Philadelphia, weekly meetings are held in Fellowship chapters Bawa established across the country as he traveled to spread his teachings. These branch locations include Boston, Des Moines, Detroit, Toronto, New York City, and Washington D.C. In addition, monthly meetings are held in Berkeley, Sacramento, Madison WI, London, and Colombo Sri Lanka.

The current Fellowship Hall was established as such in January 1972 after the group purchased a former synagogue in the Overbrook area of West Philadelphia, adjacent to the grounds of the Catholic Archdiocese of Philadelphia. This multi-religious location echoes the syncretic origins of Bawa in Kataragama. The main features of this

building include a large meeting room with rows of theatre-like seats facing a small platform with a pull-down projection screen. When Bawa was alive, he would often sit on this platform to give his talks. Now members use the screen behind it to present his videos during the public meetings held each daily, on weekends, and during annual celebrations. During these meetings, members gather to watch/listen to recordings of Bawa and discuss their meanings. Afterwards, meals of rice, fruits, and vegetables (as Bawa promoted vegetarianism) are prepared in a small kitchen and served buffet-style on long tables. While not all Sufis are vegetarian, Bawa encouraged the practice in consideration of the diversity of his followers and visitors to the Fellowship. Massive pots and utensils indicated the huge quantity of food produced by the Fellowship's resident cooks for regular members and visitors at each meeting. On the second floor, Bawa's room is maintained just as he kept it and is considered by his followers to be a sacred space. As Webb (1994:97) notes:

His bed, the locus of many of his discourses and much of his counsel...is still the place where members gather for "meetings," discuss "wisdom teachings," share experiences (and dreams), offer each "support," and "remember." Individuals also use this room for private reflection...and often kiss Bawa's pillow as they enter...

Several of his followers maintain private residences on the second and third floors. The third floor also houses the main office and the media equipment room where most of the recordings are currently stored and processed.

The Fellowship Mosque

The Fellowship Mosque was built in the back yard of the main building. It was completed in May of 1984, after six months of construction, most of which was done by members of the Fellowship. The exterior of the building resembles the mosque Bawa

began in Mankumban thirty years earlier. Veneered with marble and tile, it was topped with four green minarets. Engraved gold leaf Arabic letters on the front wall quote verses from the Qur'an and list the attributes of God. On the main entry's double doors is written (in Arabic and English) the names of the Prophets from Adam to Muhammad. By the time the mosque was built, Bawa had already instituted the five daily prayers (*salat*), and appointed two imams (one from America, one from Sri Lanka) to lead them in Arabic (Webb 1994:84). Bawa's directives to the imams were "not to use the *khutba* [public prayer] to beat people, but to melt their hearts," a clear indictment of the hell-fire and brimstone exhortations common at many mosques (Webb 2006:96). Bawa directed that the building was to be open for private worship for visitors of any religion, except during the times of the five daily Islamic prayers. At the mosque's first ceremony, the entire congregation recited the first chapter of the Qur'an aloud in unison. At this point, several members of the Fellowship left the community, unwilling to be associated with these unmistakable expressions of Islam. Other overtly Islamic policies accompanied the construction of the mosque. For example, traditional gender separation (consisting of a lace curtain dividing men from women) was instituted so that any visiting Muslim would feel comfortable praying. However, it is clear from my interviews and from video recordings of group meetings that Bawa did not otherwise segregate or treat men and women differently. In fact, women still hold many leadership roles within the community. Webb (2006) writes that establishing the mosque was "a public articulation of orthodox Islam that brought into high relief the question of the relationship of Bawa's teachings, indeed Sufism itself, with exoteric, 'orthodox' Islamic practice" (94). The building of the mosque also marked the turning point for the internal struggle over

Islamic affiliation that remains one of the most important issues facing the Fellowship today.

The Mazaar

After Bawa died, his body was buried and a mazaar was placed over his grave. The mazaar (a type mausoleum) is of Moghul design (think Taj Mahal) was constructed on the Fellowship's property west of Philadelphia in 1986. Set in a garden and flanked by a cemetery established for followers, the mazaar is the site of several annual celebrations. A simple kitchen and covered pavilions for eating and prayers are adjacent to a nearby garden. The mazaar has been visited by increasing numbers of pilgrims each year and is the site for the *maulid* and *'urs* ceremonies, which commemorate Bawa's birth and death respectively. His mazar is the only one of its kind in the United States and has become a popular pilgrimage destination for Sufis from all over the world. Webb (1995) write that Bawa's reputation as an authentic sheikh "seems to be gaining wider acceptance in the wider Muslim community as evidenced by increasing numbers of pilgrims from both the Fellowship and other Sufis groups in Muslim countries to the mazar, the shrine where Bawa is interred (255).

Such increasing status continues to spread his teachings, as visitors often purchase his books and tapes while visiting the Fellowship. During his fifteen-odd years in Philadelphia, Bawa's community of followers blossomed from a handful of spiritually-minded individuals to a massive extended family of thousands of people across the world that still gathers to remember and celebrate the life and teachings of their teacher. Electronic media are the primary method of preserving these teachings and members of

the Fellowship feel a great responsibility to maintain the recordings so that future generations can see and hear Bawa Muhaiyaddeen for themselves.

CHAPTER 5 ELECTRONIC MEDIA AT THE FELLOWSHIP

That's why we were so adamant about recording everything, because we recognized instantly that this was sagacity to be monitored and kept because it was so valuable we didn't want to lose it. So we reached out for the very mundane things that would help us do it, which was recording. The length and breadth of what Bawa brought is so enormous that you can't capture it just on a piece of film or tape. However, you can get a fraction and you can get exactly what you would need to know what he said for you... (Interview by Jason Keel, 2005)

The first electronic recordings of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen were made to reinforce members' personal understandings of Bawa's discourses. Over the past twenty years the application of these recordings has been transformed into much more. Recordings are routinely integrated within the activities of the Fellowship and are replayed after the daily prayers, at weekly and monthly meetings, and at annual celebrations. The Fellowship uses audio and video recordings to disseminate Bawa's teachings and members are constantly adapting to new developments in media technology, including a clear agenda to expand online. A recent pamphlet outlined the Fellowship goals for online promulgation, states that "the internet, web, search engine, and streaming audio and video technologies only dreamed about during Bawa Muhaiyaddeen's lifetime now make it possible to access his teachings from around the world". For example, segments of audio and video are available for download via the Fellowship's website. Their stated goal is to make the majority of the recordings fully text-searchable online with instant access to transcriptions, audio, and video collections. Before this can be done, they must complete

a project to build a hermetically-sealed building within which they will preserve the audio and video tapes, cds, and DVDs. A sterile workstation inside will contain the equipment to transfer the recordings to various digital formats for dissemination.

Audio

In the early months of the Fellowship, many members recorded Bawa Muhaiyaddeen's talks with tape recorders for their own individual use. After thirty minutes their tapes would run out and a series of clicks would interrupt the meeting as the tapes were flipped over and reinserted. Since Bawa often spoke rapidly for up to eight hours in one sitting, people had to change tapes as many as ten times each session. As one member recalls, "that went on for two or three years, until maybe '75 or so, at which point Bawa said, 'Let's not do this. We'll make sure that we have one fellowship recording and everybody can have a copy afterward, but we don't want all these tape recorders running'" (Fieldnotes by Jason Keel, 2005). It soon became clear to the technically savvy members that a single "official" recording would be in the best interests of everyone. It would eliminate the distraction of multiple individual recorders, provide a modest means of income for the burgeoning community (by selling them), and most importantly to everyone involved – help spread Bawa Muhaiyaddeen's teachings.

The disturbances helped prompt the adoption in 1975 of an ingenious master recording process. In 1976, the Fellowship bought a Crown ten-inch reel recorder and began to record Bawa Muhaiyaddeen and his Tamil-to-English translators on separate audio channels. This recording process permitted Bawa's voice to be muted when the English interpretation was needed and allowed the interpreters to be silenced when double-checking or reviewing Bawa's original speech. A frequent motive in this

double-checking process was to better understand Bawa's Tamil vocabulary, especially his frequent use of puns. Bawa actively engaged in a reflexive process, utilizing the recordings to check himself by having what he said read back to him. These master recordings have been through several technical media transformations from reel-to-reel, to Betamax, to DAT, to the present format of Compact Discs.

During the first years of the Fellowship, when Bawa traveled extensively to spread his message, the majority of his followers remained at the Fellowship building in Philadelphia. This was the first times that they were without Bawa's daily discourses. As the following conversation from my fieldwork explains, it was at this point in the Fellowship's history that members first began to use previously recorded audio and video of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen's talks as a substitute source of his spiritual guidance.

Q: Can you tell me how the recordings began to be used in the meetings?

A: Well, when Bawa was in Ceylon. Bawa said if I'm not here and you are going to hold a meeting, a regular meeting, it should be about my teaching. If you are going to talk, you should talk about your experience related to these teachings, not about something else, not about politics, not about this, not about that. The whole purpose is to focus on these teachings. And so over the years, people would be guided to a fairly regular schedule. When Bawa was still around, it was Tuesday evenings, Thursdays evenings, Saturday evenings, and Sunday mornings.

Q: So when Bawa said keep your meetings about his teachings, how was that leap made instead of talking about it to playing one of his tapes?

A: It's just another source of material to get the teachings out. It was up to the person who was giving the meeting to then make a request as to whether they wanted to play a videotape or an audio tape. And then based on their request, we would try to make something available to them.

Q: So you would play a tape and then talk about what he said in the meeting?

A: Some people were shy and they would just say welcome and turn the tape on and then when the tape was done, they would say thank you very much, the bookstore is open...any new people here we welcome you...there's tea...blah blah blah and that was it. Other people would speak from their heart and speak from the experiences related to Bawa and then play a videotape.

It is clear that Bawa Muhaiyaddeen directed that his teachings were to remain the focus at Fellowship meetings when he was not present to deliver them. Accordingly, members of the Fellowship turned to the recordings they made over the previous months and integrated their playback into the regular schedule of meetings. This set the stage for the eventual acceptance of electronic recordings as the appropriate primary sources of Bawa's teachings after his death.

Publishing: The Sequence from Speech to Book

Before publication was possible, the transcript first had to be corrected by one of the few who knew Tamil well enough to undertake this, then it had to be amended by someone who knew English well enough. After several rounds of corrections, the final version was sometimes translated back to Bawa who knew exactly what he had said originally, and if there were discrepancies, he would pounce on it with, "I never said anything like that," or something similar. (Marcus 2005:110)

The Fellowship Press publishes books transcribed from electronic recordings of Bawa and there are several books in various stages of the publishing process. Most of these publications began as audio recordings and are broadly assembled around a specific topic or uninterrupted talk by Bawa in a conscious effort to avoid condensing or interpreting his words. This is one of the most important processes to understand about the Fellowship and I will let members speak for themselves about how and why it is done.

Q: What is the relationship between the audio tapes and the books?

A: Well, it was set up by Bawa that these audio tapes should be transcribed. There were two or three or four typewriters in the third floor office. At that time, people would really want these types of jobs, because you would be able to slowly listen to Bawa, and understand him and type it down. It would give you a much deeper understanding so we had people standing in line, wanting to do this. Bawa had to have it done quickly so that gave another initiative.

Q: Can you explain the process a little more?

A: Okay. It goes, from the original tape, we make a typing copy. In the old days, it was on a typewriter. Then it would go to the Tamil translator, who translated it, who would take it back. Somebody logged everything by hand. What tape it's on, how long it is, who's the translator, etc. Then it goes back to the Tamil person and they make sure, because in the spontaneous translation you don't catch all the sentences. So they would re-do the whole thing according to the Tamil edit. Then it would go to the English editor, who might work with the Tamil editor to make sure that they're editing it correctly, and that they're using words in English that he really did say. To the best of their ability, they do that. And then sometimes, Bawa would say, "Read it back to me." So then the translator would sit there and read back what the English was and Bawa would make changes.

Q: So Bawa was actually involved in this editing process?

A: Oh, absolutely. He wanted to know everything that went out. When that was published, he said, "Don't change a word." He said, "You may want to change it. You may think you understand it, but wise people will come for hundreds of years and read that book. You should not change a word. Everyone will understand it in a different way." (Field notes, September 05, 2005)

This publishing cycle is analogous to a laser, in which a light is bounced between two mirrors, refining the focus until a concentrated ray passes through the last mirror and emerges as a beam. Bawa's speech is the light source and bounces between the two mirrors of translation/transcription and editing/proofreading, until finally emerging refined as English text in a book.

Video

Bawa told us, the people who were recording the video, that while we're videoing the meeting, we must, at some point, during every discourse, turn the camera and scan for our children who are here. He said, "Years and years after I am gone and you are looking at this, you will remember what you were doing and it will help you to stay with the task." (Field notes by Jason Keel, 2005)

The first video recordings of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen were made in the early 1970s. These few simple frames started a process that culminated in the recording of every waking moment in the last years of his life. In total, over twelve hundred hours of recordings were made. It would take fifty days to watch all of it. The content varies, but usually portrays Bawa speaking at length (up to eight hours) about some specific point.

The main video project involves duplicating all of the original electronic recordings made of Bawa. A benefactor recently bequeathed a significant amount of money and specifically designated the funds to assist in the preservation of these recordings. Most of the technical work has been outsourced to a private company that duplicates the recordings to several formats, including DVDs. Besides completing the preservation and backup process, the Fellowship's executive committee is also planning to build an archive vault and hermetically-sealed clean room in which to safely store and process the recordings. Seen as integral to the existence of the Fellowship, one member explained that:

...without these tapes, there is no fellowship. There is no reason for anyone to come to the house to research anything, because if we didn't have them anymore, we were negligent, we were irresponsible keepers of this light, of this pond, this fountain. We didn't protect it. So now you take all of your money, and you build that room first. Then the house has a purpose. The purpose is to be part of that room. The room isn't part of the house. The house is part of that room. That room is the legacy that will

receive children from all ages who come and go. (Field notes, September 05, 2005)

Although it may seem that the use of media free the community from dependence on a specific location, they must first ensure these recordings are preserved. There is a real danger of losing the material to the deteriorating effects of time. While time may be considered as a threat to the recordings, in some ways these recordings permit Bawa Muhaiyaddeen and members of the Fellowship to transcend time. An account from my fieldwork illustrates how video enables members to connect with Bawa, with each other, and even with themselves in the past. After the noon prayer, I was invited to Bawa's room, where videos were played at the same time each day. Opening the door, I entered a white room with green carpet. A small bed was neatly made near a window. Several people were already there, watching a television. On the small screen there was Bawa speaking in the same room decades earlier. The camera recorded Bawa as he sat and spoke, occasionally panned to the audience, and randomly zoomed in on someone listening in rapt attention (as Bawa requested in the passage beginning this section). In the room with me, there was a woman who sat only three feet from the TV, staring intently. As I found a seat on the floor, I realized that woman sitting very close to the TV was also on the screen in the video being displayed. She was in Bawa's audience at the time of recording and was now watching herself, all these years later. As I considered the temporal and spiritual implications, I suddenly became aware of an astonishing image. Light from the window was bathing the woman as she sat. Her face was highlighted and I could see her reflection in the television screen. At the same time the video we were watching zoomed to her sitting in that audience, so that her head filled the screen. The

effect was that I could see both images at the same time. The reflection of her illuminated face was superimposed on a recorded image of her face decades ago. She sat there looking into her own eyes across time and I could see her simultaneously in the past and present. This powerful example illustrates that for members of the Fellowship electronic recordings are more than records of what Bawa said and did. They are able to bear witness to themselves, see themselves with their spiritual leader when he was alive and remember how they felt when he spoke.

Media and Spirituality

I witnessed firsthand how these media also serve as spiritual guides for Bawa's disciples. During my fieldwork, my host family was overwhelmed by thousands of birds looking to roost every night. Apparently, their favorite spot were the trees in the family's neighborhood, including one large tree in my host family's backyard. The waste produced by the birds overnight fouled the yard beneath and the noises they made were becoming a serious annoyance. Each night, the family's attempts to drive the birds away would fail. One night, someone wondered aloud if Bawa could help them. Someone else said they thought they remembered a parable Bawa once told that mentioned birds in trees. They turned to one of the books published by the Fellowship and quickly located the passage. In Bawa's parable, trees represented the temptations and distractions of the material world that line the path of human life towards God. Birds were the effects of these negative aspects, fouling those who carelessly or arrogantly dallied beneath. After thinking and talking about the passages' relevance to their problem, they acted by organizing their neighbors in a collective effort to scare away the birds each night and

prevent them from roosting anywhere in the neighborhood. After a few nights, they were successful, bird-free and happy.

Conclusions

The ease with which Bawa and his original members used audio and video media is clearly a sign of the historical and social context of Bawa's American disciplines...one sees in fact a correspondence between Bawa's mode of teaching and the pattern of Sufi teachers before him, who used the vernacular and indigenous cultural forms they encountered, transforming them into media of transmission of Islamic spiritual teachings and values. (Webb 1994:97-98)

For the last twenty years, members of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship have been using electronic media in a number of ways. Members who are leading a discussion often replay certain videos to enhance or supplement their understanding and communication of Bawa's teachings. Individuals regularly replay audio and video recordings in their cars and homes to maintain a constant connection with Bawa and his teachings. Members may also randomly turn to recordings when they are looking for spiritual assistance, much like flipping to a random page of the Torah, Gospel, or Qur'an and attempting to reconcile the passage found with a personal decision or question. In an official capacity, the Fellowship converts the electronic recordings of Bawa into books which they disseminate among themselves and to the public. In short, there is little discernable difference between the ways members of the Fellowship treat electronic recordings of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen and the ways followers of other faiths treat the sacred teachings of their respective spiritual leaders.

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSIONS

In the preceding account, I described how and why the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship is using electronic media in a religious context. We have gained some insights here into the central questions raised at the outset, namely: what local circumstances or broader forces led this particular religious community to place such emphasis on the recording, preservation, reproduction and playback of audio and visual media? In terms of the Anthropology of Religion, my concerns went beyond a simple focus on the use of media and asked questions such as the following: Are all Sufis Muslims? Does the Fellowship identify itself as Muslim? Have the original teachings of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen been recast into a mold with a new emphasis or even with content that differs from his original message?

In the course of this paper, I discussed three quasi-universal themes facing religious communities, themes which surfaced as important within the Fellowship. The first theme is the issue of affiliation, that is, the manner in which members of religious communities define themselves and differentiate themselves from the larger societies in which they exist. The self-definition and the internal associations among a community's members work to continuously transform the community from within. To gain a better understanding of how religious affiliation is at play at the Fellowship, I have tried to examine how this suburban Sufi community defines itself (or refrains from defining itself) in terms of affiliation with Sufism at large – a question that necessarily raised the

broader issue of Islamic identity into consideration. The second general dilemma faced by the Fellowship, as it is faced by many communities in other religious traditions under the leader of powerful charismatic figures, is that of succession, which determines the sequence of leadership within the community. In examining how the Fellowship has dealt (or has chosen not to deal) with the issue of succession, concepts from the Anthropology of Religion intersect with those from American studies of New Religious Movements. Beginning with the former, I presented precedents from earlier Sufi communities to provide some understanding of the underlying systems of belief that affect how succession has been historically administered. These Islamic and Sufi archetypes were important to consider as I compared and contrasted them with the contemporary corporate organizational models found in many American religious communities. The third general theme, currently of major importance in most world religions, concerns the use of media technology to preserve and disseminate sacred teachings. Anthropologists who have studied the visual components of human culture long ago learned that since the earliest petroglyphs were etched into stone nearly ten thousand years ago, humans have been recording spiritual messages using the media technology at hand. The integration of electronic forms of media are transforming this process, no longer limiting access in the form of printed text and oral traditions. Religious communities are creating new forms of spiritual expressions that overcome previous limitations of time and space. In this final chapter of my paper, I will analyze how each of these general issues -- affiliation, succession, and the use of media -- are contextualized and managed at the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship.

Affiliation in Religious Communities

The determinations of the participants in a socio-historical enterprise become precedents that set the meaning, and practical applications of a text, even if the text is sacred, such as the Qur'an. Therefore when we speak about the meaning of Islam today, we are really talking about the product of cumulative enterprises that have generated communities of interpretation through a long span of history. (El Fadl 2003:39)

While most (if not all) members of the Fellowship would identify themselves as Sufi, many (but, interestingly, not all) also place themselves within the larger Islamic community, as is true of Sufis throughout history. Islamic critics of Sufism may have had doubts about the Islamic character of Sufism, but there has been no doubt in that regard among Sufis themselves. Members of the Fellowship who consider themselves Muslims recite the morning dhikr in Arabic, perform the five daily prayers within the Fellowship mosque, and refer to the Qur'anic context of Bawa's teachings. In terms of numbers, recognizing the absence of hard data on the matter, I would estimate that of the several hundred of people who claim adherence to the Fellowship, probably 25% would classify themselves as Muslims in the sense that they observe the outer "requirements" of the religion. It is these fully Islamic members who are particularly active in reaching out to the larger Islamic community and generate most of the new growth for the Fellowship, from recent immigrants looking for the familiar to second-generation Muslims exploring alternative Islamic manifestations in America (Webb 2005:94).

But what of those for whom Islam is not a major issue? There are those members of the Fellowship who perceive and promote the universality of Bawa's message, with clear expressions for tolerance, acceptance, and the futility of organized religion. These

members do not emphasize Islamic rituals and remind themselves and others of Bawa's oft-repeated cautions and reservations about organized, institutionalized religion. While these descriptions can not completely portray the myriad perspectives Bawa's disciples have regarding his teachings and the direction of the Fellowship, they do provide insight into one of the biggest issues facing the community, that of Islamic affiliation.

This account reminds us that for those of us who study religion, "there is a danger of overrepresenting tradition and belief; we tend to systematize, categorize and construct a view of religious reality as if it were a *thing*" (Greenway and Lewis 2003:262). The issue of Muslim identity is a complex contemporary consideration and it is tempting to describe the Fellowship in this light - as factions arguing over what it means to be a Sufi or a Muslim. However, it must be understood that the Fellowship is more diverse, with individual members dedicated to their own paths to God, guided by Bawa's teachings and generally proud of their differing perspectives. In this vein, some members of the Fellowship are actively calling for concise interpretations of the teachings of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen. While some followers see how more succinctly edited books may increase distribution of the essentials of his teachings to a wider audience (and increase much-needed revenue), other members are hesitant because of Bawa directives not to alter what he "said". However, many members question if there can really be a literal reading of his teachings for those who do not understand Tamil. For example, when he spoke, Bawa used the Tamil word for "God", but in his books, the term is alternatively translated in English as "God" or "Allah". Arguing that Bawa's words have already been interpreted, they might ask why not take this a step further and reach new readers by condensing some of his lengthier discourses into more accessible publications.

Do anthropologists have to be concerned with a yes, no, or maybe answer as to whether the Fellowship movement fits into what would be called Islamic? The answer to that question itself is perhaps yes, maybe, or no. On the one hand anthropologists of religion should be interested in describing the evolution of beliefs, rituals, and leadership structures, and identifying the forces that cause some systems to go in one direction and others in another. Precise classification becomes less important than the description and explanation of transforming processes. On the other hand current world events appear to indicate that Islam, though internally heterogeneous in terms of beliefs and practices, does constitute a unified force in opposition to the non-Muslim world, particularly in Europe and North America. The definition of what is Islam and who is a Muslim cannot be dismissed as trivial. Had Bawa lived today, one wonders what his position would have been on current world events and on the questions of what is Islam and who is a Muslim.

For the purposes of this paper, I would classify the Fellowship as an Islamic movement in its origins insofar as the majority of all Sufi communities are Islamic in their origins. But because of the large percentage of initial followers who were not Muslims, and because of the post-Bawa leadership roles assumed by those who wanted their spirituality without Islamic doctrine or ritual, the Fellowship is certainly not an example of a traditional Islamic or even Sufi movement. This assessment is shared by many members of the Fellowship who are well-aware of the unique qualities of their community that inhibit broad categorizations. As has been the case with Sufi communities in other times and places, it is the recorded sayings and writings of the

sheikh (in this case Bawa Muhaiyaddeen) and not the Qur'an, around which disciples energies are ultimately organized.

Bawa himself seemed to oscillate on the issue of Islamic identity for himself and his followers, on the one hand building a mosque, but on the other hand implying that spiritual links to God are more important than Islamic rituals, and at least implying that non-Muslims presumably have as much access to God as Muslims. The electronic media captured his ambivalence, an ambivalence which has therefore been transmitted to and perpetuated among his followers. In this case the electronic media have perpetuated not only the teachings of Bawa but also his classificatory ambiguity with respect to Islamic orthodoxy.

Regardless of how they proceed from here, members of the Fellowship are united by the overriding belief that Bawa Muhaiyaddeen taught them how they could maintain a connection with God. Through their prayers, meditations, and even technology, they are actualizing his teachings and transforming their lives and the lives of those around them. And through these efforts they “may well step beyond Sufism, or any other ism. At such a point, the questions of whether Sufism is Islamic or not, or whether this path is superior or inferior to others, are largely irrelevant. But until we reach that point (whatever we may call it), the Sufi conundrum continues” (Kinney 1994).

Succession within Religious Communities

The question of succession is analytically distinct from the question of Islamic identity, but linked in real life. There are two factors affecting succession at the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship. The first is how members of the Fellowship conceptualize Bawa's role as spiritual leader. While many Sufi leaders are considered as enlightened

teachers, Bawa was thought of as something much more. While painfully aware of his corporeal absence, members of the Fellowship still address prayers or petitions to Bawa Muhaiyaddeen. As I described in chapter two, his status as the *qutb*, or the center of spiritual authority for this era, included the belief that he was able to transcend death and maintain a presence at the Fellowship. The Fellowship's use of electronic media supports this belief with the intense and tangible effects from seeing and hearing Bawa Muhaiyaddeen on a daily basis. Such use of media technology provides sensory experience that enhances Bawa's presence and inhibits his replacement. This situation makes it highly unlikely that a new spiritual leader will replace him. The electronic media also forestall the emergence of a successor, another leader who could push the movement either into or out of Islam.

The second factor affecting succession at the Fellowship relates to its organizational structure. Although Bawa instituted most, if not all, of the directives for the Fellowship, he did not appoint anyone to succeed him. De facto leadership has been managed by the Board of Trustees and the Executive Committee he established twenty years ago. These structures, imposed by federal and state governments, have certainly affected the transfer of leadership at the Fellowship. In his study of New Religious Movements, Melton (1991) argues that the American legal system and its requirements for non-profit tax status for religious organizations is affecting stability after a spiritual leader's death. In this scenario, the collective nature of the board is designed to resist the instability caused by the death of a founder. The American legal system dictates structures specifically designed to stabilize and decentralize organizations like the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship. Originally imposed for tax purposes, these corporate

structures have, as a by-product, “given new religious groups an additional stability that no single leader could bequeath” (Miller 1991, 10). That is, the American legal and fiscal authorities created conditions under which a juridical entity emerged that made less necessary the immediate appointment of a charismatic leader. This interaction creates a new slant on the issue of the separation of “church” and state in American society and would be a useful direction for further academic inquiry.

Since the structures at the Fellowship were in place and active before Bawa Muhaiyaddeen passed away, there was not a sudden vacuum of organization leadership threatening to dissolve the community he established. Certainly his death was a devastating blow to his followers, but because of the ways and reasons he organized the administration of the Fellowship, its structural stability remains to this day. Since these organizational issues are found in other American religious communities, there may be a general process here worth exploring more, leading to a hypothesis that the likelihood of a successor being appointed to a spiritual leader is in inverse proportion to the strength and complexity of the bureaucracy which emerged around that leader during his life. This thesis cannot test that hypothesis but can at least identify it as worthy of pursuit.

Media Technology and Religious Communities

Religion undergirds the production and reading of media discourse; while the images, narrative, and symbols of the media become resources in the ongoing construction of individual and collective religious identity.
(Clark and Hoover 1997:32)

Electronic media have been utilized by religious communities for decades. American churches began broadcasting radio programs as early as the 1920s. Weekly religious television broadcasting began in the 1950s and today there are entire religious

cable networks broadcasting to millions of faithful viewers. The increasing application of media technology within religious communities can be viewed in terms of a general transformation of human societies using such technology. As one scholar argues:

...what is being reflected may be understood within the framework of a major paradigm shift from largely nation-based cultures in which print was the dominant medium, to world-linked cultures in which electronic-based means of communication have become dominant. (Horsfield 1997:168)

This is certainly the case at the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, a community with significant ties to religious communities in other times and places, that is applying media technology to record and preserve the sacred teachings of their spiritual leader. However, there are some important differences between the Fellowship and other religious movements' use of electronic media. There is a distinction between the recording of the leader and the broadcasting of his message to the world at large. Additionally, the Fellowship is unique in that it deals with the televised messages of a dead leader. Despite these important distinctions, there are shared characteristics and unique characteristics. The Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship shares with other religious communities the use of electronic media. It differs, however, in not recording living voices but only the voices of the dead leader. This phenomenon is not without problematic effects, especially in its spiritual applications. For example, if Bawa's disciples were not clear about a certain point as he was speaking to them, they could have asked a question or made a comment that may have prompted a specific response from him. Now, while the majority of Bawa's teachings may be preserved and available, they cannot be interactive in the same way. Discussing similar phenomenon, Ong (1988) writes,

Writing and print and the computer are all ways of technologizing the word. Once the word is technologized, there is no effective way to criticize what technology has done with it...and such considerations alert us to the paradoxes that beset the relationships between the original spoken word and all its technological transformations. (79-80).

Thus, a paradox has been created where spiritual teachings are both more accessible via technology, but less accessible in terms of meaningful interaction between the teacher and his students. Additionally, no new leaders have emerged whose teachings can provoke questions. However, since a wide range of material, such as Bawa's songs and mundane day-to-day conversations, were recorded alongside his more esoteric discourses, the Fellowship retains more of Bawa message and meaning than would have been possible by preserving only his formal teachings in writing alone. In this way, electronic media has transformed the ability of this religious community to preserve and disseminate the spiritual teachings of their leader.

Implications for Anthropology

Media studies are likewise moving away from a paradigm that reduced media to the function of transporting and circulating the information needed for rapid industrial progress. The focus is shifting to the many actors who are creating cultural meaning in the forum of the media and in the struggle of audiences to define their identities in interaction with the media. (Rowland and Morley qtd in White 1997:39)

At the beginning of this thesis, I questioned what local circumstances or broader forces that led this particular religious community to place such emphasis on the recording, preservation, reproduction and playback of audio and visual media. It is clear now that the local circumstances are those from America that include the organizational structures dictated by U.S. legal codes and the availability of and expertise with media technology to members of the Fellowship. The broader forces are those that are informed

by historic archetypes and relationships, such as Islamic/Sufi identity, Sufi leadership and succession characteristics, and the relationship between media and religion. In this case study we have seen a prime example of the argument and prediction that

One can think of media containing or mediating (that is, passing on) ritual, but the converse is also true: ritual may “contain” media and media devices...it may be that the world will witness not just media-assisted liturgy but media-centered liturgy. (Grimes 2002:223)

In a unique manifestation of a Sufi community, the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship has moved beyond the recording of spiritual messages towards a focus on media. After their leader’s death, members of the Fellowship have focused on the electronic recordings of his sacred teachings. On the one hand, the use of video technology by the Fellowship can be seen as a unique application of technology towards religious or spiritual ends. But on the other hand, is this really that different than previous examples spiritual followers turning to the recorded segments of their leader’s teachings? While the application of electronic media with the Fellowship is primarily used to transmit Bawa’s teachings, these recordings contain more information than just his spiritual messages. They also contain contextual information that can be analyzed for a deeper understanding of the community. For example, I have already described how Bawa’s egalitarian treatment of men and women was observable in many of the videos. What else can be learned by studying cultural information recorded onto electronic media, such as who translated Bawa’s words and how, or which members sat closest to him, or what clothing he and his followers wore? Such an endeavor is a key component in the field of Visual Anthropology and would benefit from collaboration with members of the community who are best able to interpret and explain contextual meanings. One scholar recommends that social researchers try

...engaging with the visual not simply as a mode of recording data or illustrating text, but as a medium through which new knowledge and critiques may be created. The methodological implications of this stress collaboration, not solely between researcher and informant, but also between the visual and textual and the producers of images and words. (Pink 2001:11)

In this paper, I have combined the research of religious communities with the research of visual/media components of human society. In the United States, the application of media technology within religious communities is becoming increasingly sophisticated. The examples I have described in my case study of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship can not be considered only incidental products of the contemporary intersection of religious and technology. Anthropologists must consider the historical context of religious communities and attempt to understand through collaborative and reflexive approaches the effects of internal archetypes upon the application of electronic media. By contextualizing the past, we may better understand the present, not only for religious communities, but for human society in general as we build our future.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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