

DISCOURSES OF ETHNO-NATIONALISM
AND RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM

SRI LANKAN DISCOURSES OF ETHNO-NATIONALISM
AND RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM

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Abstract

In this thesis, I argue that discourses of victimhood, victory, and xenophobia underpin both Sinhalese and Tamil nationalist and religious fundamentalist movements. Ethnic discourse has allowed citizens to affirm collective ideals in the face of disparate experiences, reclaim power and autonomy in contexts of fundamental instability, but has also deepened ethnic divides in the post-war era.

In the first chapter, I argue that mutually exclusive narratives of victimhood lie at the root of ethnic solitudes, and provide barriers to mechanisms of transitional justice and memorialization. The second chapter includes an analysis of the politicization of mythic figures and events from the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahāvam̐sa* in nationalist discourses of victory, supremacy, and legacy. Finally, in the third chapter, I explore the Liberation Tiger of Tamil Eelam's (LTTE) rhetoric and symbolism, and contend that a xenophobic discourse of terrorism has been imposed and transferred from Tamil to Muslim minorities. Ultimately, these discourses prevent Sri Lankans from embracing a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nationality, and hinder efforts at transitional justice. By shedding light on the discourses underlying popular nationalist movements, I hope to promote understanding and further post-war reconciliation between ethnic groups in Sri Lanka.

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Introduction

Nationalism and religious fundamentalism play a central role in ethnic discourses of Sri Lanka's post-war era. The Sri Lankan civil war (1983-2009) was an armed conflict that took place primarily between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) separatist group and the Sri Lankan government (predominantly Tamil Hindu and Sinhalese Buddhist groups respectively). The civil war was the climax of a long history of ethnic tensions between the two groups that became exacerbated during the British colonial era (1815-1948). Following the civil war, militant Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist groups such as Bodu Bala Sena, Sinhala Urumaya, and Ravana Balaya began propagating Islamophobic discourses and violence, primarily in Aluthgama and Dharga Town, against the Muslim community which makes up approximately 10% of Sri Lanka's population.¹ A Tamil Saivite-Hindu fundamentalist group, Siva Senai, also emerged in 2016 and began to assert and defend a distinct ethno-religious identity. Minorities are not effectively integrated into the Sri Lankan polity, but are conceived by nationalists as a threat to Sinhalese Buddhist heritage. Ethnic identity is conceived in exclusive opposition to 'the Other,' and tales of victimhood and mythic tales of kingship are drawn upon by Tamil and Sinhalese communities to assert power, supremacy, and etiological roots in Sri Lanka.

¹ The Sri Lankan population is comprised of 75% Sinhalese, 12% Tamil, 10% Muslim, and 3% Burgher, Malay, and other minorities. Muslims are both a distinct ethnic and religious identity in Sri Lanka; while Muslims generally speak the Tamil language, they tend to be perceived as a fifth column and are not accounted for in the Tamil nationalist imagination.

In this thesis, I explore the discourses of victimhood, victory, and xenophobia in order to examine the rationale and underpinnings of nationalist and religious fundamentalist movements. Ultimately, I argue that these discourses prevent Sri Lankans from embracing a multi-ethnic and multi-religious identity, and hinder efforts at post-war reconciliation and transitional justice. In the first chapter, I argue that mutually exclusive narratives of victimhood lie at the root of ethnic solitudes, and provide barriers to mechanisms of transitional justice and reconciliation. The second chapter includes an analysis of the politicization of mythic figures and events from the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahāvam̃sa* in nationalist discourses of supremacy and legacy. Finally, in the third chapter, I argue that xenophobic discourses compel ethnic communities to conceive of themselves in opposition to the Other. Popular stereotypes and discourses of terrorism promote violence in defense of the state and one’s heritage.

Historical Background

The popularization of nationalist movements in Sri Lanka can be traced to the end of the civil war (1983-2009), which ended with the military decimation of the LTTE, colloquially known as the Tamil Tigers, and bombing of northern Sri Lanka. Government forces pursued a military offensive while the LTTE refused to allow 330,000 civilians to leave the conflict zone.² The shelling of Mullaithivu,

² United Nations, Secretary General, *Report of the Secretary-General’s Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka* (March 31, 2001), ii.

Mullivaikal, Kilinochchi, and various other North-Eastern regions in the final months of the war saw the highest incidence of civilian deaths at a given moment over the course of the war, with 15,000 recorded deaths and many more civilians injured and missing.³ The government shelled no-fire zones, hospitals, and deprived people in the conflict zones of humanitarian aid.⁴ The LTTE intensified forced recruitment of soldiers and shot point-blank any civilian who attempted to escape the conflict zone.⁵ This end to the war created a relationship of victor and vanquished along ethno-nationalist lines, a relationship and atmosphere which was maintained in the post-war era by President Mahinda Rajapaksa.

Following the end of the war, the Rajapaksa government implemented a militant ethno-nationalist and triumphalist regime that drew charges of nepotism, corruption, and human rights abuses.⁶ Rajapaksa's government made few concessions to the Tamil minority and few attempts at ethnic reconciliation. Tamil regions in the North-East remained heavily monitored and militarized; private lands confiscated by the military were not returned, and memorialization of LTTE soldiers was forbidden.⁷ LTTE cemeteries were destroyed and replaced with army headquarters, police stations, and government institutions. It is in this context of ethno-nationalism and silencing of minority voices that Buddhist

³ South Asia Terrorism Portal, *Fatalities in Terrorist Violence in Sri Lanka 2002-2009* (New Delhi: Institute for Conflict Management, 2017).

⁴ United Nations, Secretary General, *Report of the Secretary-General's Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka* (March 31, 2001), ii-iii.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ John Clifford Holt, "Introduction," in *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*. 6.

⁷ Ibid

nationalist groups began promoting Islamophobic agendas. Buddha statues were aggressively constructed throughout Tamil regions, and riots began to be organized against Muslim shopkeepers. Most of the violence occurred with the police and military personnel passively observing.

After President Maithripala Sirisena's electoral victory in January 2015, the political climate in Sri Lanka improved and ethnic reconciliation began to be actualized. Various bilingual language policies have been implemented, a Right to Information Act has been introduced, and an Office of Missing Persons (OMP) has been established. However, the *Yahapalanaya*⁸ regime has displayed a slowness in addressing issues of accountability, implementing constitutional reform, and realizing concrete steps towards transitional justice.⁹ Sirisena's government has held various hearings about corruption issues but has made no effort to prosecute perpetrators of violence against Muslims. In fact, while there had been a lull in Islamophobic discourse at the beginning of the new regime, xenophobic discourse became more widespread once again as Muslim shops and mosques were bombed and burned in mid-May 2017.¹⁰

It is difficult to pinpoint the moment that tensions began to build up between Sri Lanka's ethnic communities. Some point to the era following independence from British rule in 1948, during which the Sinhala Only Laws were

⁸ *Yahapalanaya* means "good governance" in Sinhala. Maithripala Sirisena's government came into power in 2015 through promises of good governance and accountability.

⁹ Jayadeva Uyangoda, "From Good Governance to Inept Governance," *Polity 7.1* (Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 2016), 6-7.

¹⁰ Hilmy Ahamed, "Escalating Violence: Renewed Assaults on the Muslim Community," *Groundviews*, May 22, 2017.

passed and anti-Tamil pogroms began to take place, which led to the alienation of the Tamil minority.¹¹ Others look to earlier colonialist regimes, during which the Tamil minority benefitted from preferential treatment, access to educational institutions, and government job opportunities, which led to the estrangement of the Sinhalese majority.¹² Some look even farther back, to the *Mahāvamsa* and *Dīpavamsa* epics of the sixth century, and argue that such tensions are perennial and inevitable between ‘local’ and ‘foreign’ ethnic groups.¹³ Regardless of when ethnic tensions began, and whether there exists a precise starting point, social and historical processes have opened and continue to deepen the divide between ethnic communities.

Literature Review

The Sri Lankan civil war and the roles of the LTTE, government, and colonial enterprises have been analyzed by Daniel, Hoole, Thiranagama, Trawick and countless other academics.¹⁴ These writers have explored how war becomes a social condition and liminal space within which terror, isolation, and violence manifest. Bartholomeusz, Deegalle, Seneviratne, and Tambiah, have explored

¹¹ Michael P. Arena and Bruce A. Arrigo, *The Terrorist Identity: Explaining the Terrorist Threat* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 176.

¹² Daniel Bass and Amarnath Amarasingam, “Introduction,” in *Sri Lanka: The Struggle for Peace in the Aftermath of War* (London: Hurst & Company, 2016), 5.

¹³ Walpola Rāhula, *History of Buddhism in Ceylon* (Colombo: M.D. Gunasena, 1956), 79.

¹⁴ See *The Broken Palmyra* (Hoole 1988); *Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy* (Tambiah 1991); *State, Nations, Sovereignty* (Bose 1995); *Charred Lullabies* (Daniel 1996); *Enemy Lines* (Trawick 2007); *In My Mother’s House* (Thiranagama 2011).

the increasing militancy and nationalism of Sri Lankan Buddhist monks.¹⁵ Monks became more involved in politics over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and drew on the rhetoric of Dharmapala, Rahula, and the allegories of the *Dīpavaṃsa*, *Mahāvāṃsa* and *Cūḷavaṃsa* to validate patriotic-cum-chauvinistic acts.

My research addresses gaps in previous scholarship by providing an overarching analysis of discourse drawn on by both Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic groups. I avoid both vilifying the majoritarian ethnic community and idealizing Buddhism, but instead seek to show how narratives of victimhood, victory, and xenophobia permeate and underpin the views of Sinhalese and Tamil communities, and are deeply embedded in Sri Lankan life.

Post-war academic literature has focused exclusively on Rajapaksa's autocratic regime and the militancy of Sinhalese Buddhist monks. Literature on Tamil discourse addresses the LTTE and the way in which violence was sanctioned during the civil war. In this thesis, I recognize the prominence of ethnic narratives of victimhood under the *Yahapalanaya* regime. I identify not only the significance of the *Mahāvāṃsa* epic, but also that of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and Ravana imagery, about which a paucity of scholarship currently exists. Finally, interviews with Bodu Bala Sena members are set against discussions with members of the recently emerged Siva Senai organization to show parallels in

¹⁵ See *Religion and Politics in Sri Lanka* (Phadnis 1976); *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Sri Lanka* (Smith 1978); *Buddhism Betrayed* (Tambiah 1992); *The Work of Kings* (Seneviratne 1999); *In Defense of Dharma* (Bartholomeusz 2002); *Buddhism, Conflict, and Violence in Modern Sri Lanka* (Deegalle 2006).

ethnocentric and natalist arguments. In this way, my research adds depth and nuance to discursive studies of Sri Lankan myth and to analyses of novel political developments in post-war Sri Lanka.

Research Methods

Between September and December 2016, I undertook ethnographic fieldwork in Jaffna and Colombo. Open-ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted with professors, politicians, monks, journalists, and members of local NGOs. When requested, informants' identities have been protected through pseudonyms. The interview questions centered on barriers to post-war development, the legitimacy of proposals for devolution, hopes for the forthcoming constitution, and the social status of Muslims in contemporary Sri Lanka. Through interviews, I hoped to gain a sense of how citizens perceived contemporary socio-political reality in Sri Lanka and where they identified areas for possible improvement.

I have chosen to examine the discourses and narratives of contemporary ethno-religious groups in Sri Lanka. What stood out to me over the course of the interviews were the different narratives drawn on by ethnic groups and how they perceived their histories. In the first chapter, the narratives of Thayalan, a journalist associated with the Colombo *Sunday Times*, and Venerable Wimalasaara, a monk of the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) party, are juxtaposed to show how narratives of victimhood emerge in local debates through

mechanisms of selective forgetting and social amnesia. In subsequent chapters, mythic narratives and discourses of xenophobia are examined in order to show how identity is discursively and socially conditioned. Throughout my thesis, Sinhalese and Tamil nationalists are referred to when speaking of ethnic tensions; while many Sinhalese and Tamil people accept and embrace differences, xenophobic biases underlie the discourse of many citizens as a result of deep-seated grievances and narratives of victimhood.

Discourse analysis was popularized in the late twentieth century to reduce conflict and promote reconciliation between various groups. One of the most famous contexts in which narratives began to be explored is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, which sought to “establish as complete a picture as possible ... [by including] the perspectives of the victims and the motives and perspectives of the persons responsible.”¹⁶ Narratives are often used as a coping mechanism: by manipulating one’s words, one can change one’s perspective on and experience of the world. Narratives allow for citizens to affirm collective ideals in the face of disparate experiences and reclaim power and autonomy in contexts of fundamental instability.¹⁷ Through an examination of the discourses of Sinhalese and Tamil communities, I hope to shed some light on the rhetoric underlying popular nationalist movements.

¹⁶ Republic of South Africa, Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, “Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act 34 of 1995,” (Sandton, South Africa: Juta and Company Ltd, 2005), Online, <http://www.justice.gov.za/legislation/acts/1995-034.pdf>.

¹⁷ Michael Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression, Intersubjectivity*. Copenhagen (Denmark: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2007), 22.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this paper is profoundly shaped by postmodern tenets and the work of Ananda Abeysekara. In *Colors of the Robe*, Abeysekara argues that identity is historically and discursively conditioned. Meanings emerge and become submerged, become centered or marginalized, depending on the context of local debates.¹⁸ The elements one chooses to highlight or downplay depend on one's environment and current power relations. Abeysekara uses this argument to dispute the conception of an original or 'authentic' Buddhism, and show how religion and violence are not antithetical since the meanings of each term are constantly shifting.¹⁹ For example, members of the Tamil Tigers are simultaneously conceived of as martyrs and terrorists by different groups. Likewise, Buddhist monks of the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) political party were simultaneously perceived as patriotic by fellow monks and as terrorists by the Jayewardene government in the 1980's.²⁰

Throughout my work, I have highlighted the ways in which discourses are socially conditioned and politically motivated. In the first chapter, Thayalan and Venerable Wimalasaara, in order to present narratives of victimhood and appeal to mechanisms of transitional justice, carefully select historical moments that

¹⁸ Ananda Abeysekara, *Colors of the Robe: Religion, Identity, and Difference* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), 42.

¹⁹ Abeysekara, *Colors of the Robe*, 203-4.

²⁰ Ananda Abeysekara, "The Saffron Army, Violence, Terror(ism): Buddhism, Identity, and Difference in Sri Lanka," (*Numen* 48, no. 1), 27, 37.

highlight the grievances of their ethnic communities. In the second chapter, Sinhalese and Tamil mythic narratives are counterposed and reflected in nationalist groups, constitutional provisions, and processes of “Sinhalization,” which allow the state to legitimize power and stabilize control. Finally, in the third chapter, ethnic communities compete over political symbolism, and a xenophobic discourse of terrorism is imposed and transferred from the Tamil to the Muslim minority. The chapters in this thesis demonstrate the historical, literary, and political symbols that validate and motivate nationalist and religious fundamentalist rhetoric in Sri Lanka.

I– Historical Narratives of Victimhood

Victimhood is often the consequence of a history of traumatic aggression and loss, a belief that the violence suffered was unjustifiable, a fear that the aggressor could strike again, and a perception that the world is indifferent to the community's plight.²¹ It is defined as a state of “collective ethnic mind [...] characterized by an extreme or persistent sense of mortal vulnerability.”²² In the Sri Lankan context, both Tamil and Sinhalese ethnic groups perceive themselves as the “victim” and the other as the perpetrator.

In this section, I will argue that the notion of “victimhood” becomes a powerful political tool in ethnic discourse. I will begin with an analysis of Rajapaksa’s presidential speeches in 2009 and 2010 to identify the body being victimized, namely the multi-ethnic body of the Sri Lankan state.²³ Next, I will juxtapose a particular Sinhalese and Tamil narrative of victimhood. The Sinhalese narrative draws upon the archetype of the invader and colonialist, while the Tamil narrative refers to the recent Sri Lankan civil war. Ethnic communities’ different narratives of victimhood lead to different conceptions of transitional justice. Transitional justice is “an approach to systematic or massive violations of human rights”²⁴ that attempts to “ensure accountability, serve justice

²¹ Sarah Rosenberg, “Victimhood.” *Beyond Intractability* (University of Colorado, Boulder: Conflict Information Consortium, 2003)

²² J. V. Montville, “The Psychological Roots of Ethnic and Sectarian Terrorism,” *The Psychodynamics of International Relationships Vol I* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1990)

²³ See Andi Schubert. “Victorious Victims: An Analysis of Sri Lanka’s Post-War Reconciliation Discourse.” (ICES, 2013), 14.

²⁴ United Nations Peacebuilding Commission, *What is Transitional Justice* (February 20, 2008).

and achieve reconciliation.”²⁵ It adapts justice processes and mechanisms to societies in which “human rights abuse may have been a normal state of affairs.”²⁶ Sinhalese voters oppose international criminal justice procedures, while the Tamil community doubts the efficacy of domestic mechanisms. These ethnic solitudes²⁷ prevent communities from engaging in meaningful dialogue.

Memorialization also acts as a barrier to meaningful dialogue, as it is appropriated by the state to promote a narrative of the triumph of good over evil. However, I argue that post-war memorialization can allow for more meaningful dialogue. Through memorialization, citizens can provide their own narratives to counteract linear truths. Open, unfixed, incomplete narratives would legitimize each ethnic group’s narrative of victimhood, acknowledge Sri Lanka’s multi-ethnic character, and help Sri Lanka progress towards its transitional justice objectives.

Multi-Ethnic Body

Schubert has demonstrated that during the Rajapaksa regime (2005-2015), the notion of “victimhood” was politicized throughout the president’s speeches. The scope, time frame, nature of violent incidents, or violation of human rights were all strategically taken into account in these speeches in order

²⁵ United Nations and the Rule of Law. *Guidance Note of the Secretary-General: United Nations Approach to Transitional Justice* (March 2010).

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ethnic solitude is a term derived from Hugh MacLennan’s “two solitudes.” It refers to the impossibility of communication and solidarity when two communities view their history, country, and problems so differently that it difficult to find a common language. Jayadeva Uyangoda, “Healing after War: Thinking Beyond the Solitudes,” *Healing the Wounds: Rebuilding Sri Lanka after the War* (Colombo: ICES, 2012), 18.

to frame the nation as a victim and thus deserving of international aid. In a 2009 speech, Rajapaksa initially depicted all citizens as victims of war, and subject to the LTTE's "murderous terrorism."²⁸ The President constructed a shared experience of victimhood across a multi-ethnic body, by referring to "Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim, Burgher, Malay and all people" in this speech. All ethnic groups were perceived as victims of the LTTE, Tamils included. Later, in a 2010 speech, the President affirmed that soldiers "[united] our country [and] the expectations of all ethnic groups."²⁹ This assertion and shared experience of victimhood created a connection between the state and the suffering of Sri Lankan citizens of every ethnicity. This connection was further magnified through repeated use of the pronoun "we," in the President's assertions that "we defeated terrorism and separatism [...] we are now ready to lead our children and our nation to a brighter future as stakeholders of a truly free motherland."³⁰ Citizens of every ethnicity were united patriotically against the malevolent, separatist LTTE.

Geopolitical Rhetoric and Feminization

Rajapaksa's conception of the victim extends beyond citizens of each ethnicity to the geographic landscape and nation as a whole. In his 2010 speech, he affirms that "all sanctuaries were closed due to terrorist activities," and that

²⁸ Mahinda Rajapaksa, "President's Speech to Parliament on the Defeat of the LTTE," Institute for Conflict Management (Colombo, May 19, 2009).

²⁹ Mahinda Rajapaksa, "Mahinda Chitanaya 2010: Vision for the Future," UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (Colombo, 2010), 58.

³⁰ Rajapaksa, "Mahinda Chitanaya 2010: Vision for the Future," 7.

“with the defeat of terrorism, Sri Lankans are now able to reap the benefits of the total sea area that the country is entitled to.”³¹ Geopolitical rhetoric is fundamental to projects of nationhood and patriotism, and is instrumental to narratives of victory and victimhood.

Cross-culturally the association of the nation with female imagery is a common trope. Likewise, national language is commonly referred to as the “mother tongue.” In the twentieth century, for example, the Indian nation was conceived by the state as the Hindu goddess: Bharat Mata. Bharat Mata is an amalgam of Hindu goddesses, most notably of Durga, and was formed during the Indian independence movement of the late 19th century. Bharat Mata was one of the representative symbols of the nation state and she was depicted on maps, literally standing in for and conflated with the nation in some depictions. *Vande Mataram* (I worship the mother) would be sung before congress meetings, and Bharat Mata was invoked in nationalist movements for communal mobilization such as the Swadeshi movement³² and Anushilan Samiti³³ group of the early twentieth century. Bharat Mata embodied the Hindutva imagination of India, but also portrayed Muslims as a community unable to participate in this form of patriotism. Muslims were prohibited from joining the nationalist, anti-colonialist

³¹ Rajapaksa, “Mahinda Chitanaya 2010: Vision for the Future,” 89.

³² The Swadeshi (indigenous goods) movement was instituted by Mohandas Gandhi and aimed to achieve independence from Britain by establishing economic self-sufficiency. *Vande Mataram* became a popular anthem over the course of the movement.

³³ Anushilan Samiti was a Bengali Indian organization that propounded revolutionary violence to end British rule in India. The group drew heavily on militarized depictions of Bharat Mata, and performed initiation ceremonies with weapon worship in honour of the goddess.

Anushilan Samiti group, due to communal fragmentation and pro-partition sentiments.

In much the same way, female imagery is often used to depict Sri Lanka as a nation. In this discourse, Sinhalese women represent national purity as “daughters of the nation.”³⁴ “Daughters of the nation” is a natural offshoot of the common phrase “sons of the soil,” a nationalistic epithet used by the Sinhalese to depict themselves as having an exclusive geographical claim over Sri Lanka. Propagandist posters of a Sinhalese woman breastfeeding her child were circulated in the 1980s, along with the caption “give your life's blood to nourish our future soldiers.”³⁵ The images not only represented the next generation as “protectors of the motherland,” but also reinforced traditional gender stereotypes of the male as a martyr, soldier, and hero and the female as a mother, guardian, and protector of tradition.³⁶ Patriarchal and paternalistic gender dynamics are reinforced through gendered geopolitics, and lead to the evocation of pathos and the creation of a unified and coherent national body. Evocations of sexual violence and assault are associated with the acts of enemies of the state. Rumours of Muslim sexual violence towards Sinhalese women, and the abuse of Sinhalese women in Muslim majority countries, play into Sinhala Buddhist nationalist arguments about the integrity and purity of Sri Lanka and its idyllic

³⁴ Robin Noel Badone Jones, "Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism and Islamophobia in Contemporary Sri Lanka" (Lewiston, Maine: Bates College, 2015), 65.

³⁵ Malathi De Alwis, "Toward a Feminist Historiography," *Introduction to Social Theory*. (Colombo: ICES, 1994). 101.

³⁶ Neluka Silva, "'Mothers, daughters and 'whores' of the nation': Nationalism and female stereotypes in post-colonial Sri Lankan drama in English" (*Journal of Gender Studies* 6.3), 270.

past. Violence against Muslims in Sri Lanka becomes justified due to the supposed violence towards Buddhists in Muslim states.³⁷ Islamophobic arguments are part of a broader fear of the Other, which will be explored in the third chapter.

Rhetoric of Unity

Focusing on the ways in which the nation has been bombed and assaulted enables the government to emphasize the ways in which such damage can be mitigated—namely, through economic development and security measures. The Rajapaksa regime supported a market economy policy. Highways were completed and large-scale infrastructure projects were initiated such as the Colombo Lotus Tower, Mahinda Rajapaksa Port, and Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport. These infrastructure projects relied heavily on Chinese loans and tripled the country's foreign debt, leading to an economic crisis.³⁸ Rajapaksa's focus on economic development was not coupled with a concern for political representation and ethnic equity. His inconsistent commitment to parity among ethnic groups is reflected in the notion of “victimization” and his use of the pronoun “we” over the course of his speeches.

Rajapaksa's use of the pronoun “we” varies in his discourse, at times referring to the Sri Lankan people as a whole and other times to Tamil people in

³⁷ Jones, "Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism and Islamophobia in Contemporary Sri Lanka," 78.

³⁸ Rishi Iyengar, "Sri Lanka Attempts to Repair Relations with China amid Escalating Financial Crisis," *Time* (Oct 9, 2015).

particular. In order to distinguish the LTTE from the Tamil people, he pinpoints and differentiates Tamils in their suffering.³⁹ This rhetorical move allows the President to de-legitimize the LTTE's claims of representing the Tamil people. However, this technique also undermines his claim to a unified Sri Lanka and collective experience of victimhood and victory.

The North-East of Sri Lanka was subjected to heavy surveillance and militarization following the war, which resulted in an increase in substance abuse, sexual violence, and psychosocial trauma in the North. The militarization and security measures enforced in the North undercut propositions of transitional justice and Rajapaksa's rhetorical construction of a cohesive, multiethnic Sri Lankan people as a victim of war. The government's focus on economic development detracted from the underlying political issues of nationhood, and the Tamil claims to devolution and federalism.

Rajapaksa's narrative delegitimizes the causes of terrorism, and continues the silencing that occurred with the end of the war. The civil war began because of ethnic tensions, unequal power dynamics, and the Tamil demand for more political representation. Rajapaksa's narrative delegitimized the causes of terrorism by simplistically identifying the LTTE as enemies of the state and not acknowledging the reasoning behind their militant acts. Silencing continues through the focus on economic development and evasion of issues of federalism and devolution. There is no acceptance of the grievances expressed by the Tamil

³⁹ Schubert, "Victorious Victims," 14.

people in the aftermath of anti-Tamil incidents such as the Sinhala Only Act and the pogroms of 1956, 1958, 1977, 1981, and 1983.

Archetype of the Invader

The geopolitical landscape of Sri Lanka not only ties into Sinhalese plans for economic development, and disregard for political representation, but also into their narratives of victimhood. Rajapaksa's speech made direct comparisons between the terrorism of the LTTE and the "savage invaders and enemies" of the past from King Elara (235-161 BCE) all the way to the colonialism of the Portuguese, Dutch, and British.⁴⁰ The archetype of the invader has been and continues to be a powerful trope in the Sinhalese nationalist imaginary.

This archetype was introduced by Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933), an extremely influential Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist reformer in the late nineteenth century. Dharmapala critiqued the colonialist, imperialist-missionary ideology of the British through propagandist exhortations about the great Buddhist civilization of Sri Lanka. To Dharmapala, imperialism needed to be resisted because it threatened the survival of Sinhalese traditions, which had preserved the Buddha's teachings to the present day unpolluted.⁴¹ In his speeches, he would call on the Sinhalese to "wake up, and rescue *Buddhagaya*," and is quoted having said:

⁴⁰ Rajapaksa, "President's Speech to Parliament on the Defeat of the LTTE."

⁴¹ Sarath Amunugama, *The Lion's Roar: Anagarika Dharmapala & The Making of Modern Buddhism* (Colombo, Sri Lanka: Vijitha Yapa Publications, 2016), 256.

“One day White men will leave this country. But they will leave only after producing twenty-thirty thousands of ‘Brown-Sahibs’. They will hate the Sinhala language and manners. They will teach your children to condemn racial and religious divisions. They will say that Tamils, Moors, Cochchies and Hambayas are all equal. Then they will crown English. Kovils will be constructed near Buddhist temples. You will be waiting for your savior, Prince Diyasena. Remember that these Brown Sahibs are capable of killing Diyasanans to-be-born, before they are born.”⁴²

Dharmapala's critique of colonialist ideology was rooted in the social reality of British occupation, against which the Sinhalese were politically and militarily impotent. The Kandyan treaty of 1815, in which the preservation of Buddhism was ensured, did not hold in practice. Buddhist lands were expropriated and traditional institutions were threatened by the spread of missionary activity.⁴³ In order to tailor and propagate his Buddhist revivalist ideology towards the working class and lower-middle class urbanites of Colombo, Dharmapala drew on technological and social innovations under colonialism.⁴⁴ He promoted an ideological vision of Buddhism that attempted to return Sri Lankan Buddhism to its original, pristine glory.⁴⁵ Dharmapala believed that Sri Lanka's decline—from a righteous, paternalistic kingship—was due to the acceptance of foreign political and moral customs. In the absence of kings, it was the monk's duty to teach villagers the true and authentic Buddhist way of life.⁴⁶

⁴² Nirmal Dewasiri, “New Buddhist Extremism and Challenges to Ethno-Religious Coexistence in Sri Lanka” (Colombo: ICES, 2016), 7.

⁴³ Amunugama, *The Lion's Roar*, 253.

⁴⁴ Amunugama, *The Lion's Roar*, 482.

⁴⁵ H. L. Seneviratne, *The Work of Kings* (Chicago: U of Chicago, 1999), 36.

⁴⁶ Seneviratne, *The Work of Kings*, 32.

Sinhalese Narrative of Victimhood

The trope of the foreign invader holds as much power today as it did in the past. Venerable Wimalasaara, a monk of the Jathika Hela Urumaya political party, spoke to me about his inclination and motivations in taking up political activism. He asserted that the Tamil Tigers are the primary reason for joining the JHU. However, Wimalasaara's narrative completely neglected the recent war and instead focused on the trauma of the Sinhalese during colonial times.

Wimalasaara recounted to me the history of nineteenth and twentieth century Sri Lanka, and asserted that throughout history the Sinhalese have been oppressed. He claimed that the Sinhalese community has consistently been displaced and neglected, while Muslim and Tamil communities have flourished. Wimalasaara cited the example of the period of British colonial rule, during which Muslim and Tamil communities flourished and the Sinhalese became impoverished. Protestant mission schools were built in Jaffna, and Tamil literacy greatly increased as a result of such changes. The high level of education in the North prompted the British colonial government to hire Tamils as government workers, and, at the time of independence, Tamils held 60% of government jobs. The Sinhalese leaders of the country saw this situation as an affront and viewed it as the means by which the British attempted to control and constrain the Sinhala-speaking majority.

Venerable Wimalasaara recounted to me how two great insurrections took place against the British, in 1818 and 1848, both of which were brutally

suppressed. The Uva-Wellassa rebellion of 1818 occurred as a result of people's anger and dissatisfaction, since the British rule—prior to the signing of the Kandyan Convention of 1815—had promised to uphold and foster Buddhist tradition and norms. The rebellion spread through Wellassa, Bintenne, Hewaheta, Kotmale, and Dumbara for a year.⁴⁷ Sinhalese peasants were subjected to death via execution, hunger, and disease. The Matale rebellion of 1848 occurred primarily because the lands of Sinhalese peasants were taken by the government and sold at very low prices to British and Scottish coffee planters. Peasants had to pay various taxes to increase the Colony's revenue, and found themselves extremely impoverished—not even the monks (*bhikkus*) could find sustenance.⁴⁸ The uprising began in Matale, and spread to Kandy and Kurunegala. Martial law was imposed, and the British military arrested supposed rebels, confiscated property, and shot men without a proper trial. The monk Ven. Kudahapola Thera⁴⁹ was tried by a Court Martial and shot in his robes in his own temple, the Kahalla Vihara.

Buddhist Monks and Political Activism

Venerable Wimalasaara highlighted this history of colonial oppression not only to emphasize the victimization of the Sinhalese people, but also to stress the

⁴⁷ S. B. Karalliyadda, “The Uva Rebellion of 1818,” *The Island* (November 9, 2012).

⁴⁸ Aravinda Dassanayake, “Looking Back: The Foreign Invasion,” Archives (Colombo: *The Sunday Times*, 2007).

⁴⁹ Venerable Kudahapola Thera symbolizes a freedom fighter against British colonialism to the Sinhalese, and has been honored in various books, articles, and films (such as the 1979 *Veera Puran Appu*).

legitimacy of the activist role of the monk. Both the Uva-Wellawasa and Matale rebellions were led by Buddhist monks—either at the forefront or as advisors to the leaders. Monks played a crucial role in both anti-imperialist struggles of the nineteenth century and working class protests of the twentieth century.⁵⁰ Walpola Rahula, a twentieth century Sri Lankan Buddhist scholar, has argued that the monk had always been a political actor and advisor to kings in classical times. Rahula asserted that British colonial policies severed the bond between the *sangha* and the laity and confined the former to temple functions. The Sri Lankan *sangha* however has never been unified and is divided across several *Nikayas*,⁵¹ with some monks more supportive of political engagement and others more skeptical. Rahula held up the “Buddhist way of life” in contrast to Western materialistic and individualistic values.⁵² However, as one of the leading priests of the Malwatte Vihara⁵³ recently asserted, “we cannot at all think that this rebellion originated owing to the recent tax ordinances, or on account of the government having interfered with the Buddhist religion.”⁵⁴ The causes of the Matale rebellion were far more deep-seated, and the monk acknowledged that the expulsion of the British and restoration of a Sinhalese monarchy were at the forefront of the minds of the monks of Malwatte Vihara.

⁵⁰ Stanley Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed* (Chicago: U of Chicago, 1992), 101.

⁵¹ A *Nikaya* is monastic division or lineage.

⁵² Stanley Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed*, 118.

⁵³ Built in the eighteenth century, the Malwatte Vihara is one of the principal Buddhist monasteries in Kandy, is associated with the Siam Nikaya, and located near the sacred Temple of the Tooth.

⁵⁴ H. N. S. Karunatilake, “Gongalagoda banda the last crowned king of Kandy,” *InfoLanka Features* (February 2, 2008).

As I spoke to Venerable Wimalasaara, I found myself immersed in his narrative. It was hard not to experience sympathy and sadness upon hearing of the plight of the Sinhalese people, as they were mistreated and targeted by colonialists as early as the sixteenth century. However, upon reflection, what struck me was the selective nature of the monk's recounting of history. As William James has asserted, “*forgetting* is as important a function as *remembering*.”⁵⁵ Forgetting is an inevitable component of perception and of memory. It is impossible for any person to capture every element of a given situation, so people tend to highlight certain aspects and downplay others. Such processes of forgetting and remembering are quintessential to the formation of narratives; through specific processes of forgetting and remembering, specific perspectives are justified and upheld. However, selective forgetting obscures the continuity of ideas and events which persist in guiding and informing social reality. Selective forgetting conceals structural violence and oppression, and enables citizens to disregard the grievances of other ethnic communities in order to emphasize their own.

Tamil Narrative of Victimhood

While Tamil populations were certainly favoured during British colonial rule, Venerable Wimalasaara's recounting of history completely neglected the experiences and grievances of Tamil and Muslim citizens. When I spoke with

⁵⁵ William James, *Psychology: the briefer course* (New York: Harper, 1961), 167.

Thayalan, a Tamil journalist for the *Sunday Times*, he touched upon the grievances of the Tamil community, focusing particularly on the civil war and the way in which it ended. Thayalan asserted that the main reasons for the civil war were Tamil-Sinhalese relations. He affirmed that the Sinhalese, “as they are the majority, they believe we have to listen to what they're saying.” Thayalan asserted that from independence until the early 1980s, “65% of higher [government] positions were filled by Tamils.” Due to colonial era clashes between the Muslims and Sinhalese in Kandy, the British had a better relationship with Tamils. However, following independence, many social policies—including the Sinhala-Only Act and university recruitment policies—were not inclusive of Tamil people, so “because of this, Tamils took to weapons in 1972.”

As a journalist, Thayalan felt that he had considerable freedom to vividly depict Tamil grievances from the war. During the last two months of the war, in Jaffna food was served “to 3.5 lakhs⁵⁶ of people in a 200 m² [area].” However, during that period, only reserves of milk powder remained. Parents were required to take their children out of their homes to prove parenthood in order to obtain food. Thayalan commented, “even though it’s not safe [to leave home], rather than crying and dying from malnutrition, a bomb would be quicker.” Thayalan had seen forty infants die from bomb blasts. His own father had suffered for forty-five minutes from bomb fragments before passing away. Thayalan’s wife was

⁵⁶ A unit in the Indian numbering system equal to 100, 000.

pregnant when his father passed away, but Thayalan was imprisoned for association with the LTTE. It was his brother who had worked for the LTTE, but his brother had shot himself. Eleven months later, it was proven that Thayalan had not interacted with the LTTE, and he was finally able to see his child.

After telling me his story, Thayalan revealed his skepticism about the international community and diasporic Sri Lankans. “Last time, all these international forces didn't do what they said they would. People requested international authorities to save their lives [...] they asked the international organizations for help in January 2009 and people died in May—they could have helped us in April.” His skepticism about international support for the Tamil cause was echoed by a few of my Tamil informants, like Rajan Hoole who affirmed that “for the lack of a better word, a betrayal in some sense has already been accomplished. We are now a human rubbish-heap useful for the production of academic papers dealing with our shame.”

The trauma and suffering that each ethnic community has undergone as a result of the war is deep-seated and not entirely accessible to an outsider. Anthropologist Sharika Thiranagama has discussed war as a “social condition,” during which citizens live in an anticipation of violence and are united in their anxiety.⁵⁷ Citizens realize that social life is not grounded in seamless assumptions, but in individual fabrications that are structured by larger

⁵⁷ Sharika Thiranagama, *In My Mother's House: Civil War in Sri Lanka* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 244.

circumstances and histories.⁵⁸ Collective trauma from displacement, uprootedness, and the breakdown of social structures has resulted in a fundamental insecurity and suspicion of 'the Other.'⁵⁹ Trauma creates a liminality that becomes an integrated aspect of day-to-day life, resulting in new kinds of selves and engagements with reality. War simultaneously grounds life as it takes life away, and the forces that make and unmake us become “sites of ceaselessly generative *ambivalent* attachments and investments.”⁶⁰

Both Venerable Wimalasaara and Thayalan's narratives exhibit a form of social amnesia and collective forgetting. How a community envisions its past is in part captured by what it forgets, and both ethnic communities display a form of mnemonic silence. Collective memory entails both remembrance through narratives and representations of the past, as well as a forgetting that involves a silencing or muting of the past. Silence becomes mnemonic when the silence is a muting of the past and is public in nature.⁶¹ Examples of mnemonic silence include the state monuments that replaced LTTE cemeteries at the end of the war. Such silence affects both speakers and listeners, by creating a broader discourse in which certain forms of remembrance are permitted while others are forbidden.

Forgetting is inevitably involved in memory, and is a phenomenological

⁵⁸ Thiranagama, *In My Mother's House*, 6.

⁵⁹ Daya Somasundaram, *Scarred Communities: Psychosocial Impact of Man-Made and Natural Disasters on Sri Lankan Society* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2014), 102.

⁶⁰ Thiranagama, *In My Mother's House*, 12.

⁶¹ Charles B. Stone et al., “Toward a Science of Silence,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 7(1), 2012, 39-40.

condition for the possibility of remembrance; since it is not possible to be aware of every single element of a situation or event, our perception and memory is inevitably selective and subjective. However, forgetfulness in these two narratives—where historical traces of a broader and more complex reality remain—ties into discourses of victimhood and power-relations. In Venerable Wimalasaara's narrative, selective forgetting and “structural amnesia”⁶² occur to legitimate institutions and back up claims to a certain status and rights.⁶³ This leads to the perception that societies are homeostatic and that the lives of villagers have gone unchanged for generations.⁶⁴ Wimalasaara and Thayalan's narratives both lack historicity as they connect the past seamlessly with Sri Lanka's socio-political present; societies are homeostatic insofar as each ethnic community perceives itself as consistently marginalized and victimized throughout history. Wimalasaara's narrative sustains Sinhalese hegemony and legitimates state institutions since events and memories in which Sinhalese Buddhists were perpetrators rather than victims are silenced and ignored. In the same way, Thayalan's narrative disregards the role that the LTTE played in prolonging the civil war and creating an atmosphere of anxiety, liminality, and collective trauma in Sri Lanka.

⁶² Structural amnesia, a term coined by Goody and Watt (1968), occurs when “[a culture] preserves only those elements selected as central to the culture.” Helen Leckie-Tarry, and David Birch. *Language and Context: A Functional Linguistic Theory of Register* (New York: Pinter Publishers, 1995), 55.

⁶³ Susan Rasmussen, “The Uses of Memory,” *Culture & Psychology* 8(1): 2002, 121.

⁶⁴ Louise Manon Bourgault, *Mass media in sub-Saharan Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 19.

Reconciliation and Transitional Justice

One of the most important reasons for claiming the status of “victim” is that a reconciliation process should hold those responsible accountable for their actions and compensate those who were victimized. The establishment of the identities of victims and perpetrators is an important part of coming to terms with the past. Transitional justice aims to restore victims' identity, punish alleged perpetrators, and bring about institutional changes to restore confidence between ethnic groups. Sri Lanka is considered a failed test for transitional justice, partially because of the diverging narratives of victimhood.⁶⁵ The Sinhalese voters oppose criminal justice procedures that would be at the heart of transitional justice, because such procedures would delegitimize the armed forces that the Sinhalese consider heroes.⁶⁶ Many in the Sinhalese community also believe that the international community is under the influence of the pro-Tamil diaspora, and therefore promotes pro-LTTE sentiments. The Tamil community however is skeptical about the efficacy of domestic mechanisms. The different narratives of victimhood espoused by each ethnic community render reconciliatory policies difficult to implement, and for this reason ethnic tensions have persisted (as explored in Chapter III). Ethnic solitudes⁶⁷ prevent communities from engaging in

⁶⁵ P. Newman, “Transitional Justice in Sri Lanka,” *International Policy Digest* (April 9, 2016).

⁶⁶ Neil DeVotta, “Parties political decay and democratic regression in Sri Lanka,” in J Chiriyankandath (ed.) *Parties and Political Change in South Asia*. (London: Routledge, 2016). 139–65.

⁶⁷ Jayadeva Uyangoda, “Healing after War: Thinking Beyond the Solitudes,” *Healing the Wounds: Rebuilding Sri Lanka after the War* (Colombo: ICES, 2012), 18.

meaningful dialogue. As a result, ethnic communities tend to perceive themselves as mutually exclusive entities with divergent political aspirations.

The current president of Sri Lanka, Maithripala Sirisena, does not draw on the same dichotomy of victim/victor used by Rajapaksa. Sirisena similarly implies unity across a multi-ethnic body, but does not undercut this proposition through extensive security infrastructure and militarization in the North-East. The President's policies are directed towards the international community, involving plans for a new constitution, an office for the investigation of missing persons, and a consultation task force on reconciliation mechanisms. Transitional justice, constitutional reform, and economic reform are seen as the primary means through which to achieve reconciliation and development.⁶⁸

2017 has seen progress on Sri Lanka's transitional justice process. A report by the Consultation Task Force documents the views of 7000 citizens on reconciliation issues. However, the President and Prime Minister were not present at the release of the report, which implied to citizens that reconciliation issues are not among the priorities of the government. A "National Integration and Reconciliation Week" was held from the eighth to the fourteenth of January, but citizens fear that this symbolic gesture will not be followed by concrete action. There is a lack of commitment and leadership from political figures, and promises from the 2015 election are yet to be followed through on.

⁶⁸ Pradeep Peiris, "Yahapalanaya's Promise of Reconciliation: Merely a Means, Not an End?" *Polity 7.1* (Colombo: SSA, 2016), 19.

Transitional justice is promised at a domestic level “within the country’s legal framework” in the election manifesto of the UNP (United National Party), the main ruling party in the Sri Lankan government led by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.⁶⁹ However, an approach that values “truth first, [and] justice later” could be perceived as an effort to avoid issues of accountability and could consequently deepen ethnic tensions.⁷⁰ A hybrid court would be necessary to appease all ethnic groups, but the government has stated that such a mechanism would be unfeasible in Sri Lanka. Rather than re-launching peace-building and reconciliation processes, the government continues to focus on economic reforms through a neoliberal platform in order to foster a “knowledge based Social Market Economy built on social justice principles.”⁷¹ The lack of progress in terms of transitional justice and political settlements has led to an erosion of confidence among the government’s primary political support base. This lack of progress suggests discord among the coalition partners of the government. Inevitably, the dominant position of the Sinhalese population renders hybrid mechanisms and accountability difficult to implement. Issues of accountability need to be confronted in order to address Tamil narratives of victimhood.

In reality, the complexities and normative truths that underpin armed

⁶⁹ Nipunika O. Lecamwasam, “Transitional Justice in Post-War Sri Lanka: Dilemmas and Prospects.” *Polity 7.1* (Colombo: SSA, 2016), 14.

⁷⁰ Niran Anketell, “Transitional justice without justice? A way out.” *Groundviews* (April 12, 2016).

⁷¹ Ranil Wickramasinghe, “Economic Policy Statement,” *News LK* (November 5, 2015).

conflict make a simple dichotomy of victim and perpetrator difficult to sustain. Such a dichotomy leads to the privileging of one narrative over another, and becomes an obstacle to the post-war reconciliation process. Memorialization is one way in which narratives of victimhood have begun to be publicly addressed. As an element of transitional justice, memorialization allows for citizens to confront, commemorate, and learn from legacies of human rights abuses and war crimes.⁷² The government can reconcile tensions between communities by demonstrating respect for and acknowledgment of the past. Collective memories inevitably differ among communities, and war victims struggle with the tension between the desire to forget and the need to remember.

Memorialization

Post-war memorialization reflects power: whose stories are told and who has the space to tell their stories. The state was the sole actor responsible for memorialization, which led to the appropriation of space in the Tamil region of Vanni where the tombs of LTTE fighters were destroyed and replaced with state monuments. A war victory museum was built at Puthukudiyiruppu in North-East Sri Lanka, near the site where thousands of civilians died at the end of the war. The museum showcases weapons, boats, and submarines captured from the LTTE.⁷³ By promoting a narrative of the triumph of good over evil, the state

⁷² Louis Bickford, "Memoryworks/Memory Works," In *Transitional Justice, Culture, and Society: Beyond Outreach* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 2014), 493.

⁷³ PEARL, "Erasing the Past: Repression of Memorialization in North-East Sri Lanka" (Colombo:

reinscribes ethnic divisions that initially incited the violence and imposes a form of forced remembrance on citizens who are not permitted to commemorate their losses.

Today memorialization is being retrieved by citizens as a form of resistance, when the state enforces forgetting. Tamil community memorialization projects are being carried out by NGOs in Ampara, Matara, and Jaffna districts. Through memorialization, citizens counteract linear histories and truths. Focus should be on the process of creation and the dialogue it catalyzes, rather than pinpointing a single, linear truth and narrative for the war. The complexity, depth, and variety of memories and narratives refuse comprehensive labels such as “collective trauma.”⁷⁴ This unfixed, incomplete narrative opens up the possibility of conceiving of a “non-sovereign subjectivity that is porous and permeable.”⁷⁵ Such a conceptualization of citizenship and identity would acknowledge Sri Lanka's multi-ethnic character, be integrative of minorities, and in line with Sri Lanka's transitional justice objectives.

While the *Yahapalanaya* government has progressed in terms of transitional justice and has lifted the unofficial ban on the Tamil national anthem, unequal power relations, triumphalism, and narratives of supremacy and legacy remain inscribed in state narratives. The next chapter will explore mythic

PEARL, 2016).

⁷⁴ Malathi De Alwis, “Trauma, Memory, Forgetting,” *Sri Lanka: The Struggle for Peace in the Aftermath of War* (London: Hurst & Company, 2016), 161.

⁷⁵ Butler, Judith. *Undoing gender*. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 46.

narratives of victory rather than victimhood. Etiological myths underpin political acts and policies, and legitimize each ethnic community's claim to the nation.

II – Mythic Narratives of Victory

While ethnic groups struggle to claim the status of victimhood, the establishment of a victor is equally important. The ethnic group in power establishes, legitimizes, and stabilizes control over the post-war nation-state.⁷⁶ The victor not only controls the post-conflict situation, but also fixes the parameters of the reconciliation process and how the conflict will be historically narrated. The first chapter of this thesis drew on political speeches and ethnographic encounters to illustrate narratives of victimhood in the Sinhalese and Tamil communities. In this chapter, I analyze how mythic narratives of supremacy and legacy are upheld, and how they underpin nationalist acts and policies. The chapter begins with a clarification of the terms “nation” and “nationalism” before moving on to an exploration of how mythic figures and events in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahāvam̐sa* become politicized in nationalist discourse.

Anderson and Chatterjee’s Conceptions of Nationalism

Benedict Anderson defines the nation as a “politically imagined community, which is imagined as both limited and sovereign.”⁷⁷ He argues that the concept of the nation emerged in the late eighteenth century to replace

⁷⁶ Schubert, “Victorious Victims,” 4.

⁷⁷ Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 5.

previous monarchical and religious hierarchical models.⁷⁸ The Protestant Reformation is credited with leading to the decline of ancient kingship and development of vernacular state languages, which contributed to the conception of nationalism.⁷⁹ The forces that led to the origin and spread of nationalism in the eighteenth century are also linked to a decline in the perceived infallible truth of sacred texts and the sovereignty religion once held.⁸⁰ Nationhood became a way to conceptualize state sovereignty and rule, and was a notion powerful enough to convince citizens that a call-to-arms is a patriotic duty.

Anderson's conception of nationalism takes the Western modular form of nationalism as being universal. His analysis assumes that religion has less relevance in contemporary times, when in fact religion continues to play a fundamental role today; be it in the Christian underpinnings of Western values or the ways in which religion, ethnicity, and nationhood are deeply interwoven in contemporary Sri Lankan reality. Anderson's analysis also denies the colonized world any real agency; anti-colonial nationalism is reduced to a derivative discourse that depends on models gained from colonial power.⁸¹

Partha Chatterjee offers a counter-narrative to Anderson's conception of nationalism, and distinguishes between political and cultural nationalism. He insists that an "imagined community" is not a concrete universal, for the nation is

⁷⁸ Anderson, *Imagined communities*, 4.

⁷⁹ Anderson, *Imagined communities*, 12-46

⁸⁰ Morgan Oddie, "The 'Great Chronicle' of a Mythic Past: The Narrativization of Ideology in the Construction of Sinhalese National Identity," (Master's thesis, Queen's University, 2014), 11.

⁸¹ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 5.

conceived of differently by different nations.⁸² Political nationalism in the material domain is often an imitation of the West, while “cultural nationalism” in the spiritual domain consists of “national culture” rooted in traditions and customs that date from before the political battle with the colonizer. In the clarification of a national culture, reformists reclaim traditions and cultures to create a zone in which the intervention of colonizers is not permitted. A national language is determined, religious festivals become routinized, cultural symbols are identified, and secondary schools are created to normalize the national language, literature, and culture.

Myth fundamentally plays into ethno-religious narratives in Sri Lanka by discursively naturalizing and legitimizing certain social classifications and systems of hierarchy.⁸³ Through such classifications and systems of hierarchy, myth substantiates nationalist claims to an ancient heritage and consequently to territory. As Lincoln has argued, myth acts as a “second-order semiotic system,”⁸⁴ providing a meta-language that eliminates contextual and historical conditions. It grounds social order in a mythological, supernatural reality, which offers safety and stability to existing social structures and protection from disintegration as a result of change.⁸⁵ Due to the seeming universality and ahistoricity of myth, present-day phenomena are traced back and legitimated

⁸² Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*, 5.

⁸³ Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 3.

⁸⁴ Lincoln, *Discourse and Construction of Society*, 5.

⁸⁵ Oddie, “The ‘Great Chronicle’ of a Mythic Past,” 24.

through mythic references.⁸⁶

Because of their seeming universality, myths are often vehicles for ideological arguments.⁸⁷ Religious symbols and myths become intertwined with secular and national identities in a manner that blurs the boundaries between the sacred and the profane. As will be explored in this chapter, the mythological visits of the historical Buddha and image of an “island of the *dhamma*” lead to the contemporary privileging of Buddhism in the Sri Lankan constitution. Similarly, the narratives of the *Mahāvamsa* lead to deep-rooted xenophobia and fear of the Other in the Sinhalese community, as Tamils become dehumanized and categorized as sub-human in conflict. Myths legitimize a simplistic relationship between victim and victor, between dominant and subordinate groups. Consequently, texts are drawn upon by groups to construct national, religio-political identities of victory, supremacy, and legacy. The *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahāvamsa* in particular are drawn upon by Sri Lankan ethno-nationalist groups as origin myths to establish a historical and mythical precedent dating into the distant past.

The *Rāmāyaṇa*

Heinz Berchert comments on the notable absence of a *Rāmāyaṇa*

⁸⁶ Bronislaw Malinowski, “Myth in Primitive Psychology,” in *The Myth and Ritual Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Robert A. Segal (Malden, MA, Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1998), 182-3.

⁸⁷ Christopher Flood, “Myth and Ideology,” *Thinking through Myths: Philosophical Perspectives*, edited by Kevin Schilbrack (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 176.

tradition in the 1970's in Sri Lanka. He asserts that the *Rāmāyaṇa* is a central element of Hindu and Buddhist cultures influenced by Indian culture; even in Indonesia, despite the prominence of Islam, the story has remained central.⁸⁸ Sri Lanka is the scene of the epic, the kingdom of the demon king Rāvaṇa to which Sita is taken captive and to which Rāma travels with the help of the monkey deity Hanuman. Berchert sees the absence of the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a conscious decision on the part of Sinhalese writers to avoid the spread of ideas contradictory to the Buddhist teleological mission of Lanka in the *Mahāvamsa* as “the island of the *dhamma*” (*dhammadīpa*).⁸⁹

Nevertheless, Rāvaṇa is a prominent cultural and literary icon in both Tamil and Sinhalese discourse. In order to substantiate their respective claims to being the original inhabitants of Sri Lanka, Rāvaṇa has been claimed as the ancestor of both the Tamil and Sinhalese people.⁹⁰ For example, Masti Venkatesha Iyengar, an Indian academic of the twentieth century, asserts that Rāvaṇa was “Dravidian and Tamilian in particular.”⁹¹ Rāvaṇa is said to have worshipped Siva, and have had Brahma appear to him and offer “three great boons” of indestructibility, recovery, and mutability.⁹² Sri Lankan Tamils are

⁸⁸ Heinz Berchert, “The Beginnings of Buddhist Historiography: *Mahāvamsa* and Political Thinking,” *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Sri Lanka*, ed. Bardwell L. Smith (Chambersburg PA: ANIMA Books, 1978), 4.

⁸⁹ Berchert, “The Beginnings of Buddhist Historiography,” 10.

⁹⁰ S. Perera, “The Attempted Construction of a New Hero: Sinhala and Tamil Appropriation of Ravana,” in *Living with torturers* 62-70.

⁹¹ Indira Goswāmī and Manjeet Baruah, *Ravana: myths, legends, and lore* (Delhi: B.R. Pub. Corp., 2009), 26.

⁹² Brahma offered to Rāvaṇa indestructibility, recovery, and mutability (Ravana: Myths, Legends, and Lore, 22)

predominantly Śaivite rather than Vaiṣṇavite, so Rāvaṇa is worshipped more frequently than Rāma, Vishnu, and Krishna. In an alternative origin myth to the Sri Lankan *Mahāvamsa* chronicle, it is recounted that “long before the arrival of Prince Vijaya, there were in Sri Lanka five recognized temples (*ishvarams*) of Siva which claimed and received the adoration of all India.”⁹³ Koneshwaram is one of the five temples and was built by the great Tamil king Rāvaṇa. This origin myth enables Tamil people to make a claim to the nation, and draw connections between history, ethnicity, and Hinduism. Anthropologist Sasanka Perera claims that because Tamils did not have an all-inclusive origin myth as the Sinhalese had, there was a stronger political compulsion to resurrect the Ravana myth.⁹⁴ The appropriation of the figure of Ravana allowed Tamil nationalists to establish an early presence for Tamils in Sri Lanka, preceding the legendary arrival of the Sinhalese in the myths of the *Mahāvamsa*.

Despite King Rāvaṇa’s primary association with Hindu mythology, he also plays an important role in Sinhalese discourse. Rāvaṇa is said to have been the bodhisattva Bodhidharmācharya, who demonstrates his bodhisattva qualities in the Laṅkāvatāra Sutra.⁹⁵ In the ancient Sinhala works *Rājāvaliya* and *Rāvaṇaṅvaliya*, Rāvaṇa is identified and extolled as a Sinhalese king.⁹⁶ Rāvaṇa is

⁹³ Paul E. Pieris, “Nagadipa and Buddhist Remains in Jaffna,” *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society* (CB) XXVI.70: 1917, 17-8.

⁹⁴ S. Perera, “The Attempted Construction of a New Hero: Sinhala and Tamil Appropriation of Ravana” in *Living with torturers and other essays of intervention: Sri Lankan society, culture and politics in perspective* (Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 1995), 70.

⁹⁵ Mirando Obeyesekere and Nandana Tennekoon, *Ravana: King of Lanka*, 159.

⁹⁶ P. K. Balachandran, “Ravana is a hero for Sinhala nationalists,” *Hindustan Times*. September 23, 2007.

also said to have constructed a Buddhist stupa to enshrine the hair relics of Buddha Konagama, which he crowned with a blue sapphire at its peak.

King Rāvaṇa is drawn upon in Sinhalese nationalist movements because he is identified as the first king in Sri Lankan history to have resisted Indian invaders.⁹⁷ In response to the Indian appropriation of the figure of Rama, the Sinhalese have appropriated the figure of Ravana; the figure of Rama is tied into a collective memory of destructive invasions “under the false pretext of ushering in peace.”⁹⁸ As a testament to Ravana’s presence in Sri Lanka, outside of Wariyapola city stands a sign that says “You are entering the Wariyapola city, which during the reign of King Ravana served as a landing area for the vehicle that traveled at the speed of air.”⁹⁹ This sign serves to publicly legitimize the Ravana myth and the mythic notion that Wariyapola was the site for the departure and arrival of Ravana’s secret aircrafts, predating the inventions of the Wright brothers.¹⁰⁰

Politicization of the Rāvaṇa Epic

The political implications of the Rāvaṇa epic are reflected in the etymological roots of the Sinhalese nationalist group Rāvaṇa Balaya (“Rāvaṇa’s Force”), which derives its name from the mythic king. Rāvaṇa Balaya, along with

⁹⁷ Balachandran, “Ravana is a hero for Sinhala nationalists,” 2007.

⁹⁸ Ariyadasa Seneviratne, *Sri Lanka Ravana Rajadaniya*, Colombo: Samayawardena, 1991.

⁹⁹ Perera, “The Attempted Construction of a New Hero” in *Living with torturers*, 62.

¹⁰⁰ Perera, “The Attempted Construction of a New Hero” in *Living with torturers*, 64.

the Bodu Bala Sena (“Buddhist Strength Force”) and Sinhala Urumaya (“Sinhala Outcry”), is known for militantly propagating hostility against ethnic minorities.¹⁰¹ The Secretary-General of the Rāvaṇa Balaya, Venerable Ithithbekande Saddhatissa, stated that “any nation where there is a majority of a certain religion, it should have priority in that country.”¹⁰² Sinhala nationalist parties such as Rāvaṇa Balaya have been given free reign by President Mahinda Rajapaksa, who condoned an era of Sinhala chauvinism and allowed for such parties to spout ethnocentric and xenophobic rhetoric. For example, Rāvaṇa Balaya launched a two week, 250 km pilgrimage in 2013 that concluded with a high-profile presentation and petition to President Rajapaksa for a complete ban on halal labelling.¹⁰³ Recently Rāvaṇa Balaya has contributed to another surge in Islamophobic violence; between April 16th and May 22nd, 2017, various mosques and Muslim shops have been bombed, burned, and attacked with stones and clubs.¹⁰⁴

Following these events, Rāvaṇa Balaya denied involvement in the violence and Sudaththa Thero affirmed that “investigations should be made to arrest Muslims who attacked their [own] mosques.”¹⁰⁵ Ethnocentric discourse and

¹⁰¹ M. A. Nuhman, “Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism and Muslim Identity in Sri Lanka,” *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities: Religious Conflict in Contemporary Sri Lanka*, ed. John Holt. (New York City, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 39.

¹⁰² Rosie Diamonno, “Meet Sri Lanka’s radical Buddhist.” *The Star*. January 13, 2014.

¹⁰³ John Clifford Holt, “A Religious Syntax to Recent Communal Violence in Sri Lanka,” in *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities: Religious Conflict in Contemporary Sri Lanka*, ed. John Holt (New York City, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 207.

¹⁰⁴ Hilmy Ahabed, “Escalating Violence: Renewed Assaults on the Muslim Community,” *Groundviews*, May 22, 2017.

¹⁰⁵ *The Daily FT*, “Ravana Balaya demands equal justice for all communities,” May 26, 2017.

narratives of victimhood are upheld as Sudaththa Thero dismisses the privilege of being a member of the majoritarian ethnic community in Sri Lanka:

“When a Sinhala-Buddhist man talks about his race and religion, he is automatically labelled an extremist. However, if any Muslim man or anyone else stands for his identity it is labelled self-respect ... The Government should take stern actions to arrest Muslim ministers who support Muslim extremism *before* arresting Gnanasara Thero”¹⁰⁶

Thus, under the banner of legitimacy and legacy provided by Rāvaṇa, members of Rāvaṇa Balaya promulgate xenophobic and ethnocentric discourse. Sudaththa Thero ignores the structural violence inherent in Sri Lankan society due to notions of Sinhalese supremacy. Sinhalese Buddhists are being prosecuted for physical acts of Islamophobic violence, such as bombings and fires; the Sri Lankan Muslim community has never launched physical assault on other ethnic communities. The appropriation of the figure of Rāvaṇa serves to legitimate Rāvaṇa Balaya’s claims to unique ethnic privileges and entitlements, due to notions of an ancient Sinhalese heritage and persistent legacy.

The Mahāvamsa

In contrast to the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the myths in the *Mahāvamsa* are drawn on profusely in contemporary Sri Lankan political discourse. The *Mahāvamsa* is a

¹⁰⁶ Ibid; Gnanasera Thero is a founder of Bodu Bala Sena, a radical Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist group

sixth-century epic poem written by the scholar-monk Mahānāma, which narrates the story of the Sinhalese kingdom from its foundation in the sixth or fifth century BCE to the reign of the King Mahāsenā in the fourth century CE. The chronicle begins with the contention that the Sinhalese race originated with the coming of Vijaya, the earliest recorded king of Sri Lanka, which coincided with the death of the Buddha. Gananath Obeyesekere considers Vijaya's arrival to be an early prototype of the nationalist "colonization myth."¹⁰⁷ Buddhism spread in Sri Lanka through royal patronage after King Asoka's son Mahinda converted King Devānaṃpiyatissa. Asoka's daughter Sanghamitta also established the female ordained monastics (*bhikkunī*) order in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka's purported connection to the Buddha, who had visited in the years prior to his death, supports the belief that Sri Lanka would become a "the island of the *dhamma*" (*dhammadīpa*).¹⁰⁸ Throughout the chapters of the *Mahāvamsa*, Sinhalese Buddhists defend the island, their cultural heritage, and religious tradition against the influences of the Tamil and Hindu Other.

The *Mahāvamsa* establishes a strong connection between the Sinhalese people, Buddhist religion, and state. The chronicle itself begins with the visit of the Buddha to Sri Lanka, and a prophecy that Sri Lanka would be the "the island of *dhamma*." The *dhamma*¹⁰⁹ is the Theravādin Mahāvihāra tradition of

¹⁰⁷ Gananath Obeyesekere, "Gajabāhu and the Gajabāhu Synchronism: An Inquiry into the Relationship between Myth and History," *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Sri Lanka*, ed. Bardwell L. Smith (Chambersburg, PA, ANIMA Books, 1978), 94.

¹⁰⁸ *Mahāvamsa* 84; *dhammadīpa* ("the island shines with the light of the *dhamma*)

¹⁰⁹ *Dhamma* (or *dharma*) is a term that has multiple meanings depending on the context, but in this sense refers to the teachings of the Buddha.

Anuradhapura,¹¹⁰ which Sinhala Buddhist traditionalists draw on to this day. The connections between kingship and Buddhism in the *Mahāvamsa*,¹¹¹ tie into the Sinhala perception of Sri Lanka being the one nation which has integrally preserved Theravāda Buddhism. While Mahāyāna Buddhist influences were present in Sri Lanka over the 7th and 8th centuries CE,¹¹² Mahāyāna Buddhism was never accepted as a distinct form of religion by Sinhalese Buddhists. Over the twentieth century, the Buddhist revivalist Dharmapala propagated the view of Sri Lanka as being the most pure Theravāda Buddhist nation through an anachronistic interpretation of *dhammadīpa* and a blending of religious and ethnic categories, positing that Sri Lanka is both “the island of *dhamma*” (*dhammadīpa*) and “the island of the Sinhalese race” (*sihaladīpa*).¹¹³ While Dharmapala exercised creative liberty in his exegesis of the *Mahāvamsa*, the interpretation is not completely tangential to the chronicle: Vijaya, colonizer of Sri Lanka and descendant of a lion (etymologically connected with the term Sinhalese, “people of the lion race”), is said to have arrived in Sri Lanka on the day of the Buddha’s death (*parinibbāna*).¹¹⁴ For this reason, many Sinhalese

¹¹⁰ The Theravādin Mahāvihāra tradition of Anuradhapura, along with the Abhyagiri Mahāvihāra and Jetavanaramaya, is one of the earliest subdivisions of Sri Lankan Theravāda Buddhism. The Theravādin Mahāvihāra tradition was the first tradition to be established in Sri Lanka, when King Devānaṃpiyatissa (250-210 BCE) built Sri Lanka’s first *stupa* for the Buddha’s relics in Anuradhapura.

¹¹¹ Peter Schalk, “Semantic transformations of *dhammadīpa*,” In *Buddhism, Conflict and Violence*, ed. Mahinda Deegalle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 90.

¹¹² See *Buddha in the Crown: Avalokiteśvara in the Buddhist Traditions of Sri Lanka* (1991) by John Holt

¹¹³ Peter Schalk, “Semantic transformations of *dhammadīpa*,” 90.

¹¹⁴ *Mahāvamsa* VII 47

Buddhists see it as a religious duty to conserve and protect the Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition by any means possible, even if violence is required. In the *Mahāvamsa*, King Duṭṭhagāmaṇi marched to war accompanied by five hundred monks in order to have their protection and blessings. He asserted that he goes to war “to establish the doctrine of the Sambuddha.”¹¹⁵ The king formed troops of thirty-two men,¹¹⁶ which—as an allusion to the thirty-two marks of the Buddha—continues to establish the inherent connection between Sri Lanka and the Buddhist faith. He was congratulated by *arahants*,¹¹⁷ after killing “millions of beings,”¹¹⁸ for having brought “glory to the doctrine of the Buddha in manifold ways.”

The *Mahāvamsa* also propagates an ethos of xenophobia and single-mindedness. Duṭṭhagāmaṇi’s mother, while pregnant with her son, thirsted for water that had been used to cleanse a sword that had decapitated the first Tamil soldier of King Eḷāra’s army. She also longed to drink the water whilst standing upon the decapitated head.¹¹⁹ Her desires, while carrying child, served to foreshadow Duṭṭhagāmaṇi’s own aspirations and inclinations. As a prince, Duṭṭhagāmaṇi was disturbed by his father’s order to never fight with the Tamils (*Damilas*). He could not sleep soundly due to the presence of Damila people nearby, and curled into a fetal position, which the text explicitly compares to the

¹¹⁵ The term *Sambuddha* refers to the historical Buddha (*Mahāvamsa* IX 41-2, XXV 17-8)

¹¹⁶ *Mahāvamsa* XXV 55-6

¹¹⁷ *Arahant* etymologically means “one who is worthy” and refers to advanced Buddhist practitioners in pursuit of *nibbana*.

¹¹⁸ *Mahāvamsa* XXV 103

¹¹⁹ *Mahāvamsa* XXII 44-5

shape of the nation.¹²⁰

Prince Duṭṭhagāmaṇi's religio-nationalist stance has been drawn upon by Sinhalese Buddhist chauvinists to promote militancy and sanitize violence. Duṭṭhagāmaṇi slaughtered many Tamils during his war to unify Sri Lanka under Sinhalese rule.¹²¹ When consulting *arahants*, he was comforted by the notion that the Tamils he had killed were "unbelievers and men of evil life, not more esteemed than beasts."¹²² This mythic dehumanization of the Tamil people is the result of a simplistic dichotomy between good and evil, in which the negative actions of one's opponent are believed to reflect a more fundamentally evil nature—in this case, due to defiance of the Buddhist tradition. It becomes psychologically necessary to categorize one's opponents as sub-human to legitimize violence because moral exclusion reduces restraints against harming and exploiting groups of people.¹²³ For individuals perceived as outside the scope of morality, and justice, "the concepts of deserving basic needs and fair treatment do not apply and can seem irrelevant";¹²⁴ any harm that befalls such individuals is seen as warranted and morally justified. According to this foundational text, one's humanity and moral value is dependent upon observance

¹²⁰ *Mahāvamsa* XXII 82-6

¹²¹ *Mahāvamsa* XXV 7, 10, 25, 46-7, 66, 99

¹²² *Mahāvamsa* XXV 109-112

¹²³ Michelle Maiese, "Dehumanization," *Beyond Intractability* (Conflict Information Consortium: University of Colorado, Boulder. 2003).

¹²⁴ Susan Opatow, "Drawing the Line: Social Categorization, Moral Exclusion, and the Scope of Justice," In *Cooperation, Conflict, and Justice: Essays Inspired by the Work of Morton Deutsch* (New York: Sage Publications, 1995), 347.

of Buddhist religious faith.¹²⁵

The *Mahāvamsa* ends with King Mahāsena destroying the temples of brahmanical gods to build three Buddhist monasteries.¹²⁶ Any ethnic group and religious institution that was not in line with the Sinhalese-Buddhist norm was annihilated in this chronicle. The *Mahāvamsa* expunged the contradiction between nationalistic violence and Buddhist values, and provided cultural self-consciousness to the Sinhalese people as the distinct inheritors of a religion and a nation.

The *Mahāvamsa* in Post-Colonial Politics

This cultural self-consciousness is reflected in popular references to Sri Lankan myths, and particularly in President Rajapaksa’s political speeches. Rajapaksa, throughout his Presidency (2005-2015), made reference to the *Mahāvamsa* and Sinhalese kings such as Duṭṭhagāmaṇi, Valagamba, Dhatusena, and Vijayabahu. In a 2009 speech, he asserted that Sri Lanka is a country of 182 kings with a history of 2500 years.¹²⁷ This reference served to affirm the longevity and unity of the Sinhalese-Buddhist nation. Rajapaksa furthermore explicitly stated that Sinhalese kings such as Dutthugamani, Valagamba, Dhatusena, and Vijayabahu “defeated enemy invasions and ensured

¹²⁵ Alice Greenwald, “The Relic on the Spear: Historiography and the Saga of Duṭṭhagāmaṇi” in *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Sri Lanka*, edited by Bardwell L. Smith (Chambersburg, PA: ANIMA Books, 1978), 19.

¹²⁶ *Mahāvamsa* XXX 40-1

¹²⁷ Mahinda Rajapaksa, “President’s Speech to Parliament on the Defeat of the LTTE,” 2009.

our freedom.”¹²⁸ Once again, the selective use of the collective pronoun does not always refer to a collective Sri Lankan ethnic body; Rajapaksa’s statement presented a Sinhala-Buddhist body and placed it against the Tamil people and the disunity they were assumed to promote. His narrative idealized the past and presented a romanticized view of local life prior to the war.

Beyond presidential speeches, the implications of this mythic narrative are reflected in the current Sri Lankan constitution, which privileges Buddhism over other religious traditions. The Sri Lankan constitution is relatively theocratic, since constitutional legitimacy is a function of “universal norms” dictated by community values.¹²⁹ In Article 9 of the Sri Lankan constitution, Buddhism is given “the foremost place,” while other religions are ensured the rights granted by Articles 10 and 14e. Article 9 also affirms that it is the duty of the state to “protect and foster the Buddhist *Sāsana*.”¹³⁰ Nevertheless, Sri Lanka’s constitution is explicitly secular and “ensure[s] equality of opportunity to citizens.”¹³¹ While citizens are not forced to convert to Buddhism, the Constitution requires citizens to inhabit a Buddhist state, which protects and fosters the Buddhist teachings. This ideal is premised on the notion of a uniquely Buddhist state (as seen in the myths of the

¹²⁸ Ibid

¹²⁹ Larry Catá Backer, “From Constitution to Constitutionalism: A Global Framework for Legitimate Public Power Systems,” *Penn State Law Review* v.113, n.3 (2009): 671-672.

¹³⁰ *Sāsana* is a Sanskrit and Pali term which refers to teachings, doctrine, practice, and religion. Buddha *Sāsana* means “the teachings of the Buddha”.

Keown, Damien, Stephen Hodge, Charles Brewer Jones, and Paola Tinti. *A Dictionary of Buddhism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

¹³¹ The Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka (1978, as amended up to 9 September 2010), Published by the Parliament of Sri Lanka. Chapter 2, Article 9.

Mahāvamsa) and is reinforced through the dehumanization of the Tamil people and the legitimization of war.

In the constitution, there is a tension between constitutional religious preference by giving “Buddhism the foremost place”¹³² and constitutional safeguards of religious freedom. In order to address this inherent contradiction in Article 9, politicians often claim that this law is simply theoretical and meant to appease Buddhist nationalists and extremists. Jehan Perera, of the National Peace Council, told me that “the Supreme Court has ruled that Sri Lanka is a secular state. This is symbolic and a compromise [...] and other religions are free to practice and not be discriminated against.” In reality, Perera claims, all citizens are treated equally and ensured the rights listed in the constitution. Nevertheless, as mentioned in Chapter 1, after the end of the war the government destroyed the cemeteries of Tamil Tiger fighters and replaced them with state monuments. In the *Mahāvamsa*, too, a state monument is built above Eḷāra’s ashes.¹³³ While the construction of a monument can be perceived as honouring the death of the King Eḷāra, contemporary state monuments are tied into violent and chauvinistic state assertions of power and dominance. As Hirschl stated, “state religion is often viewed as [...] an integral part, or even the metaphorical pillar of the polity’s metanarrative.”¹³⁴ Religion often determines the boundaries of collective identity

¹³² Ibid

¹³³ *Mahāvamsa* 175 (XXC 73)

¹³⁴ Ran Hirschl, *Constitutional Theocracy* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2010), 2.

and the nature of the rights of its citizens, such as the perceived right of the ethnic majority to impose Buddhist structures and monuments throughout the nation.

The *Mahāvamsa* and Ethno-Political Competition

The *Mahāvamsa* also substantiates Tamil narratives of victimhood. As stated above, King Eḷāra was seen as a just and righteous king but was nevertheless killed by Duṭṭhagāmaṇi. Eḷāra was cremated and given a proper burial, but he was buried according to Buddhist regulations and norms. Damilas were consistently targeted by the Sinhalese Buddhist regime in the chronicle, and Hindu temples with brahmanical deities were destroyed and replaced with Buddhist viharas.

The Tamil people draw parallels between the xenophobic violence of the *Mahāvamsa*, and subtle forms of competition in the post-war era. Just as Buddhist viharas replaced Hindu temples in Duṭṭhagāmaṇi's time, so too are Buddha statues being built and disseminated throughout northern Sri Lanka, which is primarily inhabited by Tamil people. Thayalan, the Tamil journalist for the *Sunday Times*, affirmed that 180 Buddhist temples are being built in the north of Sri Lanka. Thayalan also told me that:

“The problem behind building Buddhist temples is that they're building [them] where there are no Sinhalese people. Where they're building the temples, they took the land from Tamils who had bought it; they take it

away [at] gunpoint¹³⁵ and by force.”

The community sees this as a “Sinhalization,” and an attempt to reduce the percentage and voting powers of ethnic minorities in the North-East. Jehan Perera recognized the dangers of such forms of ethnic competition: “Tamils are fearful not of the Buddha statue, but of Sinhalese colonization with army camps and settlers [...] how it asserts Sinhalese presence and power.” He likewise acknowledged how such acts are a consequence of the privileging of Buddhism in the constitution: “[there is] no direct connection between the Buddha statues and the government, though the policy of ‘Buddhism [having] the foremost place contributes to the mindset of those who plant them.” The way in which the mythic narrative of the *Mahāvamsa* is used by the state and media to make connections between kingship, state, and religion encourages Sinhalese Buddhists to perceive themselves as the rightful inheritors of the nation.

The mythic narrative has been consistently alluded to in presidential speeches, and the implications of an ethnocentric and nationalistic stance are visible in constitutional provisions and the political acts of military personnel. Mythic narratives of victory and histories of trauma are integrated into an ethnic group’s identity to differentiate the group through language, religion, traditions, cultural practices, and a sense of historical continuity.¹³⁶ These stories create the

¹³⁵ Harim Peiris, “Resettlement as a First Step in Reconciliation,” *The Island*. February 16, 2016.

¹³⁶ Rajmohan Ramanathapillai. "Past Traumas and Present Suffering: Consequences of Buddhist Narratives in the Sri Lankan Peace Process". (*South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*. 35 (4). 2012), 834.

illusion that each group is homogeneous¹³⁷ and foster a group identity in opposition to those who are perceived as alien, foreign, and unwelcome.

Myth in Narratives of Victor and Victimhood

Ramanathapillai argues that narratives of glory provide self-esteem for a group and “bring about positive political changes that enhance attachment to an ethnic group.”¹³⁸ However, he stipulates that narratives of trauma are also persuasive and remind a group of their experiences of terror, loss, and humiliation. In times of high anxiety, these stories trigger unconscious defense mechanisms. Thayalan and Venerable Wimalasaara’s narratives in the previous chapter provide examples of trauma, since “trauma memories are reactivated in the context of a new political reality” in which the present is interpreted as an extension of a past conflict.¹³⁹ Histories, mythologies, and fantasies are transmitted to the next generation with the goal of reminding them of a devastation that took place long before, and to bind them emotionally to the past. While Venerable Wimalasaara asserted that he entered politics to combat terrorism, his motivations were more deeply rooted in the past, in colonial trauma and fear of the Other. Likewise, Thayalan’s distrust of the international and diasporic community informs his perception of freedom and post-war development in Sri Lanka. The past, and, at times, the very distant past, provide

¹³⁷ Schubert, “Victorious Victims,” 3.

¹³⁸ Ramanathapillai, “Past Traumas and Present Suffering,” 834.

¹³⁹ Ramanathapillai. “Past Traumas and Present Suffering.” 835.

a framework through which to understand the present and create a cogent and persuasive narrative.

Narratives of glory and trauma are interwoven, sometimes paradoxically, into an ethnic group's identity to differentiate the group through language, religion, tradition, cultural practices, and a sense of historical continuity.¹⁴⁰ Such characteristics create an ethnic and emotional bond among members of an ethnic community, a bond perceived to transcend spatio-temporal boundaries. With the *Mahāvamsa*, the Sinhalese take pride in their mythological beginnings to claim their uniqueness. Likewise, the stories of Emperor Asoka and Duṭṭhagāmaṇi emphasize remembrance of the suffering of Sinhalese Buddhists. These stories create the illusion that each group is homogeneous,¹⁴¹ in order to foster a group identity in opposition to those who are perceived as perpetrators or as alien, foreign, and unwelcome.

Legitimization of Power and Control

Although narratives of victimhood are central to transitional justice and processes of memorialization, the identity of victor and fixing of narrative is monopolized by those in power.¹⁴² The establishment of a national narrative serves to legitimize power and stabilize control, establishing a historical and mythical precedent dating into the distant and idealized past. Narratives of

¹⁴⁰ Ramanathapillai, "Past Traumas and Present Suffering," 834.

¹⁴¹ Schubert, "Victorious Victims," 3.

¹⁴² Schubert, "Victorious Victims," 4.

victimhood are woven into narratives of victory, supremacy, and legacy, positing the Sinhalese Buddhist citizen as simultaneously a victor and a victim of war.

Rajapaksa's discourse draws on the *Mahāvamsa* and conflict between Duṭṭhagāmaṇi and Elara, framed as a conflict between the Sinhalese and Tamils, in order to affirm the unity and longevity of the Sinhalese-Buddhist nation.

While Sinhalese populations draw on the *Mahāvamsa* as an origin myth to stake a claim to the nation, Tamil people also draw upon an origin myth, in this case the *Rāmāyaṇa*, to legitimate their claim to Sri Lanka. Origin myths allow for ethnic groups to perceive history as an “eternal return” to a mythical age.¹⁴³ Because of the seeming universality of myth, myths are often vehicles for ideological beliefs and arguments. Ethnic groups become proud and patriotic about the great temples of Rāvaṇa or of Sri Lanka's status as “the island of *dhamma*.” By attributing sacred forces to ethnogenesis and etiological myth—such as the Buddha's visits and Brahma's blessings—the myths serve to justify a particular social order legitimized by a higher power and teleological purpose.

These narratives shed light on the worldviews, shared values, and assumptions of Sinhalese and Tamil people. By creating an embellished narrative of the past, history is continually reconstructed and perceived through different lenses. Myths legitimize a simplistic relationship between victim and victor, between dominant and subordinate groups. For example, Duṭṭhagāmaṇi is commendable in his commitment to the “doctrine of the Sambuddha,” but is also

¹⁴³ Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 17-19.

xenophobic and violent towards a fair and righteous king. The construction of Buddha statues and temples throughout the North can be perceived as an interfaith, progressive act, as well as a politically charged, chauvinistic decision. The notion of truth becomes more subjective because narratives are effective not in their adherence to empirical fact but in their emotional appeal, persuasiveness, and coherence.

While the first two chapters have focused on the narratives of victimhood and victory within particular ethnic groups, the final chapter will explore the relationships between groups through discourses of xenophobia and fear of the Other. Dynamics of ethno-religious competition, reflected in the building of Buddha statues and temples throughout the North, can also be perceived between Hindu and Muslim minorities, and between ethnic groups and state apparatus.

III – Xenophobic Discourse and Fear of “the Other”

In this chapter, rather than exploring discourses of victimhood and victory and ethnic groups’ perceptions of themselves, I explore intersubjectivity and discourses of xenophobia and “fear of the Other.”¹⁴⁴ Both majority and minority ethnic communities in Sri Lanka display a fundamental fear of the Other, which connects their narratives of victimhood and collective trauma with narratives of victory and claims to the nation. While narratives of victimhood draw on histories of trauma and are projected into the past, discourses of “fear of the Other” are determined by possibility and projected into the future.

I begin by discussing the global discourse of terrorism, and the specific narrative of victimhood of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the symbols drawn upon in their discourse. Next, I discuss the Bodu Bala Sena’s (BBS) promotion of Islamophobia in Sri Lanka, and the ways in which the Tamil Tigers and Siva Senai organization draw on the same discourse. Finally, I draw parallels between the treatment of the Tamil and Muslim minorities to show that the Othering of the Tamil community by the Sinhalese Buddhist community had political undertones while with the Islamic community, Othering had an economic pretext. Ultimately, the ability to look past popular stereotypes and Western ideological assumptions—especially state-centric conceptions of terrorism—

¹⁴⁴ The “Other” is traditionally capitalized in existentialist and phenomenological literature. It refers to those considered to be different from and alien to the social norms of a society. The practice of “Othering” is the reductive labelling of a person/people to a subordinate social category. Miller, J. “Otherness” *The SAGE encyclopedia of qualitative research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2008. pp. 588–591.

would allow both majority and minority ethnic groups to create an inclusive discourse. A new discourse could acknowledge Sri Lanka's distinctly multicultural character and avoid relegating conceptions of ethnocide to a socially-constructed 'Other.'

Global Discourses of Terrorism

Global discourses of terrorism became more prominent in the aftermath of 9/11; the concept of terrorism is invoked to categorize the increasingly frequent phenomena of violent, transnational attacks against civilians.¹⁴⁵ Sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer contends that terrorism and extreme militant acts emerge from cultures of violence. Certain social and ethical values give rise to communities and ideologies that sanction violence.¹⁴⁶ Violence allows for "symbolic empowerment"¹⁴⁷ and for individuals to gain a sense of control over their lives. This sense of control is seen as necessary in a chaotic world in which ordinary options are foreclosed.

However, state discourses of terrorism often uphold the status quo by assuming that existing power structures are natural and immutable. State-centric approaches to terrorism and security largely ignore "whether the state itself and its repressive apparatus might have played a role in creating an environment in

¹⁴⁵ Christine Sargent, "Global Discourse, Local Context: Counter-Terrorism and Human Rights in Morocco." *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*, 2009. 652.

¹⁴⁶ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: the Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 12.

¹⁴⁷ Michael P. Arena, and Bruce A. Arrigo. *The Terrorist Identity: Explaining the Terrorist Threat*. (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 8.

which terrorism may seem desirable (and even legitimate) to certain actors.”¹⁴⁸

Traditional conceptions of terrorism reduce politics to “the management of social order without much thought for emancipation—internal critics and dissenters notwithstanding.”¹⁴⁹

Such discourses are used to maintain power, discredit oppositional groups, and deny certain actors the space and power to speak.¹⁵⁰ Terrorists especially are disempowered within this discourse; they are depicted as criminals and not given a chance to account for or explain actions, while the plaintiffs control the discourse and the way in which each party is perceived. Terrorism is thus deeply tied into narratives of victimhood; it is a tactic justified by the alleged culpability of citizens who have affronted an aggrieved group.¹⁵¹ Sri Lankan Tamils perceive the violence of the civil war as inevitable given the discriminatory state policies and anti-Tamil pogroms that occurred post-independence. They perceive their ethnic community as under attack, and the militant acts as justified responses to the violence they have experienced.¹⁵² Tamil nationalists extricate key historical events from narratives of victimhood in order to sanction violence.

¹⁴⁸ Richard Jackson, et al, *Terrorism: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 21.

¹⁴⁹ Jeroen Gunning and Harmonie Toros, “Exploring a Critical Theory Approach to Terrorism Studies”, in Jackson, Richard, et al., *Critical Terrorism Studies: a new Research Agenda* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 91.

¹⁵⁰ Rainer Hülse, and Alexander Spencer, “The Metaphor of Terror: Terrorism Studies and the Constructivist Turn,” *Security Dialogue* vol. 39, no. 6, 2008, 577.

¹⁵¹ Brendan O’Leary and John Tirman, “Introduction. Thinking About Durable Political Violence,” in *Terror, Insurgency, and the State: Ending Protracted Conflicts* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 7.

¹⁵² Juergensmeyer. *Terror in the Mind of God*. 11.

Symbols have been created and appropriated by the LTTE to encourage and inspire civilians to engage in violent, bellicose acts.

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

The LTTE emerged as a terrorist group in 1976, under the leadership of Velupillai Prabhakaran. The movement was driven by proponents for a separate Tamil state and youth protesting discriminatory university admission policies. Post-colonial nationalist policies served as an impetus for this Tamil nationalist-*cum*-terrorist movement. The Sinhala-Only Language Act (1956), which universalized Sinhala script in Sri Lanka, meant that public signs, buses, and license plates used Sinhala only lettering. Likewise, the 1972 constitution and privileging of Buddhism, as well as educational “standardization,” which discriminated against minorities by allowing Sinhalese students to enter university with lower test scores,¹⁵³ contributed to the Tamil adoption of a nationalist and terrorist mindset. These events served as symbols to the Tamil people and LTTE; they contributed to the discourse of victimization, and united Tamils in their resistance against state oppression and advocacy for self-determination. The LTTE in fact explicitly made a connection between these events and Tamil activism when it asserted that the Sinhalese majority had “unleashed a systematic form of oppression that deprive[s] the Tamils of their

¹⁵³ Arena and Arrigo. *The Terrorist Identity*. 176.

linguistic, educational and employment rights.”¹⁵⁴

LTTE Rhetoric

Anti-Tamil rallies and pogroms in 1956, 1958, 1977, 1981, and 1983 deepened the animosity between ethnic groups in Sri Lanka and led to the internalization of trauma among the Tamil people and the perception that conventional solutions were inadequate and ineffective. The 1983 pogrom in particular, known as “Black July,” is central to Tamil narratives of victimization. Estimates of the death toll range from 400 to 2000 people.¹⁵⁵ In addition, over 10,000 Tamils were forced into refugee camps.¹⁵⁶ Stories of women being sexually assaulted on the streets; of passengers being burned alive in a minibus; of the ransacking and destruction of homes, stores, and Tamil institutions contributed to a collective trauma. Tamil citizens accused the Sri Lankan government of complicity during the pogroms because official government vehicles were used by Sinhalese assailants and a public inquiry was never held.¹⁵⁷ These events concretized the LTTE conception of Tamils as abused, neglected, and consigned to the permanent status of Other in Sri Lanka in order to preserve Sinhalese hegemony.

The LTTE affirmed that “the objective of the chauvinistic ruling class is

¹⁵⁴ Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, International Secretariat, *A struggle for justice*, 1997.

¹⁵⁵ Pavey Eleanor, “The massacres in Sri Lanka during the Black July riots of 1983,” *Online Encyclopedia of Mass Violence* (SciencePo: March 13, 2008).

¹⁵⁶ Amarnath Amarasingam, “Black July: Remembering the 1983 riots in Sri Lanka,” *Huffington Post* (July 23, 2011).

¹⁵⁷ Arena and Arrigo, *The Terrorist Identity*, 177.

nothing other than to inflict maximum injury [on] the Tamils[,] to terrorize, subjugate and destroy the aspiration of our people for political independence.”¹⁵⁸ The LTTE equated the 1983 pogrom with a racial holocaust¹⁵⁹ and believed the government had a “genocidal intent involving a plan aiming at the gradual and systematic destruction of the essential foundations of the Tamil national community.”¹⁶⁰ Ultimately, the LTTE saw the state as “destroy[ing] the national identity of Tamil people.”¹⁶¹ This perception of victimhood, compounded with the reality of state institutions’ inability to protect citizens and ensure fundamental human rights, led the LTTE to contend that there will never be peace between ethnic groups in a single state. The LTTE sought a separate state and the right for self-determination, and hoped to promote a “unique socialist model” in which there is “no class contraction and exploitation of man by man.”¹⁶² Armed struggle was believed to be the only means to achieve self-determination because of the many cease-fire and reconciliation failures with the state. The struggle was not “aimed at domination,” instead the LTTE sought to “protect the sovereign identity of the Tamil people.”¹⁶³

The LTTE perceived itself as a group of freedom fighters struggling for

¹⁵⁸ E. Palacinkam [Anton Balasingham], *Liberation Tigers and Tamil Eelam freedom struggle* (Madras: India: Political Committee for Tigers of Tamil Eelam, 1983), 31.

¹⁵⁹ Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, *A struggle for justice*, 1997.

¹⁶⁰ Palacinkam, *Liberation Tigers and Tamil Eelam freedom struggle*, 31.

¹⁶¹ Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. *A struggle for justice*. 1997.

¹⁶² J. Singh, “Tamil National Leader Hon. V. Pirapaharan’s Interview,” *The Week* (March 3, 1988).

¹⁶³ International Federation of Tamils. *The legitimacy of the armed struggle of the Tamil people*. Paper presented at the seminar “Towards a Just Peace” at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London (February 15, 1982).

self-determination. The success of the LTTE was founded on collective memories of victimhood, suspicion of governmental institutions, and a persistent state of anxiety in anticipation of violence. Central to the LTTE's narrative of victimhood were specific symbols, meant to incite chauvinistic sentiments and encourage civilians to support the cause.

Political Symbolism and National Flag

Competition for power, wealth, land, and legitimacy are often accompanied by conflict over important symbols, and struggles to control and manipulate such symbols. The Tamil demand for secession and self-determination was a proprietary struggle for control of collective symbols, aimed at shifting social distribution of territory and political power.¹⁶⁴ Similar to many Sinhalese nationalists, who make reference to ancient kings and Buddhist heritage, the LTTE draws on mythic symbols to legitimate its cause. The organization places emphasis on the symbol of a tiger, which was the emblem of the ancient Chola emperors under whom the Tamil language, culture, and Hindu religion flourished.¹⁶⁵

The symbol of the leaping tiger in the LTTE emblem came to represent martyrdom and the sacrifice of soldiers on behalf of the Tamil community. Through celebrations such as the Day of Great Heroes (Maveerar Naal), the

¹⁶⁴ Simon Harrison, "Four Types of Symbolic Conflict," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 1, no. 2 (1995), 259-60.

¹⁶⁵ Arena and Arrigo, *The Terrorist Identity*, 182.

LTTE was able to commemorate soldiers who had died for the cause and stress the importance of the struggle for freedom and self-determination. An additional unit of Black Tiger¹⁶⁶ fighters was dedicated by the LTTE specifically to suicide missions. The adoption of a tiger emblem ties into the expectation that the LTTE cadre live up to the sacrifices of fallen soldiers and conform to the ideals of the glorified past of ancient Chola emperors.¹⁶⁷

The appropriation of a tiger symbol also creates a clear divide between Tamil and Sinhalese, with the tiger representing Tamil heritage and the lion representing Sinhala-Buddhist origins. The tiger was appropriated to create a schizmogetic fission in a process of competitive differentiation, as the LTTE sought to emphasize the uniqueness¹⁶⁸ of Tamils as an ethnic group and their supposed superiority. However, the symbol not only distinguished the Tamil people as an ethnic group but was simultaneously used to assert equality¹⁶⁹ with the Sinhalese. The LTTE's central symbol of the Chola tiger both echoed and challenged the corresponding Sinhalese lion. The symbols reflect how each ethnic group, despite prominent differences and animosity, draws on a fundamentally similar discourse. The symbol of the tiger was relational, and ethnic identity was asserted in opposition to an Other.

These symbols also tie into popular debates about the national flag. A

¹⁶⁶ Øivind Fuglerud, "Aesthetics of Martyrdom," in *Violence Expressed* edited by Maria Six-Hohenbalken and Nerina Weiss (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 78.

¹⁶⁷ Sabil Francis, "The uniqueness of LTTE's suicide bombers," *the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies*, Article No. 321 (2000, February 4).

¹⁶⁸ Harrison, "Four Types of Symbolic Conflict," 261.

¹⁶⁹ Harrison, "Four Types of Symbolic Conflict," 262.

nation state typically has a standard language and national flag. Oftentimes, the state is personified through a totemic animal emblem.¹⁷⁰ As the sociologist Simon Harrison states, “when a group captured territory in war ... to legitimize [its] conquest it was necessary for the victors to ‘become’ the original owners.”¹⁷¹ The current Sri Lankan flag has a lion at its centre, surrounded by four bo leaves. The lion ties into the *Mahāvamsa* narrative of the Sinhalese race originating with King Vijaya, the offspring of a lion, and the four bo leaves represent Buddhist virtues. The lion is placed against a maroon background that occupies two thirds of the flag, and this color block represents the Sinhalese people. The final third of the flag has an orange and green stripe, representing the Tamil and Muslim minorities respectively.

There exists controversy over whether the flag perpetuates ethnic discrimination that led to the civil war and whether it should be more inclusive of minorities. Anuruddha Pradeep, a member of the Jathika Hela Urumaya party, believes that giving a third of the flag to minorities and two thirds to the majority is “generous, [given that] minorities actually are a quarter of the population.” Pradeep contends that “you can’t recreate a new flag with such a rich cultural history; you need to consider the [Buddhist] heritage.” Pradeep’s claim that Buddhist heritage must be privileged in national discourse is an underlying assumption with Sirisena’s current government as well; in order to avoid inciting

¹⁷⁰ Anderson, *Imagined communities*, 67-92.

¹⁷¹ Harrison, “Four Types of Symbolic Conflict,” 260.

Buddhist nationalists, minorities need to habituate to Buddhism holding “the foremost place.” In 2014 to 2015, Sri Lankan Buddhist nationalists were roused in opposition to the new ‘Other,’ the Muslim minority.

Islamophobia in Sri Lanka

Fear of the Other and appropriation of a global discourse of terrorism is reflected in the case of the Muslim minority in post-war Sri Lanka. Muslims are considered an ethnic minority in Sri Lanka. While Tamils make up 12.5% of the population, Muslims make up 9.5%.¹⁷² Islamophobia became most prominent in Sri Lanka from 2014-15; Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) and other Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist groups such as Ravana Balaya and Sinhala Urumaya began propagating Islamophobic and Sinhala nationalist discourse under Rajapaksa’s presidency.

Dilanthe Withanage, Chief Executive Officer of BBS, explained to me the BBS’ mission and what the organization perceives as “threats to Sinhala Buddhist heritage.” A fundamental part of the BBS’ rationale is what I term its “minority complex,” and which Withanage sees as a fear that its sovereign territory is threatened by minorities with globalized support. Withanage has asserted that “Sinhalese, mostly Buddhist, is a very tiny population [...] When you look at the Sinhalese, it’s something like less than 15 million, compared with a

¹⁷² Sri Lanka Census of Population and Housing 2011, published by the Department of Census and Statistics Sri Lanka.

7000 million world population.” When asked about the majority status of the Sinhalese, who make up 70% of Sri Lanka’s population, Withanage affirms “we’d be a dominant force if only Sri Lanka were there, but international forces are so powerful.” It is these “international forces” of globalization that Withanage pinpoints as an obstacle: “I’m not saying don’t live together—that’s the misconception—we can have different people living together, but [we can]not [have] these global forces [and] global agendas motivating them.” Withanage believes in a “tolerance within hegemony,”¹⁷³ wherein non-Sinhalese and non-Buddhist are welcome as long as they do not threaten the traditional balance and ratio of ethnic and religious groups in Sri Lanka.

Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has explored the “minority complex” and its relation to dynamics of globalization. He contends that “minorities are the major site for displacing the anxieties of many states about their own minority or marginality (real or imagined) in a world of a few megastates, of unruly economic flows and compromised sovereignties.”¹⁷⁴ Awareness of minorities intensified in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a result of an increased number of censuses, statistics, and data on the constitution of nations under colonial regimes. The presence of minorities activates new fears about human rights, citizenship, and the rights and obligations of the state. Minorities blur the

¹⁷³ Benjamin Schonthal, “Configurations of Buddhist Nationalism in Modern Sri Lanka” in *Buddhists Extremists and Muslim Minorities*, edited by John Clifford Holt (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 106.

¹⁷⁴ Arjun Appadurai. *Fear of small numbers: an essay on the geography of anger* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 43.

boundaries between “us” and “them,” “in” and “out,”¹⁷⁵ and obstruct the state’s mission to assert a fixed identity in opposition to other nations. In this way, minorities become the face of globalization for the Sinhalese. Through fear of the Other, minorities become identified and equated with the ethnocide of the Sinhalese community.

Appadurai’s analysis is extremely relevant to processes of Othering and xenophobia in Sri Lanka. One example of these processes involves gender and representations of women. Sinhalese women are depicted in propagandic imagery as “daughters of the nation” and as the guardians and protectors of tradition. As the Sinhalese woman comes to represent the nation, so too do minorities come to represent the Other. Rumours of Muslim sexual violence towards Sinhalese women depicts Muslims as the ‘Other,’ degrading the integrity and purity of the nation. Through geopolitical imagery, Muslims have become transfixed as the Other and as foreign to the Sri Lankan nation. Patriarchal and paternalistic gender dynamics are sustained through fear of the Other.¹⁷⁶ Likewise, Islamophobic violence becomes justified and perceived as vigilante justice against sexual predators through such geopolitical depictions.

Bodu Bala Sena

One of the global forces which are believed to threaten Sinhalese

¹⁷⁵ Appadurai, *Fear of small numbers*, 7.

¹⁷⁶ Jones, "Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism and Islamophobia in Contemporary Sri Lanka," 69.

Buddhist hegemony is “global Islamic terrorism.” Bodu Bala Sena was renowned for the Islamophobic riots of 2014 in Aluthgama, which was seen as a “lesson’ taught to the Muslims.”¹⁷⁷ As sociologist Farzana Haniffa affirms, “the new polity was Sinhala supremacist, militaristic, and did not tolerate what it understood as minority recalcitrance.”¹⁷⁸ Monks of Bodu Bala Sena had identified Muslims as the newly chosen “Other,” and vilified them as terrorists despite Muslim compliance and acquiescence with national law. Dilanthe Withanage, on the violence of June 2014, asserts that “those were not riots, those are incidents ... it’s [neither] good [nor] bad.” Dilanthe continued by saying:

Bodu Bala Sena never promoted riots and we never had any fight against them. But there were some incidents, after Muslims attacked Sinhalese women, but no one talks about this. This is happening throughout the world, in France, in all places; you have to understand the reason for this—it’s extremism, because these extremist people don’t want any other religion to be there.

Both the Bodu Bala Sena and state representatives blamed Muslims for the outbreak of violence, citing two different instances of Muslim attacks against monks. The state’s legitimization of the BBS’ narrative demonstrated its complicity in the violence, and perpetrators were never persecuted for the violence. The riots in Aluthgama were targeted towards Muslim property and shops more than against specific individuals. The focus on property and

¹⁷⁷ Farzana Haniffa, “Stories in the Aftermath of Aluthgama” in *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities*, edited by John Clifford Holt (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 167.

¹⁷⁸ Haniffa, “Aftermath of Aluthgama,” 168.

economic establishments stems from the popular stereotype of Muslims as wealthy, successful businessmen. These stereotypes ignore the reality that the majority of Muslims live below the poverty line.¹⁷⁹ For example, Muslims in the North-East in particular are predominantly farmers and fishermen.¹⁸⁰ Dilanthe Withanage, in response to depictions of the BBS as Islamophobic, contends that “global forces—media, political, financial—[are] working against us, that's what we see as the issue here.”

LTTE and Muslim Separatism

While there has been a growth in Muslim separatism and orthodox interpretations in Sri Lanka, Muslims in Sri Lanka have traditionally been tolerant of differences in Islamic faith.¹⁸¹ Nevertheless, the increasingly orthodox stances of the Islamic community have been simplistically categorized as radicalization by both Tamil and Sinhalese communities, and assumed to be part of broader Jihadist movements. This depiction of Muslims dates back to the civil war, as the LTTE used Muslim radicalism to justify actions against the Islamic community and garner international support. The LTTE displaced 55,000 Muslims from the Jaffna peninsula in 1990 because of suppositions that the Muslim population were working with the government. Paranthaman, an ex-LTTE cadre that I

¹⁷⁹ Jones, "Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism and Islamophobia in Contemporary Sri Lanka," 41.

¹⁸⁰ Asia Report, "Sri Lanka's Muslims: Caught in the Crossfire," International Crisis Group 134 (May 29, 2007), 1.

¹⁸¹ Asia Report, "Sri Lanka's Muslims: Caught in the Crossfire," 25.

interviewed, affirmed that Muslims were expelled from Jaffna and the North of Sri Lanka because of Islamic collusion with the government in the East. He acknowledged that the expulsion was not reasonably justified or fair, but he hoped to simply rationalize the LTTE's decision.

Paranthaman also acknowledged the xenophobic and Islamophobic atmosphere that continues to permeate Sri Lanka today. He asserted that “Muslims don't increase, they multiply” and that “Tamil nationalism and the Tamil nation [are] a part of Saivism. Without Saivism, [the] Tamil nation would not survive, because Christians and Muslims are converting Hindus into their religion.” Siva Senai, a new Hindu fundamentalist organization in Sri Lanka, embraces this ideology, which values Hinduism and Saivism as quintessential to Tamil identity. Similar to the BBS, Siva Senai has a fundamental fear of the Other, globalization, conversion, and, as one of its members stated, “the external forces disturbing Hinduism.”

Siva Senai

Yasotharan, a member of Siva Senai, told me that “Buddhism and Hinduism are the traditional religions of Sri Lanka. But now, after colonial periods, Christians and Muslims have arrived.” Yasotharan and Mr. Sivanesan—another member of Siva Senai—contend that “Christian infiltration in Mannar, Eastern conversions by Muslims, [are creating] an unsafe and insecure situation for Tamils in the North-East.” Both members see Siva Senai as a necessary

representative of the Hindu people, since Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims are believed to be adequately represented by religious organizations. Siva Senai is viewed by its members as an apolitical organization concerned with “social and economic development” that is necessary to “safeguard and protect our religious identity.”

Yasotharan insists that Siva Senai hopes to address the psychological trauma of women and children in the North-East, through social development and religious education. He affirms that those “affected by tsunami and war are suffering too much,” and that “political hopes are okay, but to reach political aspirations we need [...] social and economic development first.” Ultimately, Siva Senai is not about promoting “Hindu politics but promoting equality.” However, Siva Senai recently released a statement affirming that it will sponsor the fourth child of Tamil Hindu families if the child is given a traditional Hindu name (see Appendix A). While Siva Senai supposedly is focused on post-war development and psychological trauma, this policy reveals a Hindutva ideology and attempt at securing an increased birth rate and percentage of Tamils in Sri Lanka.

Such pro-natalist arguments have been similarly drawn upon in representations of Muslims, in an attempt to depict high birth rates as a surreptitious stratagem aimed at dislodging the Sinhalese community from being the demographic majority. The Sinhalese “theory of the womb” (*garbasha niyamaya*) draws connections between Islamic birthrates and geography as well

as the economy.¹⁸² Muslims are believed to assert geopolitical power in the East through high birth rates, and subsequently restrict economic privileges and business opportunities to their offspring or ethnic group. Sinhalese nationalists thus contend that anti-natalist policies must be legally enforced upon Muslims through state intervention.¹⁸³

Local stereotypes about Muslims and their attempts to shift demography through pro-natalism merge with global stereotypes of terrorism to create a new and constantly changing image of the Islamic ‘Other.’ Rumors and unsubstantiated anecdotes are drawn upon by informants to corroborate this depiction of the Other. Sinha Ratnatunga, editor of *The Sunday Times*, does not believe in Islamophobia: “it’s the same everywhere,” he contends. After tensions between the Sinhalese and LTTE were dealt with, “small tensions started cropping up with Muslims.” Muslims “were businessmen, and [many] started wearing the hijab and niqab and making people wary.” Ratnatunga maintains that “BBS took [Islamophobia] too far ... [but] initially people appreciated it.”

Jehan Perera of the National Peace Council likewise acknowledges that “Islamophobia is everywhere ... they say Muslims keep their word only to one another, so they have an advantage and are prospering.” Perera recognizes the natalist argument: “the population growth rate is higher,” but he also sees the flaws in such preconceptions since “it would take hundreds of years for them to

¹⁸² Jones, “Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism and Islamophobia in Contemporary Sri Lanka,” 90.

¹⁸³ Ibid

outnumber the Sinhalese majority.” Due to the fact that such preconceptions are unsubstantiated, they are not easily invalidated. Prevalent stereotypes perpetuate assumptions about and the divide between ethnic groups in Sri Lanka.

Parallels Between Tamil and Muslim Othering

The Tamil and subsequently Muslim minority became the “Other” and foreigner in the eyes of the state. Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists’ fears of devolution, federalism, and ethnocide resulting from globalization were projected onto these minorities. As Appadurai has stated, “minorities are metaphors of the betrayal of the nationalist project.”¹⁸⁴ Between the 1970’s and 2009, Sinhalese nationalists were concerned with Tamil separatists and territorial unity. After 2009, Buddhist nationalists became concerned with Islam and the economic climate of post-war Sri Lanka. The anti-Tamil pogrom of 1983 and Islamophobic violence in Aluthgama and Dharga Town of June 2014 enable academics to draw parallels between Tamil and Muslim Othering. In both cases, the riots were choreographed with the involvement of state institutions and with the police permitting armed mobs to roam the streets after curfew.

Sociologist Farzana Haniffa argues that the anti-Muslim sentiment in post-war Sri Lanka was a product of Rajapaksa’s martial logic; subsequent to the military decimation of the LTTE, the government endorsed the BBS monks’

¹⁸⁴ Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers*, 43.

ideology of minorities as a threat to Sinhalese Buddhist hegemony.¹⁸⁵ President Rajapaksa implemented excessive security measures and opened military camps in the North-East of Sri Lanka. While Rajapaksa's government advocated for economic development throughout the island, underlying this discourse was a very apparent mistrust and suspicion of the Tamil people.

While ethnic and religious prejudices were drawn upon to sanction violence in both the anti-Tamil pogrom of 1983 and the Islamophobic riots of 2014, an economic pretext was more prominent in the riots of June 2014.¹⁸⁶ In 1983, three thousand people were killed in Colombo, while the violence in Aluthgama and Dharga Town was focused on the destruction of property and Muslim businesses.

Black July was used by the regime to punish the Tamil people for political recalcitrance. The Muslim minority was never perceived as a political threat to the regime or state; they were simply viewed as different and foreign due to increasingly traditional and orthodox Muslim practices and attire. This conception fed into prejudices about extremism and fundamentalism, which caused the violence of 2014. The state was complicit in the Islamophobic riots of 2014, and circumvented responsibility despite promises of implementing greater security measures. State representatives blamed Muslims for the outbreak of trouble, maintaining that Muslim attacks against monks on two occasions led to the

¹⁸⁵ Haniffa, "Stories in the Aftermath of Aluthgama," 168.

¹⁸⁶ Haniffa, "Stories in the Aftermath of Aluthgama," 170.

violence.¹⁸⁷ The event led Muslims to radically question their relationship to the state and neoliberal economy, since the rationality and integrity of market mechanisms became eclipsed by ethnic chauvinism.¹⁸⁸

Popular Discourse and Western Assumptions

Saba Mahmood has problematized Western liberal and feminist assumptions through fieldwork in Cairo, and argued that such assumptions detract from the unique ways in which local actors exert agency. Such discourse is reductive and fails to account for the ways in which locals exercise agency and address their respective concerns. Mahmood maintains that academic work should not be equated to or collapsed into political judgment, since intellectual inquiry entails a certain skepticism of political discourse and consolidated normative claims. Through a suspension of judgment, one can challenge conventional assumptions that have become an integral part of our habits of thought and praxis.¹⁸⁹

Fear of the Other becomes engrained in ethnic communities through gossip, stereotypes, and unexamined assumptions. Minorities become an Other onto which the fears and anxieties of the majority community are projected. Tamils threatened the hegemony of Sinhalese Buddhists through strivings for

¹⁸⁷ Haniffa, "Stories in the Aftermath of Aluthgama," 171.

¹⁸⁸ Haniffa, "Stories in the Aftermath of Aluthgama," 176.

¹⁸⁹ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 196.

political power and autonomy, and Muslims were likewise perceived as an Other due to demographic politics and economic power. The Othering of ethnic communities becomes dangerous insofar as violence becomes sanctioned and justified through simplistic discourses. Minorities become equated with global processes of diasporic wealth, international sanctions, and Jihadist movements when local phenomena differ substantially and distinctions need to be drawn. The Sri Lankan Muslim minority is tolerant and rather moderate, despite orthodox practices and attire.¹⁹⁰ Allegations of radicalization are largely baseless, and simplistic claims are based on popular discourses of Islamophobia.

Despite Mahmood's encouragement to challenge popular discourses and assumptions, such assumptions are pervasive and so deeply embedded in our worldview that they remain prominent and rather difficult to dislodge. Islamophobic biases are not only present in Sinhalese discourse, but also in that of the Tamil minority; the Tamil community's lack of attention to Tamil-Muslim relations and tacit consent to Sinhalese Islamophobic acts has contributed to a feeling of marginalization within the Muslim community.¹⁹¹ The roots of popular presumptions, stereotypes, and xenophobic biases must be examined in order to yield a more open, unfixed discourse and acknowledge the dangers of creating an "Other" onto which fears and anxieties are projected.

¹⁹⁰ Asia Report, "Sri Lanka's Muslims: Caught in the Crossfire," 25.

¹⁹¹ Mirak Raheem and Priya Thangarajahm, "Tamil-Muslim Tensions and Coexistence in Mannar" (Colombo: Center for Policy Alternatives, 2013), 10.

Conclusion

Ethnic discourse has been coloured and politicized through historical narratives of victimhood, mythic narratives of victory, and xenophobic discourses embodying a fear of “the Other.” These narratives have allowed citizens to affirm collective ideals in the face of disparate experiences¹⁹² and reclaim power and autonomy in contexts of fundamental instability, but they have also deepened ethnic divides in the post-war era.

Discourse is socially conditioned and mutable; meanings emerge and become submerged, become centered or marginalized depending on the context of local debates.¹⁹³ In the first chapter of this thesis, I have show how Thayalan and Venerable Wimalasaara carefully select historical moments that highlight the grievances of their ethnic communities in order to present narratives of victimhood. In the second chapter, I demonstrate that the figure of Ravana has been appropriated as an ancestor by both Tamil and Sinhalese communities in etiological myth to validate claims to the nation and an ancient Sri Lankan heritage. Finally, in the third chapter, I illustrate how a discourse of terrorism has been imposed and transferred from the Tamil to the Muslim minority due to fear of the Other. Through these processes of historical selectivity, mythical appropriation, and fear of the Other, the notion of truth becomes subjective because narratives are effective not in their adherence to empirical fact but in

¹⁹² Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling*, 22.

¹⁹³ Abeysekara, *Colors of the Robe*, 42.

their emotional appeal, persuasiveness, and coherence.

Collective forgetting and social amnesia prevent ethnic communities from appreciating divergent narratives of victimhood. Narratives of victimhood and trauma are interwoven with mythic narratives of glory to create the illusion of a homogeneous group and foster group identity in opposition to an “Other.” Mythic narratives of glory also serve to dehumanize the Other and legitimize xenophobic violence. This violence becomes further sanctioned through gossip, stereotypes, and unexamined assumptions. An open-ended, unfixed national discourse could be used to integrate different narratives of victimhood and avoid creating an “Other” onto which fears and anxieties are projected.

This thesis addresses gaps in previous scholarship by providing an overarching analysis of discourse drawn on by both Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic groups. Post-war academic literature has focused exclusively on Rajapaksa’s autocratic regime and the militancy of Sinhalese Buddhist monks. Literature on Tamil discourse addresses the LTTE and the way in which violence was sanctioned throughout the civil war. My research recognizes the prominence of ethnic narratives of victimhood under the *Yahapalanaya* regime. This study identifies not only the significance of the *Mahāvamsa* epic, but also the *Rāmāyaṇa* and Ravana imagery upon which a paucity of scholarship currently exists. Finally, I set interviews with Bodu Bala Sena members against discussions with members of the recently emerged Siva Senai organization to show parallels in ethnocentric and nativist arguments. This research would have

benefitted from additional time in the field in order to trace the progression of Buddhist and Hindu nationalism, and investigate the appropriation of *Rāmāyaṇa* imagery by Buddhist monks and politicians.

Future scholarship could trace the development of Siva Senai in Sri Lanka and possible links with the right-wing Hindu nationalist Shiv Sena party in India. Contemporary Tamil nationalism, such as the recent Eluga Tamil movements, could be studied and connections with the Pongu Tamil movement in Jaffna during LTTE occupation could be fully explored. Finally, the reappearance of Islamophobic violence during the *Yahapalanaya* regime and new provisions in the forthcoming constitution could be examined and the influence of Buddhist nationalists investigated. The currents of nationalism and religious fundamentalism that continue to animate post-war politics in Sri Lanka warrant a nuanced examination of the historical, sociological, religious, and discursive causes.

Appendix A

பிறக்கும் நான்காவது குழந்தைக்கு தமிழில் பெயர் வைத்தால் நிதியுதவி சிவசேனை அமைப்பு தெரிவிப்பு

யாழ்ப்பாணம், நவ. 30

வடக்கு, கிழக்கில் 4ஆவது மற்றும் அதற்கு மேற்பட்ட குழந்தைகளைப் பெற்றெடுத்து தமிழ்ப் பெயர் வைக்கும் இந்துக்களின் குழந்தைகளுக்கு வங்கிக் கணக்கு ஆரம்பிப்பதோடு, கல்விச் செலவும் வழங்கப்படவுள்ளது என்று சிவசேனை அமைப்பு அறிவித்துள்ளது.

இது தொடர்பில் அந்த அமைப்பின் இணைப்பாளர்களில் ஒருவர் தெரிவித்ததாவது:

சிவசேனையின் இணைத் தலைவர் மறவன் புலவு க.சச்சிதானந்தனின் 75ஆவது பிறந்த தினத்தை முன் கொண்டு சிவசேனை அமைப்பு சைவசேனை

பரில் சிவசேனை அமைப்பு சைவசேனை அறப்பணி நிதியத்தினூடாக இந்த செயற்றிட்டத்தை ஆரம்பிக்கவுள்ளது. இந்த வருடம் 4ஆவது மற்றும் அதற்கு மேல் குழந்தைகளைப் பெற்றுக் கொள்ளும் சைவர்கள் தமது குழந்தைகளுக்குத் தமிழ்ப் பெயர் சூட்டினால் இந்தக் கொடுப்பனவுகளைப் பெற முடியும். அதிலும் அந்தக் குழந்தைகளை பராமரிப்பதற்கான உதவி தேவைப்படுவோர் அல்லது பொருளாதாரத்தில் பின் னடைந் தோர் இந்த உதவியைப் பெற முடியும். வறுமைக்கோட்டுக்கு உட்பட்ட நிலையிலும் குழந்தைகளைப் பெற்றெடுத்து தமிழில் பெயர் சூட்டப்பட்டிருக்கும்

பணியில் சிவசேனையின் மாவட்ட இணைப்பாளர்கள் ஈடுபட்டுள்ளனர். சைவத் தமிழ் அன்பர்களின் நிதியுதவிகளைப் பெற்றே சிவசேனை இந்தச் செயற்றிட்டத்தை ஆரம்பிக்கவிருக்கின்றது. எனவே, இந்தப் பணி தொடர்வதற்கு அனைவரையும் ஆதரவும் எதிர்பார்க்கப்படுகிறது. வீழ்ச்சியடைந்து வருகின்ற சைவத் தமிழரின் இனவிகிதாசாரத்தையும் சிவபூமியின் கிராமங்களின் இருப்பையும் நிலைநிறுத்துவதை நோக்கமாகக்கொண்டே இந்த செயற்றிட்டம் ஆரம்பிக்கப்படவுள்ளது - என்றார்.

(November 30th, 2016 in Jaffna)

The Siva Senai organization states that if the fourth child is given a Tamil name, financial aid will be given to Tamil families. If a family has more than four children: financial aid will be given, a bank account will be opened, and tuition will be paid for school. This campaign has been financially supported by Saivite Hindu devotees, and Siva Senai is expecting the full support of Hindus in this pursuit. This project can help alleviate financial problems of families living below the poverty line. There is a drop in the percent of Saivite Hindus in Sri Lanka; it is because of this drop that the organization is pursuing this initiative, to increase the Tamil population and birth rate.

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