

The origins and affinities of the Sri Lankan Moors

The Sōnahar or Sri Lankan Moors have a long history in Sri Lanka. The descendants of Arabs who espoused local women they are largely a mixed race with a considerable infusion of Sinhalese and Dravidian blood. Nevertheless their Arab ancestry is a matter of pride for them and provides them the basis on which to claim a distinct ethnic identity. We will here attempt to show that the core or nucleus of the Sri Lankan Moor community comprises the descendants of Arabian merchants and settlers hailing from Iraq and the Arabian peninsula who arrived in the country during the mediaeval period, and perhaps earlier to form considerable settlements in various parts of the island, and especially the coastal areas.

Oral tradition, genealogical records, anthropological data and linguistic, epigraphic and literary evidence will be adduced to support this view which was elaborated by the Moorish scholar I.L.M.Abdul Azeez in his famous treatise on the origins of the Moors¹. Abdul Azeez's thesis sought to disprove P.Ramanathan's assertion² that the Moors were Tamils by race on the basis of their spoken language as well as on account of certain customs relating to marriage such as *strīdānam*, the *ālatti* ceremony, the wearing of *kūrai* and the tying of the *tāli*. Abdul Azeez's arguments were largely based on Moorish oral tradition relating to their earliest settlements and the etymology of the term Sōnahar.

The early Muslim settlements in the island appear to have arisen from peaceful infiltration of Arabian merchants and settlers over a considerable period of time, though such settlement would have been more pronounced at certain times than others. Although the Arab presence in Sri Lanka is generally believed to have not been very old, the fact is otherwise. According to the Mahāvamsa, an ancient chronicle of Sinhalese royalty compiled around the 5th century A.C., King Pandukābhaya (C. 4th –3rd century B.C.) had a quarter named *Yonasabhāga-vatthu* (lit. ground set apart for the *Yonas*) located on the side of the western gate of Anuradhapura. There has been some dispute as to who these *Yonas* were, it being generally assumed that they were Greeks, especially as the term suggests a close similarity with the Greek *Ionia*. We know however that the Prakritic *Yona* is cognate with, or derived from the Sanskritic *Yavana*.

This becomes especially significant in view of the findings by Rajendrala'la Mitra³, based largely on literary evidence, showing that originally the *Yavana* of

¹ A Criticism of Mr.Ramanathan's 'Ethnology of the 'Moors' of Ceylon'(1907)

² The Ethnology of the 'Moors' of Ceylon. JRAS.CB (1888)

³ On the supposed identity of the Greeks with the Yavanas of the Sanskrit writers. JASB (1874)

the Sanskrit writers was the name of a country and of its people to the west of Kandahar (Arabia, Persia, Medea or Assyria) subsequently becoming the appellation for all casteless races to the west of the Indus, including the Arabs and the Asiatic Greeks. He has shown that there is absolutely no evidence to indicate that it was at any one time the exclusive name of the Greeks. Besides, Mitra has shown that the term *Yona* occurring in the Asokan edicts of C.3rd century B.C. would have denoted Syria and the countries to the east of it as far as Afghanistan, but neither Greece nor Egypt.

In any case, Wilhelm Geiger⁴ has shown that the Yonas of Pandukabhaya's time were probably Arabian traders. He has noted that although in the 4th century B.C., the term *Yona* was applied to Greeks, from the second century A.C., it was used to denote all foreigners who hailed from the west, as well as the Arabs. As the *Mahāvamsa* was not composed before the 5th century A.C., he believes that its author employed a term in general use in his time. He also notes that at the beginning of the 5th century, the Chinese pilgrim Fa-Hien who visited Sri Lanka has alluded to the houses of Sabaeans (i.e. Arabian) merchants⁵ in Anuradhapura being beautifully adorned, suggesting that the Yonas of the *Mahāvamsa* were none other than Arab merchants or settlers.

Buzurg Ibn *Shahryār*⁶ alludes to the country having relations with the Arabian peninsula as early as the days of the Prophet Muhammad (570 – 632 AC). Says Ibn *Shahryār*: “When the people of Sarandīb and the surrounding area came to know of the appearance of the Prophet of Islam and his message, they deputed an intelligent person from among themselves and sent him to Arabia to meet him to obtain information about him and give a first-hand report to his people. When the deputed person reached Madina after a hazardous and long journey, the Prophet, on whom be peace, had passed away and the caliphate of his successor Abu Bakr had ended and Umar was the Caliph. The messenger met the Caliph and heard in detail from him about the mission of the Prophet and his character. However, on his return journey he died on the Makran coast. But his Indian servant who had accompanied him succeeded in returning to Sarandīb and gave his impression to the people in the light of what he saw and heard in regard to the Prophet-on whom be peace- and of Abu Bakr-May Allah be pleased with him; that he and his deceased master had met Umar-the companion of the Prophet.

The servant told his people about the sweet disposition extended to him and his master by Umar who used to wear patched garment and sleep in the mosque at night. On receiving his report in detail, the people of Sarandīb adopted a friendly attitude towards Muslims”.

⁴ Culture of Ceylon in mediaeval Times.Ed.Heinz Bechert (1960)

⁵ Fa-Hien in his record of Buddhist kingdoms refers to Sabaeans merchants (the phonetic values of the Chinese characters being sa and va, bo or bha) whose houses are stately and beautiful.

⁶ *Ajā'ib al Hind*.10th century.Ed.P.A.Van Der Lith.1883-1886.

It is also said that the Arab invasion of Sind in 712 A.C. led by Muhammad Bin Qāsim was prompted by the capture of some Arab women – daughters of merchants who had died in the island – near the sea port of Daybul (near Karachi, Pakistan) whom the Sri Lankan sovereign was sending to Iraq. According to Ahmad Al-Balādhuri, the 9th century historian and author of the Futūh Al-Buldān, the Sri Lankan monarch (Probably King Mānavamma who reigned 684-719 AC) sent some Muslim women to Hajjaj Ibnu Yusuf, the Governor of Iraq (694-714 AC) as their fathers who were merchants had died. But their ships were attacked by some pirates near Daybul and one of the captured women of the tribe of Bani Yerbu cried out “Oh Hajjāj! Come to my help”. When this news reached Hajjāj, he sent a message to Rajah Dahir, the ruler of Hind (i.e. Sind) demanding the immediate release of the captives. As he did not respond, a series of raids against his kingdom commenced, leading ultimately to the conquest of Sind in 712 AC.

Having shown the close relations the Arabs of yore maintained with Sri Lanka, we will now attempt to trace the origins of the Moors to Arab folk largely hailing from Iraq and the Arabian peninsula. Alexander Johnston ⁷ has recorded that the first Muslims who settled in the country, were, according to the tradition which prevails among their descendants, a portion of those Arabs of the House of Hashim ⁸ who were driven from Arabia in the early part of the eighth century by the Umayyad Caliph Abd-al Malik bin Marwan, and who proceeding from the Euphrates southward, established settlements in the Concan, the southern parts of the Indian peninsula, Sri Lanka and Malacca. He adds that the division of them that came to Sri Lanka formed eight considerable settlements along the north-eastern, northern, and western coasts of the island, namely, at Trincomalee, Jaffna, Mantota-Mannar, Kudiraimalai, Puttalam, Colombo, Beruwala and Galle.

Intermittent Arab settlement evidently did not cease until fairly recent times. E.B.Denham ⁹ has noted the existence of a Muslim community at Hambantota who gave their race as ‘Arabs’. Denham notes that they claimed to be descendants of two Mawlanas or clerics who came to Ceylon from Baghdad “One about 150

⁷ Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland (1827)

⁸ The Prophet Muhammad’s clan, the Hashimites, i.e. the descendants of the Prophet’s great grandfather Hashim. Many Hashimites are said to have fled their homeland due to the persecution of the rival Umayyad dynasty, especially during the reign of its fifth ruler Abd-al Malik bin Marwān (685-705 A.C.)

⁹ Ceylon at the Census of 1911 (1912)

years, the other about 60 years ago". H Parker ¹⁰ also noted that in his time Arabs from Western Arabia still occasionally settled among the Moormen of Ceylon.

Genealogical records maintained by certain Moor families also bear testimony to their Arab ancestry. J.C. Van Sanden ¹¹ cites literary evidence (viz. an old Arabic document in the possession of one of the oldest Moor families residing in Beruwala) in support of the claims of some Moorish folk of Beruwala who traced their ancestry to a scion of Arabian royalty who departed from Yemen in the 22nd Hijri year (C. 643 A.C.) in the time of the second Caliph Umar. It is related here that of a fleet of vessels carrying three sultans that left Yemen, Sultan Salah-ud-din's son Sams-ud-din cast anchor at Mannar off the west coast of Ceylon while another vessel conveying Sultan Mohamed's son Sad-ur-din sailed south and landed at Beruwala where he settled down. There were a few Moors in Van Sanden's time who in fact traced their ancestry to this prince.

Mohamed Sameer ¹² has cited substantial genealogical evidence showing the Arab origins of prominent Moor families. An Aluthgama family for example traced its lineage to the first Caliph of the Islamic Commonwealth Abu Bakr (C. 573-634 A.C.), while another traced its descent to one Badrudeen who evidently hailed from Iraq. Yet another family traced its descent to one Prince Jamaldeen, an Arab from Konia, who arrived in the country in 1016. Such patronymics as Baghdadi (the one from Baghdad) and Yemeni (the Yemenite) which figure among the prominent Moor families cited in Sameer's work indicate the diverse origins of the Moorish folk settled in Sri Lanka ¹³

The Nicholson Cove Tombstone inscription at Trincomalee refers to the deceased as the daughter of the chief Badriddin Husain Bin Ali Al-Halabi, showing that her family hailed from Halab (Aleppo) in Syria. The Moors of Akurana trace their descent to three Arabian mercenaries who espoused Kandyan women during the reign of King Rājāsīnha II (1635-1687) ¹⁴.

The Gopāla (Bētḡē Nilamē) family of Moors domiciled in Gātaberiya in the Kegalle district likewise claim descent from Arab physicians (*hakīms*) who arrived in the country from Sind during the reign of King Parakramabahu II (1236-1270) of Dambadeniya and espoused Kandyan women ¹⁵.

¹⁰ Ancient Ceylon (1909)

¹¹ Sonahar. A brief history of the Moors of Ceylon (1925)

¹² Personages of the Past. Moors, Malays and other Muslims of the past of Sri Lanka (1982)

¹³ More details on the Arab origins of prominent Moor families could be found in the Genealogical Table of Sri Lankan Muslims by Fazli and Firoze Sameer (1996).

¹⁴ See A Gazetteer of the Central Province of Ceylon. A.C. Lawrie (1896)

¹⁵ See The Muslims of Sri Lanka. One thousand years of ethnic harmony. Lorna Dewaraja (1994)

There is also reason to believe that the Moors of the Puttalam and Chilaw districts are at least partly derived from Arab settlers or traders hailing from Egypt. This is suggested by the fact that they formerly conveyed in their processions the wheeled boat which they described as the custom of their fathers and which very probably had its origins in ancient Egypt. Says Hugh Nevill ¹⁶ “In Ceylon the ship of Isis is no doubt the origin of the ship so often carried by the Moors of the Putlam and Chilaw district in their processions of today, but I cannot find they attach any hidden meaning to the ceremony, which is called “custom of our fathers”.

C.G.Seligman ¹⁷ notes that the Moormen of Ceylon have a ceremony in which figures a boat on wheels and holds that it is a survival of an old Egyptian rite which, after being absorbed into Islam, was introduced by Arab traders into Ceylon. In Luxor in Egypt, three boat processions have been traditionally held every year, at the festivals commemorating the birthday of its patron saint Sidi Abuel Haggag and that of the Prophet and at the beginning of Ramadan. Similarly, the boat figured prominently in ancient Egyptian ceremonial, as shown by the number of representations of sacred boats on wheels which have come down to us. The boat which figured in the ceremonies at Luxor in the days of the Pharaohs evidently symbolized the journey to the world beyond the grave. That it figured in the ceremonial of some sections of local Moors who described it as the custom of their fathers strongly suggests that they are descended at least in part from Arabs hailing from Egypt.

Epigraphic evidence also suggests a strong Arab connection in the olden days. Noteworthy is the Arabic gravestone inscription in Kufic characters ¹⁸ concerning an Islamic cleric named Khālid Ibn Abu [B]aqāya dated the Hijri year 337 A.H. (C.948 AC) found at the Moorish burial ground near Colombo. According to local tradition, this cleric was sent by the Caliph of Baghdad to reform the Muslims of Colombo after learning that these Muslims (who were then established as traders) were ignorant of, and inattentive to the real tenets of their religion (Johnston. 1827).

Besides this, seven other stones, including five gravestones inscribed in Arabic dated from the 8th – 16th century A.C. have been discovered. The earliest tombstone discovered in May 1976 at Madulbowa in Hemmatagama in the Kegalle District bears the Hijri date 133 A.H. (C.750 AC) ¹⁹. The fact that the Arabic language had

¹⁶ The Taprobanian June 1886

¹⁷ Ancient Egyptian beliefs in modern Egypt. Essays and Studies presented to William Ridgeway on his Sixtieth Birthday (1913)

¹⁸ The Kufic (kufi) script developed in Kufah, Iraq, was extensively used for documents, inscriptions and monuments during the mediaeval era, and especially during the Abbasid period (750-1258 A.C.)

¹⁹ Recent archaeological finds. Souvenir of the Moors Islamic Cultural Home. 1970-1976 (1978)

been employed in the inscriptions suggests that the country's Muslims, or at least a significant proportion of them were literate and conversant in Arabic. Although this is no longer the case, one still finds a few vocables of Arabic origin such as *umma* 'mother' commonly employed by Moor folk which may perhaps be a survival of their former Arabic speech.

The appellation given to the Moors by themselves as well as by others also indicate their Arab origin. The Moors have traditionally referred to themselves as *Sōnahar*²⁰ in their peculiar dialect of Tamil, the pure Tamil form of which, *Sōnagar*, refers to a native of Arabia (*Sōnagam*)²¹. Another term *Sōni*, perhaps a corruption of *Sōnahar*, also appears to have been used by some Moors, such as those of Batticaloa. Ramanathan (1888) says that in the District of Batticaloa "which is the premier district of Islam in the island", the "Muhammadans" call themselves "Sōni" or "Chōni" which he wrongly argued was another form of Choli or Tamil of the Chola country. Similarly, Denham (1912) says that the term Soni is frequently applied to a Moor in the Batticaloa District.

²⁰ Although today, the term *Sōnahar* is hardly if ever used as an ethnonym by the Moors who simply know themselves by the general term of Muslims on the basis of their religious faith, there is ample evidence to show that in the olden days they referred to themselves as a distinct ethnic group by this term. Simon Casie Chitty notes in his Ceylon Gazetteer (1834) that in the Tamil language the Moors are usually denominated by the term Sonahar which they do not object to. Abdul Azeez (1907) states in no uncertain terms that his community is known in its own circle as Sonahar. Similarly, Ponnambalam Arunachalam in his contribution on the Population of Ceylon to the Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon (1907) states that the local Moors call themselves Sonahar, as distinguished from the Sammankarar, the later arrivals from India.

²¹ J.P.Rottler's Tamil-English Dictionary.Pt.1 (1834). Similarly, the Madras Tamil Lexicon (1928) gives *Cōnakan* as 'foreigner, especially Greek, Arab or Moor'. It would appear that the Tamil *Cōna* or *Sōna* has in fact derived from the Sanskritic *Yavana* through the Prakritic *Yona*. The latter term would have with time been turned to **jona* before entering Tamil as *Cōna*, the initial *j* being unknown to Tamil which in adopting it hardened it to *c*. The term *Sōnagar* was also formerly used to denote the Tamil-speaking Muslims of the coastal belt of Tamil Nadu, evidently because of their Arab ancestry. The description is said to have been used in their documents and other writings till the beginning of the last century, though it is no longer in use in Tamil Nadu. Towns like Nagore, Santhome, Cuddalore and Porto Novo in Tamil Nadu are still said to have Sonagar Streets (See Arabic, Arwi and Persian in Sarandib and Tamil Nadu. Dr.Tayka Shuayb 1993). The Moors who formed a considerable settlement in Jaffna and its environs until fairly recent times (i.e. about 1990) lived in large numbers in a quarter known as *Sōnahar-Teru* or 'Moor Street' showing that the term *Sōnahar* was commonly applied to them not very long ago, though today they are more often known by the religious designation 'Muslim'.

The Sinhala term for the Moors *Yon*²² is related to the Sanskritic *Yavana* and Prakritic *Yona* used by the Indians to denote foreign peoples, especially the Arabs, Greeks and those who belonged to the vast Graeco-Bactrian region between Greece and India following Alexander's Asian conquests in the fourth century B.C. In Sinhala however, the term *Yon* appears to have been associated with the Arabs and Moors. Fernao de Queyroz in his *Conquista Temporal e Espiritual de Ceylao* (1687) has noted that the Sinhalese generally called the Moors *Iona*. That the term is closely connected with the Arabs is suggested by the Sinhala term for the 'date' *yon-iñdi* which was evidently thought to have originated in Arabia and *yon-dehi*, a species of lime supposed to have been brought originally from Arabia²³.

The ethnonym Mouro or Moor employed by the European colonial powers such as the Portuguese, Dutch and British to denote the Sonahar can however in no way be taken to indicate an ethnic relationship between them and the Moors of North Africa who are largely Berbers of Mediterranean stock. In fact the term Moor as applied to the Sonahar is a misnomer. The term Moor in its various forms was used in virtually all Western European languages to denote the Muslims of Spain and of the Mediterranean ports of North Africa. The term is thought to have derived from the Semitic *Mahourim* 'the people of the west' which seems to have been employed by the early Semites such as the Phoenicians to denote the peoples of the Maghreb or Barbary states of North Africa. The Romans perhaps inspired by the Semitic usage used the term *Mauri* to indicate a group of relatively sedentary tribes in the Roman Province of Mauretania (Present-day Morocco) following the destruction of Carthage in 146 BC. This term *Mauri* passed into Spain as *Moro* and it was under this designation that the inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula designated the Muslim conquerors of Spain (i.e. the Arab conquerors and Arabicised Berbers who had come to settle in Spain from the other side of the strait of Gibraltar) during the whole period of Muslim domination from the eighth to fifteenth centuries²⁴.

²² Rev.B.Clough in his *Sinhalese-English Dictionary* (1892) gives *Yonā* as 'Moorman' while Charles Carter in his *Sinhalese-English Dictionary* (1924) gives *Yonā* as a colloquial term for 'Moorman' and *Yon* as 'Arabian' or 'Moorish'. Among the place-names still bearing the name *Yon* 'Moor' may be mentioned *Parana Yon Vīdiya* (Old Moor Street) and *Alut Yon Vīdiya* (New Moor Street) in the Hulftsdorp area of Colombo. There is also *yon-gala* (Lit.Moor rock) a huge rock near Mutwal in the north of Colombo named after an incident connected with a Moorish girl who entered it after having escaped the pursuit of the Portuguese (See Van Sanden 1925). The appellation *Yon* has however now been confined to classical usage and the term *Marakkala* is the usual colloquial term used to designate the Sri Lankan Moors. The term evidently has its origins in maritime trade and is derived from the Tamil *marakkalan* 'sailor', 'master of a ship' (fr.T.*maram* 'wood' + *kalam* 'vessel').

²³ Clough (1892)

²⁴ See Enc.I.VII.1991

It is evident that in Spanish as well as in other Western languages that borrowed the appellation in forms like Mauren, Moors etc that the term had a geographical meaning indicating the people coming over from the North African coast, including not only the native Berbers, but also the Arabs. As such the term was not an ethnographical one ²⁵. The Portuguese evidently borrowed this usage from their Spanish neighbours and bestowed the appellation on the Arabs and their mixed breed descendants whom they found established as traders in the coastal regions of Asia and Africa at the time of their conquests in the sixteenth century. Although primarily used to denote the Arabs and their mixed progeny, the term was at times extended to cover all persons professing Islam. It is perhaps in such a context that they applied the term Mauros to the Moors as is borne out by their numerous tombos or land registers. The Dutch continuing this usage called them Mooren and this in turn was adopted by the British who called them Moors ²⁶.

Physical anthropological evidence may also be cited in this connection. The Kovul Sandēśaya (15th century) refers to *Yon liya* (Arab or Moor women) of golden hue (*ranvan*) at a village called Mahavāligama (Probably Weligama in the southern part of the country) with its thriving bazaar full of traders, suggesting that these *Yon* were a relatively fair-complexioned folk, much like the true Arabs. According to the Physical Anthropology of Ceylon (1961), a comprehensive work dealing with the physical characteristics of the country's various races ²⁷, the skin colour of over thirty Moor subjects of the Jaffna district measured in the survey approximated that of the Aryan Sinhalese, which would suggest that they derive from a somewhat fair-skinned race. The 32 Moors measured showed 37.5 percent in the light-light brown category, 21.9 percent in the light-brown category and 40.6 percent in the dark-light brown category.

The work further shows the Moors to be a people with a tendency towards brachycephaly or broad-headedness as distinct from the long-headed or dolicocephalic Tamils and that they most closely approximate the Sinhalese in cephalic index ²⁸.

²⁵ *ibid*

²⁶ A parallel situation is to be observed among the Moros of Mindanao in the southern Philippines who were designated as such by the Spanish conquerors on account of their religion and not on account of their race, they being a Malay, and not an Arab or Berber people.

²⁷ The Physical Anthropology of Ceylon by Howard Stoudt (1961) is based on the information gathered during the Ethnological Survey of Ceylon (1937-1939)

²⁸ The cephalic index is the proportion of the maximum breadth of the head (measured above the ears) to its maximum length (measured from the glabella to the back of the head)

$$\text{i.e Cephalic Index} = \frac{\text{Head breadth}}{\text{Head length}} \times 100$$

Indices below 75 are termed dolicocephalic; those between 75-80 mesaticephalic and those above 80 brachycephalic

The 32 Moors measured in the survey showed a mean cephalic index of 78.14 which closely approximates the Sinhalese mean of 78.33 as against the Tamil mean of 74.68. It is however unlikely that this brachycephaly derives from the Sinhalese. It is more likely that this trait originated from Iraq or Southern Arabia, especially since there is literary evidence to show that many of the forebears of the Moors hailed from these regions.

It has been shown by C.G. Seligman²⁹ that the Arabs of the Northern Arabian peninsula and Sinai are predominantly long-headed (dolicocephalic) while those of the south such as the Yemen are predominantly broad-headed (brachycephalic). Citing anthropological evidence obtained from skeletal remains, he states that the Northern Arabs have been predominantly long-headed for the last 2000 years. The South Arabian brachycephaly, he believes to have derived from the Armenoid type found largely in the great brachycephalic area of Western Asia, viz. Asia Minor and Mesopotamia. This southern brachycephaly is thought to be an intrusive element borne to South Arabia, perhaps by sea, from the north-east, and it is likely that the Southern Arabian peninsula, like the Northern, was originally peopled by a dolicocephalic Semitic stock, upon which was later superimposed a brachycephalic element following some remote Armenoid immigration from the east, probably Mesopotamia. There is reason to believe that Mesopotamian cultural influence was exerted in South Arabia at least as far back as the first half of the first millennium B.C.³⁰.

The aquiline nose, a characteristic of Semitic races such as the Arabs and Jews, is also prominent among the South Arabians (Seligman.1917). This too is significant as there are many Moors to-day who do possess prominent aquiline noses³¹. The nasal index³² of the Moors differs significantly from that of both the Sinhalese and Tamils. The Moors measured in the Physical Anthropology showed a relatively low mean nasal index of 67.70 as compared to the Sinhalese mean of 70.35 and the Tamil mean of 70.51.

²⁹ The Physical characters of the Arabs. Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute. Great Britain & Ireland (1917)

³⁰ See Seligman (1917)

³¹ It is interesting to note here that Ernst Haeckel (A visit to Ceylon 1883) describes the Moors as having a brownish yellow complexion and unmistakably Semitic features. John Ferguson (Mohammedanism in Ceylon. Moormen, Malay, Afghan and Bengali Mohammedans 1897) similarly refers to the Moormen as having 'Arab features and as 'veritable father Abrahams or Ishmaelites' (Old and New Colombo. J.Ferguson.1900)

³² The nasal index is the proportion of the breadth of the nose to its height

$$\text{i.e. Nasal Index} = \frac{\text{Nose width}}{\text{Nose height}} \times 100$$

Indices below 70 are termed leptorhine; those between 70-85 mesorhine and those above 85 platyrhine.

The Moors measured had a nose height of 53.38 as against the Sinhalese mean of 51.75 and the Tamil mean of 51.77, and a nose breadth of 35.97 as against the Sinhalese mean of 36.21 and the Tamil mean of 36.30. They therefore had the narrowest noses of any of the races of Ceylon measured in the survey.

The prevalence among the Moors of the Shāfi Madhhab, the school of Islamic jurisprudence founded by Ash-Shāfi (150-204 AH) which was once prevalent in Iraq and many other parts of the Arab world and indeed is still so in the southern parts of the Arabian Peninsula such as Yemen may also be taken as evidence of an Arab origin from these parts. Johnston (1827) noting that the Sri Lankan Moors are of the 'sect of Shafei' says that the commentary on the Mohammedan law which is most in use amongst them is called the Amali. "The whole of it is written in Arabic, the text in the old Arabic of the Koran, and the notes in modern Arabic. Their laws of marriage and inheritance are a modification of the laws of marriage and inheritance which prevailed amongst the Arabs, who were subject to the caliph of Baghdad at the time their ancestors emigrated from Arabia". That the Arab ancestors of the Moors subscribed to the Shafi school is not unlikely given the fact that it then exerted a considerable influence in Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate. It was in Baghdad that the Shafi madhhab came to be formally established after Imam Shafi had taught there from 810-814 AC. Hence Baghdad became the chief centre of the school and it was mainly from here that Shafi teaching spread to the rest of the Islamic world. The school is said to have been particularly known in Baghdad in the days of Abu'l Qāsim Uthmān Al-Anmātī (9th century) whose principal disciple, the Qādī Abu'l Abbas Ibn Surayj played an important role in the diffusion of the madhhab³³.

Although it is true that the Hanafi madhhab had gained a predominant place in the Abbasid state, particularly after Abū Yūsuf (late 8th century) an adherent of this school was appointed Chief Qādi of Baghdad by the Caliph Hārūn Ar-Rashīd, it was not until the 16th century with the Ottoman Turks that the Hanafi madhhab became permanently established in Iraq³⁴, though we still find the Shafi school being followed in its northern provinces among the Kurds who are still very much Shafis ritually. It is very likely therefore that the Shafi school was introduced here by the early Arab settlers just as they did in peninsular India where the existence of the Shafi school, especially in the coastal areas of Kerala and Tamil Nadu very likely owes its origins to the commercial and cultural links these areas maintained with the southern Arabian lands like Yemen, Hadramauth and Aden. In contrast, the Hanafi school has prevailed largely in those areas that have come under non-Arab Turkish or Moghul influence which explains its prevalence in Turkey, Central Asia and Northern India as well as those Arab countries that have come under Turkish rule such as Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Palestine and Iraq.

³³ See Enc.I.Vol.IX.1995

³⁴ See Mediaeval Islam. Gustave Von Grunebaum (1947)

Having thus demonstrated that the Moors are largely of Arab descent through a consideration of historical, linguistic, anthropological and genealogical evidence, we will proceed to explain how Tamil came to be adopted as the ‘home language’ of the Moors of Sri Lanka.

It is very probable as contended by Dr.M.A.M.Shukri ³⁵ that following the fall of Baghdad in 1258, the Sri Lankan Muslims came to rely largely for their contact with the Muslim world on Mabar, that is to say, the Coromandel coast where Arab trade colonies had been established like Kayalpattinam in Tirunelveli district. Shukri notes that due to increased trade activity in the Mabar area, mainly with Yemen, Hadramaut and Aden, a thriving Muslim community developed and steadily found their way in considerable numbers to Sri Lanka where they intermarried with the local Muslims. As a result, a new element, a South Indian one, was added into the composition of local Muslim society which consequently lost its exclusively Arab character. He notes that the memory of a new wave of immigration that occurred due to the outburst of Muslim commercial activity in the Coromandel coast is preserved in a tradition centering around the mediaeval port of Kayal as the ancestral home of local Muslims. He adds that as a result of the commercial and cultural contact that existed between the Muslims of Sri Lanka and Mabar, the Tamil language made its impact in their social and cultural life to the extent of becoming their medium of expression in all aspects of life. This led to the emergence of Arabic Tamil as a common language among them, where the Tamil as spoken and written assumed a peculiar pattern and shape in respect of the script and vocabulary.

It is very probable then that with the fall of Baghdad –the seat of the Abbasid Caliphate- to the Mongol hordes in the 13th century, the old ties subsisting between the Arabs of the Middle East and those of South Asia were severed with the result that the Arab merchants and settlers resident in the island and their mixed descendants would have had little option but to cease connections with their old home country and turn towards their closest co-religionists in the region, the Tamil-speaking Muslims of South India for commercial and cultural intercourse. Being a largely mercantile community themselves, they would have established and maintained close relations with the Muslim trading settlements in the South Indian coastal areas, especially since their livelihood depended largely on maritime trade; and Tamil it should be pointed out was the lingua franca of commerce in the region at the time. Such a situation could have easily led to the acceptance on the part of the Moors of Tamil as their spoken language over a period of time, a process which would have been greatly facilitated by constant intermarriage with Tamil women or perhaps even Tamil-speaking Muslim women hailing from South India. Thus it would have been due to obvious reasons of convenience that the Moors came to speak Tamil as their ‘home language’.

³⁵ Muslims of Sri Lanka- A cultural Perspective. Muslims of Sri Lanka. Avenues to Antiquity. M.A.M.Shukri (1986)

The period of the Abbasid Caliphate (750 -1258 A.C.) is widely regarded as the golden age of Arabian culture, science and commerce, an enlightened epoch dominated by caliphs of the likes of the illustrious Hārūn Ar-Rashīd so grandly portrayed in the Arabian Nights. The sacking of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258 and the other destructive acts perpetrated by them is said to have resulted in the downfall of the Arabian political and cultural heritage in the eastern part of the Arab world as well as in neighbouring countries like Iran. Indeed, the period from 1258 to the 18th century is known as the age of decadence of Arabic language, literature and the sciences.

As such, it is hardly surprising that the Arabs and Moors established in the country should have ceased connections with the rest of the Arab world and eschewed their native Arabic speech for a completely different and non-related language – Tamil. This process which is known as linguistic regression is not unknown amongst other nations and has taken place due to various political, social and economic factors. This has been the case with the Parsis of Western India who have eschewed their native Iranian speech for Gujarati and the Cape Malays of South Africa whose native Malay speech has been superseded by Afrikaans, an offshoot of Dutch.

As for the adoption of Tamil customs such as *strīdānam*, the *ālatti* ceremony, the wearing of *kūrai* and the tying of the *tāli*, we may suppose that these too entered the social life of the Moors due to close intercourse with their Tamil-speaking co-religionists of South India as well as intermarriage with local Tamil women which would have been fairly commonplace in the olden days. It is interesting to note here that it is not only the Moors, but also the Sinhalese who had adopted the custom of wearing the *tāli* as a symbol of marriage. The ornament was known as *tālla* in the Sinhala language and seems to have been commonly worn in the olden days, though not so now.

For instance, in a Sigiri inscription of about the eighth century we find the composer boasting thus in Old Sinhala verse:

*no helillā me ki bit'hi dig netak mayi
tepalan piyovur mājā kaḷa la muka ārā nil tāllak*

(Did not the long-eyed one on the wall – the fair one – say this to me: “Open your mouth and speak after having placed between the breasts a blue necklet) ³⁶.

³⁶ Sigiri Graffiti. Senarat Paranavitana (1956)

This is not to say that a Dravidian racial element is altogether absent among the Moors. A sizeable infusion of Dravidian blood appears to have entered the Moor community through intermarriage with Mukkuvar women. Dravidian blood seems to be especially pronounced among the Moors of the Eastern districts such as Amparai and Batticaloa who have preserved a form of social organization known as the kuḍi system, a matri-clan system found also among the neighbouring Mukkuvars from whom it appears to have originated ³⁷. Folk belief such as that found in Amparai holds that the Arabs or Moors who settled here espoused local Mukkuvar women and inherited the Kuḍi system from them ³⁸ which may also explain why some Moors in the area still bear typically Dravidian physical characters such as relatively dark complexion and snub nose, though a good many are undoubtedly of Arab ancestry as borne out by such characteristics as the aquiline nose commonly found among them ³⁹. As noted by Edgar Thurston ⁴⁰, the Mukkuvans are the sea fishermen of the Malabar coast. That they are of Dravidian origin is borne out by the statement of Simon Casie Chitty ⁴¹ who observes that the Mookwas bear a close resemblance to the Tamils in their physiognomy, manners and gait.

A few Coast or South Indian Moors known as the Sammankārar who largely comprise of Muslim ethnic groups like the Labbai and Marakkayar originating from Tamil Nadu state in South India, may have also merged into the Moor community, facilitated largely by a common religion and language. These folk, though largely of Dravidian extraction, also appear to have had an admixture of Arab blood ⁴².

³⁷ See The Kudi Maraikayars of Batticaloa South. M.Z.Mohideen. MICHS. 1944-1965 (1965)

³⁸ See The Land of the Matri-clans. Asiff Hussein. SO June 29,2003. There also exists A Tamil folk tradition which recounts a caste conflict between the Mukkuvars and their rivals, the Thimilars for regional dominance, in which the former are said to have enlisted the aid of the Moors. According to this tradition, a party of Mukkuvars consisting of seven clans or kudis came over from north Jaffna to Batticaloa and conspired with some shipwrecked Moors who had settled at Kattau-Kudierupu to eject the Thimilars who then had control over that part of the country. The plot succeeded and the frightened Thimilars fled to beyond Panichankani. The Moors having been of such service to the Mukkuvas were in recognition of their valour and services offered for their choice, either gold, lands or women. The wily Moors, knowing the value of the ties of consanguinity chose the last (See Tradition as to the origin of the people of Batticaloa. J.P. Lewis. CALR. July1923). S.O.Canagaratnam (Monograph of the Batticaloa District.1921) found that even in his time mixed marriages between Moormen and Mukwa women were common.

³⁹ See Hussein, June 29,2003.

⁴⁰ Castes and Tribes of Southern India. Vol.V.1909

⁴¹ The Ceylon Gazetteer.1834

⁴² Edgar Thurston (Castes and Tribes of Southern India.. Vol.IV.1909) records that the Labbais are said to be converted Dravidians with a slight admixture of Arab blood. However, the infusion of Arab blood was probably much more considerable, for an interesting tradition recorded by Colonel Wilks (Historical Sketches of the South of India.1810-17) has it that the Labbais are descended from some persons of the House of Hashim who landed to the eastward of Cape Comorin, having been forced to flee by Hajjaj, Governor of Iraq. This tradition corroborates the local tradition regarding the origin of the Moors as recorded by Johnston (1827)

Migration to Sri Lanka does not seem to have solely originated from the Tamil country of South India. The Portuguese historian João de Barros in his third Decada (1563) says that the Moors of Calcut and of the coast of Malabar, having been scared away from those parts since the arrival of the Portuguese to India “had some refuge in this island of Ceylam” as their armadas did not go to it ⁴³. This was however before Lopo Soarez built a fort in Colombo in 1518 and established a foothold in the country. It is therefore possible that some Muslims from the Kerala area settled here and eventually assimilated into the Moor community, which may also explain why some Moors of not very long ago bore names like Nayna Marikkar which is evidently of Kerala origin. We also know that the Māppillai or Moplah Muslims, a mixed Indo-Arab community tracing its origins to Arab settlers who espoused Kerala women many centuries ago ⁴⁴, resorted to the island until fairly recent times and participated in the business life of the country. That some of them settled in the country or left behind offspring is not unlikely ⁴⁵. Muslims from places like Pullicat in South India also resorted to this island, not merely for commerce, but also to practice the trades they specialized in ⁴⁶.

It is also possible as noted by Denham (1912) that the ranks of the Moors were occasionally swollen by Tamils who embraced Islam as an escape from caste regulations, though here we would have to suppose that the vast majority of such proselytes originated from the depressed Tamil-speaking castes who appear to be largely of Austro-Asiatic, rather than Dravidian origin ⁴⁷.

Miscegenation has however not been restricted to the Tamils, for there is ample evidence to show that certain sections of Moors have a considerable infusion of Sinhalese blood as well. As seen earlier, both the Gopāla clan of Moors and the Moors of Akurana trace their descent to Arabs who espoused Sinhalese women.

⁴³ See The History of Ceylon. As related by João de Barros and Diogo do Couto. Trans & Ed. Donald Ferguson. JRAS. CB 1908

⁴⁴ See Thurston. Vol. IV (1909)

⁴⁵ This is suggested by notices such as that of Tudor Jones (These People make Ceylon. Times of Ceylon Christmas Number 1935) who notes that: “The Moplahs, a fair sturdy race, are rice and curry-stuff traders. Others make roti in little tea shops”. He adds that some of them go about the streets, dressed in white, carrying round tin boxes on their heads. “In these boxes” he says “they carry Bombai muttai, for the Moplahs have a monopoly in this and pappadam”. These observations are quite interesting since the sale of Bombai muttai is still largely if not solely confined to local Muslims, many of whom may be regarded as Moors. The making of roti until fairly recent times also appears to have been dominated by Moors, though other communities have now ventured into this occupation.

⁴⁶ For instance, Ryckloff Van Goens in his Memoir to Ryckloff Van Goens the Younger dated 12, 1675 refers to six or seven Muslim Palleacatta tailors and their families who were resident at Colombo. These Palleacatta tailors are evidently tailors from Pullicat.

⁴⁷ See The Lion and the Sword. An Ethnological Study of Sri Lanka. Asiff Hussein (2001)

This situation is known to have continued in the south until fairly recent times, for Denham (1912) observes “ Amongst the Moors in Colombo and Galle at the present day there must be a fairly considerable infusion of Sinhalese blood; the number of Sinhalese women married to or living with Moors is fairly large”.

The fact that the Arab forbears of the Akurana Moors and the Gopāla family were allowed to marry Sinhalese women would indicate that they were not subject to the rigid Sinhalese caste rules governing intermarriage ⁴⁸. In fact, the Moors of the Sinhalese areas have tended to bear a certain resemblance to the Sinhalese amongst whom they live, which may perhaps indicate some admixture of Sinhalese blood since at least the Kandyan period.

In fact, James Cordiner, a keen observer of peoples who spent five years in the country (1799-1804) could hardly distinguish a Moor from a Sinhalese, referring to the country’s Muslims as “the Cingalese who profess the religion of Mahomet” ⁴⁹. Another authority, John Davy ⁵⁰ says of the Moors “In dress, appearance and manners, they differ but little from the Singalese”. To this day, many upcountry Moor families bear typical Kandyan patronymic *ge*-names like *Vidānalāge-gedara*, *Muhandiramlā-gedara*, *Vedarālage-gedara*, *Kosgaha-gedara*, *Liñde-gedara* and *Gal-gedara*. It is possible that such names, at least in some instances, were originally borne by the Sinhalese ancestresses of these Moor families who passed it down to their offspring, thus ensuring its continuity.

⁴⁸ Needless to say, such mixed marriages were not looked upon with favour, especially if it concerned high-born Sinhalese women of the Govi caste. For instance, we find in the case of Eknaligoda Dingiri Etana Vs. Udagedara Korale Arachila 1829, where a Govi woman who had embraced Islam and married a Muslim was disinherited as it was stated that Muslims were inferior to the Govi (PRO/CO/416/20). In contrast, the Arab ancestors of the Moors who were not bound by considerations of caste do not seem to have been prejudiced against marrying native women as seen from the above instances of intermarriage. Many factors would have contributed to this attitude. For one thing, the Arabs who resorted to the island would have found it difficult to control their natural urges, particularly when away so long from home where they would have had wives. A second marriage being permissible in Islam would have been looked upon as an ideal way out of this predicament. Further, those Arabs who had chosen to settle down here permanently would have had little recourse but to espouse local women. Secondly, since the Arabs have traditionally reckoned descent from the paternal line, even the more ethno-centric among them would not have been too concerned about co-habiting with non-Arab women since their offspring would still be recognised as Arabs by the larger community. What must also be borne in mind is that the Arabs, beginning from the early days of Islam were not averse to marrying non-Arab women. The Prophet Muhammad himself is known to have taken a Coptic woman from Egypt known as Māriya through whom he had a son named Ibrāhīm. We also come across instances of Arab men espousing Greek or Byzantine women in mediaeval Arabian literature such as the *Kitāb Al-Aghani* and the *Alf Layla wa Layla*. Indeed, even royalty was no exception and this was especially true of the Abbasids, a house that traced its ancestry to Abbas, an uncle of the Prophet. Several Abbasid princes, we know, were born of Greek, Persian or Turkish women.

⁴⁹ Description of Ceylon (1807)

⁵⁰ An Account of the Interior of Ceylon (1821)

James Emerson Tennent mentions in his monumental work *Ceylon* (1859) that in the mountains of Ooda-kinda in Western Oovah is a small community known as the Padu-guruwas who profess Islam, but conform to Kandyan customs, while H.W.Codrington ⁵¹ gives Guruva as “a man of a mixed race of Sinhalese and Moor descent and of the Muhammadan religion in Uva”.

Sinhalese blood may have also entered the Moors by way of conversions which seems to have even taken place during the days of Portuguese colonization when Christian missionary activity was at its height. Queyroz (1687) says that the Moors have a Cassis (Perhaps Qadi or cleric) to teach them and to propagate their sect among the Sinhalese. He adds that the licence of the sect was very inviting to the Sinhalese and the favour which they found with the Portuguese also induced them to embrace it. He notes that once when a Franciscan preacher preached to these heathens to become Christians, they replied that they would rather become Moors “for if they became Christians, the Portuguese would not on that account cease to tyrannise over them and to treat them like slaves, which was not done to the Moors, rather they did them many honours, giving them the posts of vidanas, and canacapoles in their villages, letting them come into their houses and treating them like lords”.

We may therefore conclude that although the core or nucleus of the Sri Lankan Moor community was formed of Arab traders and settlers who chose to make Sri Lanka their home, considerable accretions from the other communities resident in the island, especially the Tamils and the Sinhalese, have taken place from a very early period. All this suggests that the Moors of today are a largely mixed community though their claim to be of Arab descent is by no means unfounded.

⁵¹ Glossary of Native, Foreign, and Anglicised Words (1924). The Guruwo are also said to have been found in Dibburuwela in the Udasiya Pattu of Matale South (See Lawrie.1896)