

*A Short History of the
Awliya' Allah of
Guyana*

A study of the role played by Muslim saints and the tariqah of the Indian sub-continent in the development of Islam in Guyana in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century

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Dedicated to my Beloved Murshid al-Kamil

Qaid-e-Ahl Sunnah Hazrat Maulana
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*Rahmatullah Alaih
May Allah Raise him in Rank*

The history of The Awliya Allah of Guyana

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Since my first contact with Pir Ameer Saheb in 1985 whilst on an assignment in Austin, Texas, his knowledge and humble demeanor has since pre-occupied my imagination. Although I cannot recall exactly who introduced me to Pir Ameer Saheb, my admiration and love for him has never ceased. His extensive achievements in the fields of law, humanity and Islam can easily fill many pages. However, due to humility, I am always reminded by him that he feels perfect contentment by being referred to as Allah's servant or Allah ke bandah.

Pir Ameer Saheb is *khilafah* for Qadiriyya, Naqshbandi and Chisti tariqahs and is currently retired in the USA where his humanitarian work continues as he continues to heal countless individuals through love and devotion to Almighty Allah and His Beloved Prophet Salalaahu alahi wa Sallam.

Forward

[to be inserted]

By Prof. Shahid Raza Naimi

Chapter 1

Introduction

Wherever Allah *Azza wa Jal* (The Mighty and Majestic) wishes to establish his Dominion, He sends his friends who are known as the *Awliya' Allah*. Whether, it may be Guyana, Hong Kong, Australia or Senegal.

Those who are from the former British colony Guyana at the edge of the Amazon forest in South America, may be surprised to learn that the mantle of Islam was laid and preserved primarily by the effort of Muslim saints.

In the *Qur'an al-Kareem* (Holy Quran) such people are referred to as *Awliya' Allah*, which literally translates to 'The Friends of God'.

Alaa inna Awliya-ullahi laa khawfun 'alayhim wa laa him yahzanun - Nay they are the Friends of God, no fear shall come upon them neither shall they grieve. Holy Qur'an, Sura Yunus, verse 62

Muslims who have been separated from their ancestral homelands for a number of generations and who have not had the opportunity to experience life in a Muslim culture, will find the concept of sainthood in Islam somewhat strange. Yet, if one were to visit the Indian sub-continent, the Middle East or Africa, the shrines of their saints are strewn across the landscape. In these places the works and achievements of such pious people have been preserved and their life stories are being celebrated and told to successive generations. The history of the Muslim world is inextricably linked to the lives of these sages who dedicated their entire existence for the pleasure of their Creator.

Enemies of Islam

In Guyana, however, this has not been the case. Most are unaware that such pious men and women arrived amongst the general population of African slaves and Indian indentured labourers. They lived and walked amongst the new arrivals to this distant land. It is this history that we are concerned with

in this treaty. An account of this nature, up until now, has escaped the annals of history in Guyana and has almost been erased from our collective memory.

The reasons for this lack of information is not due to carelessness on the part of the Muslims of Guyana, but due to a systematic erosion of the spiritual dimension of Islam from the hearts of Muslims over successive generations by external forces in the form of British colonialism working hand-in-hand with Christian missionaries.

Our forefathers were aware of the relentless attack on their faith in their homelands. History has recorded the struggles of Uthman Don Fodio in West Africa in the 1790's and that of the uprising of the Muslim sepoys in Meerut, India in 1857 against the British occupiers. The British was engaged in a tirelessly campaign for over two centuries to undermine Islam not only in the land of our forefathers but wherever they took us.

If the results of a century's missionary effort in British Guiana are to be preserved, the Christians Church must make a more determined effort to combat the influence of the East Indians. The struggle of the future in British Guiana will be between Christ and Mohammed. [New York Times Magazine, October 29, 1911]

changing of names...by misspelling anglicisation of names.

Chapter 2

Spiritual influence from West Africa

O you who believe, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority from among you. Holy Qur'an Surah An-Nisa, Verse 59

Muslims first arrived in South America from West Africa during the days of the European slave trade in the early 16th century. Prior to the European colonization of Africa and the work of Christian Missionaries, most if not all of Africa comprised of civilized Muslim societies. It is therefore not surprising to learn that the Muslims who arrived in the new world as slaves were practicing *sunni* Muslims who followed the *madhab* (Islamic school of jurisprudence) of Imam Shafi *Radi Allahu Ta'ala Anhu* and Imam Malik *Radi Allahu Ta'ala Anhu*.

Recent research has indicated that:

“Muslim slaves included a disproportionate number of the intellectual elite in West Africa, men far better prepared than the average farmer to sustain their faith. Being Muslim helped them to do well in the horrifyingly difficult circumstances of American chattel slavery” [Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas by Sylviane A. Diouf]

We know that in the slave population Allah *Azza wa Jal* in His Infinite Wisdom, infused amongst them, men of knowledge and understanding. These *‘ulama* (scholars) and saints have miraculously been able to accomplish what few can ever imagine possible given the inhumane conditions they found themselves in.

“As a result, the last Muslims of slave background died in the 1920s, though the last semi-Muslim (a person who outwardly accepted Christianity) was alive in Brazil as late as 1959.” [Servants of

These selected learned Muslims within the general slave population had knowledge of *shariah* (Islamic law) and also a mastery of Arabic, the language of the Qur'an al-Kareem which was taught at centres of learning in places like Timbuktu, which is situated in the West African nation of Mali.

African Islamic Civilization

We know that by the 12th century, Timbuktu became a celebrated center of Islamic learning and a commercial establishment. Timbuktu had three universities and 180 Quranic schools. These universities were the Sankore University, Jingaray Ber University and Sidi Yahya University. *This was the golden age of Africa.* Books were not only written in Timbuktu, but they were also imported and copied there. There was an advanced local book copying industry in the city. The universities and private libraries contained unparalleled scholarly works. The famous scholar of Timbuktu Ahmad Baba who was among those forcibly exiled in Morocco claimed that his library of 1600 books had been plundered, and that his library, according to him, was one of the smaller in the city.

The Islam which survived for almost three centuries in this part of the world under brutal and authoritarian regimes was not the open and external Islam we might expect to be practiced. Rather it was a religion suppressed by the Christian slave masters. For Islam to have survived, it would have had to be practiced secretly and covertly. This we know was done through secret brotherhoods and *halaqas* (gatherings), under the watchful eyes of the spiritual guides amongst the slaves. They thought their followers the importance of reliance on inner resources through *dhikr* (remembrance of Allah) with the aim being *fana* or in complete absorption in God.

In fact, this system of Islam known as *tariqah* or spiritual covert Islam has successfully preserved the Muslim faith in various places throughout history. Recently, we saw an example of this how the Naqshbandi and Qadiriyya tariqahs were able to preserve Islam in the Central Asia and

Chechnya during communism for almost a century after the fall of Soviet Russia in 1981. [Meeting on the Road: Cosmopolitan Islamic Culture and the Politics of Sufism by R. James Ferguson]

It is no surprise that men of high learning and of great *darajah* (spiritual status) were interspersed within the slave population of North and South America and the West Indies. Such men would have undoubtedly been influenced if not themselves keen advocates of the spiritual sciences found in Islam, so prevalent in West Africa today in places like Senegal where most Muslims are members of one of the Sufi brotherhoods. The two largest orders are the Tijaniyyah and the Muridiyyah, although the pan-Islamic Qadiriyyah and the smaller Layene orders are also represented in parts of the country and elsewhere in West Africa.

We know of the influence of the sufi tariqah in Jamaica by the following:

Yet, despite the forced baptism there were still West African Muslim slaves, who continued in spirit, if not in reality, to study and observe Islamic life. Some of them even resisted slavery and led slave riots. In December 1831-January 1832, there was an island-wide rebellion. The rebellion, misinterpreted as the Baptist War, is reported to be in response to the call for jihad made through *Wathiqah*, or *Wathiqat Ahl Sudan*, which exhorted all Muslims to be true and faithful to religion if they wished to enter Paradise. Apparently, this document was written in Africa in 1789 by the great West African Muslim scholar and reformer, Othman dan Fodio (1754–1817), and was circulated in Jamaica in the late 1820s, reaching the hands of Muhammad Kaba, a Muslim slave of Spice Grove Estate who had been baptized and known by his Christian name Robert Tuffit or Robert Peart. Of Mandingo parentage, Kaba came from Bouka, a short distance east of Timbuktu, and belonged to a well-to-do family learned in law and Islamic teachings. Apparently Kaba, who studied the Qur’anic law at Timbuktu, which was then regarded to be one of the most important centers of Arabic and Muslim studies, was a *marabout* and a Sufi. So strong was Muhammad Kaba’s belief in Islam that never in practice or in spirit did he give up his faith. Even as a member of the Moravian Church, Kaba and many of his fellow brethren who had gone through the process of baptism were practicing Islam. These Muslim slaves, who were inspired by the *Wathiqah*, which called on the Muslims to wage Jihad and resist slavery, rebelled against their white owners. Commonly known as the

Baptist Rebellion or the Baptist War, the slave's revolt of 1832 wrought havoc of irreparable dimension to the plantation system in Jamaica and hastened the Emancipation Act, which abolished slavery in the British Empire, in 1833. [Radical Islam in the Caribbean Basin: A Local Problem or a Global Threat? By Moshe Terdman]

Fulani Legacy

Given that this form of spiritual potency existed within Islam amongst the African slave population, Muslims of Guyana are still referred to as “fula” by the non-Muslim population in this country. The term links us to our West African Fulani ancestry and proud we are of it.

This focus of this study is not the West African Muslim experience in Guyana, but on their sunni brothers whose forefathers came from the vast Indian sub-continent from as far north as Afghanistan, Uttra Pradesh and Bihar to the southern city of Madras, all of whom without exception followed the *madhab* of Imam Abu Hanifa *Radi Allahu Ta'ala Anhu* with some of their notable companions being deeply attached to the Qadiriyya, Chistiyya and Naqshbandi sufi orders of the sub-continent.



Chapter 3

The arrival of Indian Awliya

Muslims arrived in Guyana as laborers or *coolies* who toiled in almost slave-like conditions in the coastal sugar plantations of Berbice, Demerara and Essequibo. The condition in which these indentured laborers lived were so wretched that one can only imagine that religion and its practice might have been the furthest thing from the minds of the average laborer. Yet, despite this reality they found themselves in, ‘somehow’ Islam survived in Guyana. Some might claim, that for some time, it even flourished.

Immigration records indicate that the majority of Muslims who migrated to Guyana came from the urban centres of Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow, Agra, Fyzabad, Ghazipur, Rampur, Basti and Sultanpur. Small batches also came from Karachi in Sind, Lahore, Multan and Rawalpindi in the Punjab, Hyderabad, in the Deccan, Srinagar in Kashmir, and Peshawar and Mardan in the Northwest Frontier i.e. Afghan areas - Appendix I has a full account of Afghani Muslim presence in Guyana.

Amongst these labourers, Allah *Azza wa Jal*, in His Infinite Wisdom, hand-picked a handful of his spiritual emissaries to accompany this destitute lot who made this strange and distant land their new home. From 1835-1917, over 240,000 East Indians, mostly illiterate, were brought to Guyana. Of these 84% were Hindus, but 16% were Sunni Muslims. [Mircea Elida]

We know that some of the early Awliya’ Allah who left India for Guyana and the West Indies were initiated into the Qadiriyya and Chisitiyya sufi orders. Before a teacher gave his *murids* (students) *ijaza* (permission) to travel to a distant land, the student would first have to master Urdu, Persian and Arabic. He would also have to complete studies in tafsir, hadith, hanafi fiqh, history, poetry as well as the spiritual sciences of tasawwuf and ta’widh (healing through the use of Quranic verses). Only once equipped with ‘ilm or knowledge would he be allowed to accompany his fellow

Muslim brethren to a new land. A good example of this is recorded in the biography of Haji Ruknuddin Sahib.

Haji Ruknuddin Sahib came to Trinidad educated by the Chisti Spiritual Order of Sufism in Punjab, India, in Arabic, Urdu, Hindi and Persian languages. These he perfected by constant reading and recitation in Trinidad. He arrived as an immigrant in 1863, and was attached to the La Plaisance Estate in La Romain. [Finding a Place: IndoTrinidadian Literature By Kris Rampersad, published by Ian Randle Publishers, 2002]

These men of knowledge came to Guyana and neighboring territories ostensibly as common laborers, but the objectives of their spiritual masters were divinely inspired.

The knowledge that was passed to them from their teacher or *murshid* in India would be within their *silsila* or chain of authority which was unbroken and can be traced all the way back to Allah's Beloved Prophet Muhammad *Salalaahu 'alaihi wa Sallam*. Each *silsila* possesses a published *shajarah* or spiritual lineage of the order. The knowledge possessed by these savants who came to Guyana was the knowledge of certitude based on the spiritual insights Allah *Azza wa Jal* granted them. This knowledge came only by permission from Allah *Azza wa Jal* through the blessed saints of their orders. In other words, this knowledge was definite and purposeful. This was not interpreted or suppositional knowledge based on worldly pursuits. It came from those in authority to fulfill a purpose within Allah's Plan. The Beloved Prophet *Salla Allahu ta'ala Alayhi wa Sallam* spoke of this knowledge as experiential, as seen from the following prophetic saying:

“*Laisal kaburukal ma'imah*”
“Nothing is more valuable than direct experience”.

Second Generation

Equally important to the migration of a people is what sociologists refer to as the second generation dilemma [Alejandro Portes]. Sociologists recognize that whenever a people migrate due to socio-economic or political

reasons, their immediate off-springs, i.e; the second generation plays a pivotal role in the survival of culture and religion.

The connection of the second generation with the culture and religion of their migrant parents and whether or not they identify with it either means the survival or the annihilation of a people. The second generation in this sense, therefore, plays a key role in the history of human migration.

Islam is no exception to this sociological process [Ibn Khaldun's *Al Mukadimah*]. As a religion, Islam was passed on to this venerable generation of Guyanese Muslims by the great teachers and spiritual masters who came to Guyana from India – the *Awilya' Allah*.

70 pages to follow...