

Exploring Muslim Women's Participation in Music Performance: A Study of the Sri Lankan Muslim Community in Galle Fort

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Abstract

This research explores the role of Muslim women in the performing arts within the Sri Lankan Muslim community, with a particular focus on Galle Fort. It investigates how Muslim women engage in musical performance, examining the elements of performance, religious interpretations, and ideological dimensions. Data were collected and analyzed through thematic analysis, using ethnographic methods such as semi-structured interviews, discussions, and video recordings during fieldwork. This research offers an in-depth examination of the historical, cultural, religious, and political aspects of Sri Lankan Muslim women's involvement in the performing arts. It delves deeply into how these women navigate their musical expression within the framework of their religious and cultural identities. This research attempts to capture the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity, highlighting the unique challenges and opportunities faced by Muslim female performers in Galle Fort. Through rich, narrative-driven content, the research seeks to explore the vibrant but often overlooked contributions of Muslim women to the arts. This offers a nuanced perspective on their artistic endeavors, revealing the diverse ways in which they interpret and embody their cultural heritage within the realm of musical performance.

Keywords

Ethnography, Galle Fort, Music Performance, Muslim women, Performing Arts, Sri Lanka

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Introduction

Sri Lanka, often referred to as the "Pearl of the Indian Ocean", is renowned for its remarkable cultural diversity and historical richness. The island's population is a vibrant mix of ethnic groups, each contributing uniquely to the nation's cultural heritage. Of these groups, Sri Lankan Muslims, who constitute approximately 9% of the population, are a dynamic community with a rich heritage deeply intertwined with the country's history and identity (Ali, 2004, pp. 149–150). The majority of Sri Lankan Muslims are Sri Lankan Moors, descendants of Arab traders who arrived on the island as early as the 8th century. Drawn by Sri Lanka's strategic position along ancient maritime trade routes, these early Muslims established thriving coastal communities in cities such as Colombo, Galle, and Batticaloa (McGilvray, 2008). These communities played a crucial role in the spice trade, which connected Sri Lanka to the global market and maintained their Islamic faith and cultural traditions (Mahroof, 1990). Despite their minority status, Sri Lankan Muslims have made significant contributions to the country's social, cultural, and economic life. This research explores an understudied aspect of Sri Lankan Muslim culture: the role of Muslim women in the performing arts, with a particular focus on Galle Fort. While much of the discourse surrounding Muslim women often centers on their religious and societal roles, their contributions to the arts remain underexplored. This study aims to fill that gap by investigating how Muslim women engage in musical performance, examining the interplay between performance elements, religious interpretations, and ideological dimensions within the community.

Employing ethnographic methods, this research gathered data through semi-structured interviews, discussions, and video recordings during fieldwork. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the findings, providing insight into the nuanced experiences of Muslim women in the performing arts. This study not only highlights their artistic contributions but also sheds light on how their participation navigates and challenges cultural and religious norms. By focusing on the experiences of Muslim women in Galle Fort, this research contributes to a broader understanding of the intersection of gender, culture, and the performing arts in Sri Lanka. It emphasizes the importance of recognizing and celebrating the diverse ways in which marginalized communities engage with cultural expression.

The researcher

As a lecturer in the Department of Western Music at the University of the Visual and Performing Arts in Colombo, Sri Lanka, my expertise encompasses Western classical singing, composition, voice training, choral direction, and psychological counselling. My journey into understanding Muslim music and culture began with the formation of the Muslim Choral Ensemble of Sri Lanka, under Haadia Galely in 2016, where I served as artistic director and vocal coach. Originating from a Sinhala Buddhist background, this collaboration sparked my interest in studying Muslim cultural and religious music, leading me to research indigenous and Islamic music practices in various parts of Sri Lanka.

Galle Fort: A Historical and Cultural Tapestry

Galle Fort, located on the southern coast of Sri Lanka, is a UNESCO World Heritage site renowned for its rich history, architectural grandeur, and vibrant multicultural community. Initially constructed by the Portuguese in 1588 and significantly expanded by the Dutch in 1640, Galle Fort stands as a testament to the island's colonial past and strategic importance in maritime trade (UNESCO, 1988). Its robust ramparts and bastions have withstood the test of time, serving as a symbol of resilience and continuity.

Historically, the Galle Fort was a crucial hub in the Indian Ocean trade network. Its strategic location attracted traders from Arabia, Persia, and Southeast Asia long before the arrival of European colonialists. Recognizing the importance of Galle in controlling the lucrative spice trade, the Portuguese were the first to establish forts (Liyanage, 2016, pp. 35–37). In 1640, the Dutch East India Company seized control, transforming the fort into a flourishing commercial and administrative center linked to global spice markets (Schrikker, 2007, pp. 52–54). Despite its reduced prominence under British rule after 1796, the British preserved much of the fort's structure, adding iconic features like the lighthouse and the clock tower (Pieris, 1920).

Today, Galle Fort is home to a small but diverse community that reflects its rich historical legacy. As of 2018, the fort housed 1,071 residents, comprising Muslims (561), Sinhalese (432), Tamils (14), Malays (2), and Burghers (2) (Department of Census and Statistics, 2018). The largest ethnic group within the fort is the Muslim community, mainly the Sri Lankan Moors. These Moors, Sunni Muslims who follow Shafi'i jurisprudence, trace their descent from Arab traders who settled in Galle centuries ago (Ali, 2004, pp. 147–150). Many within this community also actively participate in Sufi Tariqa orders such as Qadiri, Shadhili, and

Naqshbandi, reflecting the spiritual dimensions of their cultural heritage (McGilvray, 2008). Landmarks such as the Meera Mosque, a prominent feature of Galle Fort, emphasize the enduring presence and cultural contributions of the Muslim community. The mosque, alongside other heritage sites, serves as a testament to the historical integration of Arab-Islamic influences within the broader Sri Lankan cultural context (Jazeel, 2013). This complex interplay between history, culture, and tradition makes Galle Fort not only a repository of Sri Lanka's colonial heritage but also a vibrant living space that is continuously evolving.

Research Approach and Methodology

This study examines the understudied role of Muslim women in the performing arts within the Sri Lankan Muslim community, with a particular focus on Galle Fort. The research employs qualitative methods rooted in ethnographic traditions to explore the interplay between performance practices, religious interpretations, and ideological dimensions in this context. Ethnography allows for the exploration of lived experiences, providing a rich, contextual understanding of the complexities of subject matter (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The primary method for data collection included semi-structured interviews, which were conducted with Muslim women performers, religious leaders, and community members in Galle Fort to capture diverse perspectives on the permissibility and practice of performing arts. The semi-structured format facilitated in-depth exploration while allowing flexibility to probe emerging themes (Brinkmann, 2013). Group discussions with community members were organized to explore collective attitudes and social norms regarding women's participation in music performance. Fieldwork involved recording live performances and community events to document the activities and practices of Muslim women in the performing arts. These visual data provided additional layers of analysis, capturing non-verbal elements and performance settings (Pink, 2013). Thematic analysis was used to interpret the collected data. Brown and Clarke's (2006) framework for thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and themes, ensuring a systematic and rigorous approach to analyzing qualitative data.



1. **Religious Interpretations:** Examining how Islamic teachings and local religious practices influence perceptions of performing arts among Muslim women.
2. **Cultural Contexts:** Understanding the cultural frameworks and traditions within which music performance by Muslim women is situated.
3. **Activities Related to Music:** Exploring the specific musical activities and roles undertaken by Muslim women, including their participation in community events.
4. **Historical and Present Conditions:** Investigating the historical evolution of Muslim women's participation in performing arts and its current state within the community.

Figure 1: Four main themes were identified from the thematic analysis

Findings and Discussion

Sri Lankan Moor Muslim women's engagement in the performing arts, particularly sacred music, reveals a subtle relationship between cultural practices, religious interpretations, and social norms. This section examines these dynamics within the context of Galle Fort, drawing on ethnographic data and historical evidence to discuss women's participation in both sacred and secular musical traditions.

Islamic Interpretations and Cultural Contexts

Islamic jurisprudence offers different perspectives on the permissibility of the performing arts. Some scholars argue that music and artistic expression are permissible as long as they do not lead to immoral behavior or distract from religious obligations (Al-Qaradawi, 1994). Conversely, others adopt a stricter stance, asserting that certain forms of music and dance might conflict with Islamic principles (Nasr, 2007).

Although the Quran does not explicitly prohibit music, certain hadiths suggest its permissibility in specific contexts, such as celebrations (Sahih al-Bukhari, vol. 7, book 62, hadith 77). In South Asia, cultural traditions often blend with Islamic practices, leading to diverse attitudes toward performing arts. Historically, Muslim women in Sri Lanka participated in various

artistic practices, influenced by shared cultural elements with the Sinhalese and Tamil communities.

Evolving Roles and Historical Context

Historically, Muslim women in Sri Lanka have been actively and prominently involved in various music-related activities, encompassing both secular and sacred practices. Archival records and oral histories shed light on their significant participation in various art forms that were deeply intertwined with the cultural and social fabric of their communities. These activities included:

- **Kavi:** Traditional songs are often performed to mark significant life events, such as weddings, births, and other milestones. These songs were both celebratory and reflective, serving as a means of documenting personal and communal histories.
- **Kalikambu Dance:** A vibrant stick dance performed in groups, characterized by rhythmic movements and synchronized beats. This traditional form highlighted community cohesion and was an integral part of festive celebrations.
- **Padam:** Narrative songs that told stories, conveyed moral lessons, or recounted historical events. These songs not only entertained but also educated, acting as a medium for cultural transmission.
- **Raban Dance:** Performances centered around the *Raban*, a traditional percussion instrument. These dances were often accompanied by rhythmic drumming and were a staple of communal gatherings and festivities.
- **Islamic Geetha:** Devotional songs that blended spirituality with artistic expression. These compositions often praised Allah, the Prophet Muhammad, or reflected on themes of faith and devotion.
- **Villupattu:** A unique form of storytelling that combined song and narration, using the bow (*villu*) as a resonating instrument. This art form served as an engaging way to impart cultural and religious values.

Despite this rich history of artistic expression, social attitudes towards women's participation in music-related activities began to change over time. Evolving interpretations of religious teachings influenced these changes, the increasing influence of conservative cultural norms, and broader socio-political dynamics within the Muslim community. As a result, secular music

practices among Muslim women in places like Galle Fort gradually became marginalized. Activities that were once celebrated and widely accepted started to be viewed as incompatible with the evolving cultural and religious ideals. While some traditions have endured in a limited capacity, many have faded into obscurity, remembered only through the stories of older generations and historical documentation.

Participation in Secular and Spiritual Music

Although secular music activities among Muslim women in Galle Fort are now limited, especially among older generations, data collected through semi-structured interviews indicate that adolescent girls frequently engage in secular music during school or community events. Activities such as Kalikambu dancing, tambourine dancing, and Qasida recitation are common. These practices reflect a period when social restrictions were less strict, allowing young girls to participate in music-related activities without stigma. However, as girls reach puberty, social attitudes undergo a marked shift. The community essentially discourages women from engaging in secular music, deeming it inconsistent with traditional Islamic values of modesty. Consequently, many women transition to spiritual music, which is more socially and religiously accepted. Older women, in particular, find an outlet in religious music, focusing on practices like Dhikr, Salawat, and Mawlid recitations, where the use of musical instruments is minimal or absent.

Sacred Music Practices in Galle Fort

Sacred music is a cornerstone of cultural and religious life for Muslim women in the Galle Fort area. Among the most prominent practices is the recitation of Ratib, a devotional act that includes Quranic verses, Dhikr, and Salawat, alongside hymns praising the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and revered spiritual figures. In this context, it is essential to note that participants in these practices do not refer to them as "music" or "singing." Instead, they describe them as "recitation" or "chanting." While these recitations often take on a musical or choral tone due to the deliberate use of various melodies, they are distinct from conventional music. Notably, there is no use of musical instruments in these practices. Historically and in some sects, such as the Naqshbandi Tariqa, the rhythm is maintained by the use of the duff drum. The duff is considered religiously permissible for religious chanting, but no other musical instruments are used for these spiritual practices (Al-Qaradawi, 1994, pp. 297–303; Nasr, 2007, pp. 95–98).

Structure of Ratib

The Ratib consists of six key elements:

1. Quranic Recitation: Verses from the Quran set a spiritual foundation.
2. Dhikr: Collective remembrance of Allah.
3. Salawat: Praises for the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).
4. Mawlid: Hymns praising the Prophet and saints.
5. Dua and Munajat: Supplications seeking Allah's blessings and guidance.

Women in Galle Fort have played a significant role in preserving these traditions. Although Ratib is traditionally sung by men in other parts of Sri Lanka, women in Galle Fort have become active participants, particularly in forms such as Ratib Jalaliyyah, Haddad Ratib, and Lathifiya Ratib. Weekly gatherings are common for this recitation, while specific forms such as Thalai Fathiha and Serendib Mawlid are reserved for annual celebrations.

- **Ratib Jalaliyyah**

A ratib is a liturgical recitation - a structured set of invocations, prayers, and praises, often performed collectively. Ratib Jalaliyah is associated with the Qadiriyya Sufi order (named after Sheikh Abdul Qadir al-Jilani), and it typically includes Quranic verses, dhikr (remembrance of Allah), and supplications asking for protection, blessings, and spiritual support. The name Jalaliyah originates from *jalal* (glory), which emphasizes the divine power of supplications.

- **Haddad Ratib**

This is a famous litany compiled by Imam Abdullah al-Haddad (1634–1720), a renowned Yemeni Sufi scholar. The Ratib al-Haddad includes selected verses, prophetic supplications, and invocations of Allah's names. In South Asian and Southeast Asian Muslim communities (including Sri Lanka, Maldives, Indonesia, and Malaysia), it is often recited in the evenings or at community gatherings as a means of seeking spiritual protection and blessings.

- **Lathifiya Ratib**

Ratib al-Latifayah (sometimes spelled Ratib al-Latif) is another structured dhikr litany attributed to various Sufi traditions. It tends to focus on themes of kindness (in Arabic, *Lutf* means gentleness or subtle kindness) and protection from harm. Like other Ratib, it is sung or recited in a call-and-response style and is used for spiritual strengthening.

- **Thalai Fathiha**

In Tamil-influenced Muslim terminology used in Sri Lanka and South India, the word "Talai Fathiha" means "head Fathiha". It refers to a prayer ceremony (Fathiha) held in honor of a deceased person — often a saint (wali) or a family ancestor — by reciting the opening chapter of the Qur'an (*Al-Fathiha*) and other prayers. *Thalai* indicates it is done as the leading or opening act of remembrance or ritual.

- **Serendib Mawlid**

Mawlid means "birth", referring to the celebration of the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad. Serendib Mawlid is a local version of the Mawlid texts and recitations unique to the Sri Lankan (Serendib) Muslim communities. It typically includes poetry and prose that praise the Prophet, retell his life story, and express devotion. Serendib Mawlid gatherings are often social and spiritual events that include collective recitation, food distribution, and sometimes drumming with permitted instruments such as the duff.

Spiritual and Social Impact

The sacred recitations performed by Muslim women in Galle Fort are more than acts of worship; they serve as vehicles for spiritual enrichment and social cohesion. Many women believe that Ratib recitations bring blessings, success in business ventures, fulfillment of marriage proposals, recovery from illness, and safe childbirth. This belief underscores the deep cultural and spiritual value attached to these practices. Social attitudes have evolved, resulting in the marginalization of secular musical practices among Muslim women in Galle Fort. Presently, their contributions are predominantly centered on spiritual and religious contexts, mirroring broader cultural and religious shifts. The participation of Muslim women in sacred musical traditions within Galle Fort demonstrates a delicate balance between tradition, faith, and cultural progress. Although the prominence of secular music has diminished, sacred practices such as Ratib and mawlid remain alive, providing women with a socially respected avenue for artistic and spiritual pursuits. These traditions not only preserve cultural heritage but also highlight the integral role of women in maintaining the religious and spiritual integrity of their community.

Conclusion

The study of Muslim women's participation in the performing arts in Galle Fort illuminates a rich and complex interplay between cultural heritage, religious devotion, and social evolution. These women have transcended the boundaries set by tradition and faith, preserving and redefining their artistic and spiritual roles in meaningful ways. The history of their participation in both secular and sacred music reveals a vibrant legacy that has evolved to adapt to shifting cultural and religious paradigms over the centuries. Although secular musical practices among Muslim women have become marginalized due to evolving religious interpretations and social expectations, the resilience of sacred traditions, such as the Ratib and mawlid, demonstrates their enduring cultural significance. These practices not only serve as acts of worship but also as powerful expressions of identity, offering a space for women to connect with their faith, foster community ties, and transmit cultural values to future generations. The continued prominence of sacred recitations highlights the crucial role that women play in preserving the spiritual fabric of their community. Their contributions enrich both the cultural heritage of Galle Fort and a broader understanding of how marginalized groups engage with artistic expression. Ultimately, this exploration of Muslim women's engagement in the performing arts highlights their ability to balance tradition with innovation, faith with creativity, and individual expression with collective identity. As custodians of cultural and spiritual heritage, these women stand as important pillars of their communities, reminding us of the enduring power of art to inspire, unite, and transcend boundaries.

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