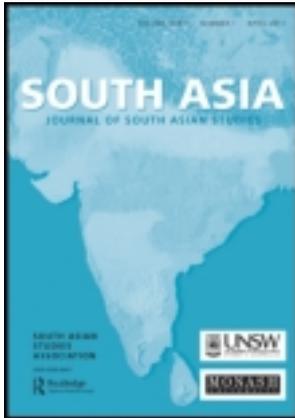


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Some Critical Notes on the Non-Tamil Identity of the Muslims of Sri Lanka, and on Tamil–Muslim Relations

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Abstract

The ethnic civil war between the Tamil and Sinhalese communities that ravaged Sri Lanka in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and which ended in May 2009 has attracted great interest from scholars of ethnic identity. Both the Tamil and Sinhalese ethnic groups employ language—Tamil and Sinhalese—as their primary ethnic marker to support their distinct ethnic formations. As for the Muslims, while the vast majority living in the north and east share many things with the Tamils there including the Tamil language, Muslims in the south have divergent interests based more on trade and commerce. Under a predominantly southern leadership, the Muslims who speak the Tamil language with some borrowed Arabic words seek a social formation based on religion to win a distinct *ethnic* recognition—*distinct* from the Tamil ethnic group. The result has been a deep rift between the Muslims and the Tamils, making a permanent solution to Sri Lanka's problems elusive. These issues have been relatively under-researched. This study looks at Sri Lankan Muslim identity and the Muslims' relations with Tamils. In particular it interrogates some aspects of the identity discourse developed over the years by the south-centred Muslim elites who align with the Sinhalese political class. We argue that the Tamils' northern leadership has been insensitive to Muslims—that they have played into the hands of the Colombo government by persecuting Muslims in their midst on the pretext of responding to government-instigated violence among local Muslim youths.

Keywords: Arab, Muslim, Moor, Tamil, identity, symbols, violence

Introduction

The construction of identity plays a significant role in the social formation of any political group. In Sri Lanka, language is the primary ethnic marker in the social formation of the two major ethnic groups—the Tamils and Sinhalese. The Muslims of Sri Lanka are the second largest group after the Tamils and share close linguistic and cultural ties with them, including the Tamil language; however, they prefer to be recognised by their religious and cultural identity, and claim they have a distinct ethnic group identity. This Muslim position expresses the key differences between the two Tamil-speaking communities. This paper discusses Tamil–Muslim relations and the key Muslim arguments that Muslim elites and politicians often employ to justify a distinct Muslim identity formation apart from that of the rival Tamil identity.

Both the minority Tamils, who made up 12.7 percent of the population in 1981,¹ and the majority Sinhalese who claimed 74 percent of the population in 1981, base their respective identities on distinct languages—Tamil and Sinhalese—and symbolic mythical pasts. However, the Muslims of Sri Lanka, or more concisely the group commonly identified as Moors, claim that they are a distinct ethnic group despite their use of Tamil as their mother tongue.

Also contributing to Muslim social formation are markers based on descent from seafaring Arab traders who arrived from the 4th century AD onwards. The earliest stratum of Arab traders are likely to have been Christian, as indicated by the archaeological finds of a Thomian cross,² and an early Christian baptismal font,³ from the pre-Buddhist Anuradhapura period (161–137 BC). But most of those who came later were converts to Islam. These included not only Arabs, but low-caste Hindu converts from the Malabar region of South India.⁴ These converts had no Arab blood, but to judge from what we see today it would appear that they internalised the traditions of Arab descent into their faith system, identifying with Arabia as their putative place of origin; so also the more recent converts from the lower castes to Islam.⁵ Surprisingly, compared to converts from other communities, Tamils have ‘the least pronounced hereditary stratification’ along caste lines.⁶

¹ No census has been conducted in the Northern Province since 1981 because of the war.

² H.W. Codrington, *A Short History of Lanka* (London: Macmillan, 1926), Chap. 2 [http://lakdiva.org/codrington/chap02.html, accessed 30 Jan. 2010].

³ Andrew Scott, ‘Christmas in Ancient Sri Lanka’, in *The Sunday Observer* (20 Dec. 2009), Features page [http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2009/12/20/spe12.asp, accessed 20 Jan. 2010].

⁴ P.K. Balachandran, ‘Lankan Muslims’ Historical Links with India’, *Hindustan Times* (3 April 2006), p.5.

⁵ Imtiaz Ahmed, *Caste and Social Stratification Among Muslims in India* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1978).

⁶ Douglas Allen, *Religion and Political Conflict in South Asia: India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press, 1992), p.52.

The Muslims of Sri Lanka claim that the violent conflict between the Tamils and the Sinhalese has unfairly affected their interests and security, and seek just redress for the problems caused to them by the conflict.⁷ This first part of this paper will examine the factors pertaining to the identity formation of the Muslims or Moors.

The Sri Lanka Muslims or 'Moors'

The Muslims, who practise Islam and speak Tamil, are a significant portion of the minorities in Sri Lanka. In 2001 they constituted 7.9 percent of the island's total population.⁸ The term 'Moors' was introduced by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century. They used it to refer to people they regarded as Arab Muslims and their descendants.⁹ Moreover the term was applied solely on the basis of religion: it said nothing about their origin.¹⁰

Initially the Muslims mainly inhabited the coastal areas of Sri Lanka but over time some of them moved into the interior. Today the majority (62 percent) live in the south of Sri Lanka, amidst the Sinhalese (Table 1). The remaining 38 percent, though, are established in the Tamil-dominated north and east, the region claimed by the Tamils as their traditional homeland.¹¹ In a context where census-taking has become politicised, it is noteworthy that Muslims have become a majority in the Amparai District of Eastern Province which is part of this region.¹² When the Tamil insurrection flared in the 1980s, most of the Muslims pointedly stood aside. This is one of the main reasons the Tamil Tigers (the LTTE or Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) were always opposed to Muslim participation in any peace talks.

Nevertheless, at this time many Muslims were members of the Tamil Federal Party and a few did participate in the armed uprising. This was alarming to the

⁷ A.R.M. Imtiaz, 'Eastern Muslims of Sri Lanka: Special Problems and Solution', in *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Vol.44, no.4 (Aug. 2009), pp.404–27.

⁸ Department of Census and Statistics–Sri Lanka, 'Statistical Abstract of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka' [http://www.statistics.gov.lk/Abstract_2006/abstract2006/table%202007/CHAP%202/AB2-12.pdf, accessed 19 Mar. 2008].

⁹ The term Moor is said to have its origins in Mauritians or Maurs—the Muslims of the mixed Berber and Arab peoples of North Africa—whom the Portuguese, arriving late in the fifteenth century, took Sri Lankan Muslims to be similar to.

¹⁰ R. Vasundra Mohan, *Identity Crisis of Sri Lankan Muslims* (Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1987), p.9.

¹¹ Chelvadurai Manogaran, *Ethnic Conflict and Reconciliation in Sri Lanka* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987).

¹² Department of Census and Statistics–Sri Lanka, 'Statistical Abstract of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka'.

Table 1
Provincial Distribution of the Muslim Population 1911, 1971, 1981 and 2001

| Province | 1911 | 1971 | 1981 | 2001 |
|---------------|----------------|----------------|------------------|------------------|
| Western | 50,292 | 237,587 | 297,587 | 378,173 |
| Central | 29,997 | 135,903 | 167,690 | 225,453 |
| Northern | 13,354 | 44,429 | 54,828 | — |
| Southern | 20,308 | 45,149 | 52,545 | 63,230 |
| Eastern | 69,912 | 250,801 | 317,177 | 245,089* |
| North Western | 25,506 | 88,429 | 114,459 | 229,642 |
| North Central | 9,350 | 38,877 | 61,422 | 88,775 |
| Uva | 5,357 | 28,397 | 34,509 | 48,502 |
| Sabragamuva | 10,825 | 40,369 | 51,989 | 72,570 |
| Total | 234,901 | 909,941 | 1,152,206 | 1,351,434 |

*Only Amparai District

Source: Tabulated from *Report of the Delimitation Commission, 1976, Sessional Paper No.1* (Colombo: Government Printer, 1976), p.371; V. Samaraweera, 'Some Sociological Aspects of the Muslim Revivalism in Sri Lanka', in *Social Compass*, Vol.XXV, nos.3–4 (1978), p.468; Department of Census and Statistics, *Census on Population and Housing, Colombo, 1981* (Colombo: Department of Census Statistics, 1981); and Department of Census and Statistics, *Census on Population and Housing, Colombo, 2001* (Colombo: Department of Census Statistics, 2001).

Sinhalese government. Therefore, pushing a policy of *divide et impera*, President J.R. Jayawardene sent one of his southern Muslim ministers, accompanied by his henchmen, to attack Tamils in Karaitivu village south of Batticaloa, and the two communities fell into the trap. With their prejudice against Muslims, the Tigers reacted with extreme violence. Too late, the presence of outside Muslims was exposed by Minister S. Thondaman who represented the hill-country Tamils. Muslim leaders of the east like A.L.A. Majeed protested, but to no avail.¹³ As the violence continued, the communities—seemingly inexorably—went their different ways.

A central aspiration of the Muslims in contemporary Sri Lanka, according to McGilvray, is their desire to develop a non-Tamil identity based on Islam.¹⁴ Radically-shifting political developments 'have made them realize that their interest lies in holding fast to the religion of Islam and not to any ethnic

¹³ Rajan Hoole, *Sri Lanka: The Arrogance of Power—Myths, Decadence and Murder* (Colombo: University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), 2001).

¹⁴ Dennis B. McGilvray, 'Tamils and Muslims in the Shadow of War: Schism or Continuity?', in *South Asia*, Vol.XX, Special Issue (1997), pp.239–53.

category'.¹⁵ But the Muslims of the north and east blame the Tamils for pushing them in this direction. Gripped by demographic anxiety and locked in competition with the Tamils for control over economic and land resources, they turned to religion as a way of bolstering their cohesion.¹⁶ This was a key factor in the formation of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) in the mid 1980s (at a time when the Muslims had established informal and formal contacts with the Sri Lanka state forces with a view to fighting against the Tamil Tigers).

However the Muslims living in the south and west of Sri Lanka have not shown any similar inclination to support an exclusive Muslim party, despite also being increasingly marginalised by the majority Sinhalese. Why not? There are two major reasons. Firstly the Muslims from outside the north and east believe that the Sinhalese-dominated United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) accommodate their needs, especially those of the Muslim political elites who lead them, because these parties have given some significant (and not-so-significant) ministerial portfolios and positions to Muslims, in addition to substantial business benefits. Secondly, unlike their brethren in the north and east, these Muslims are not confronted with organised violence at the hands of Sinhalese-Buddhist extremist groups targeting their identity and existence.

This situation in the south is unlikely to last much longer, however, as the Sinhalese-Buddhist extremists are ideologically committed to establishing complete Sinhalese dominance over the entire island. For instance, in the presidential elections of January 2010, the only two serious candidates were the president, Mahinda Rajapakse, and his one-time commander of the Sri Lankan army, Sarath Fonseka. Both hold hardline views on the ethnic question. Rajapakse said:

You must remember my political legacy and constraints. During my election I received few Tamil [votes]. . . I was elected primarily by a Sinhala [*sic*] constituency on an election manifesto which made it clear that an ultimate solution to the ethnic crisis could be evolved only on the basis of a unitary state.¹⁷

¹⁵ Ameer Ali, 'The Muslims of Sri Lanka: An Ethnic Minority Trapped in a Political Quagmine', in *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, Vol.5, no.3 (2006), pp.372–83.

¹⁶ The older Northern and Eastern Provinces were merged under the Indo-Lanka Accord of 1987 into the North East Province, and then broken up again in October 2006 under the orders of the Supreme Court which described the merger as 'unconstitutional, illegal and invalid'. Thus the terms Eastern Province, Northern Province and North East Province are to be understood in this context. See 'Judgment on North East Demerger' [<http://www.asiantribune.com/index.php?q=node/2578>, accessed 15 Mar. 2011].

¹⁷ 'President Outlines Peace Strategy' [http://www.priu.gov.lk/news_update/Current_Affairs/ca200709/20070920president_outlines_peace_strategy.htm, accessed 12 Feb. 2010].

And statements attributed to Fonseka had an even sharper tone:

I strongly believe that this country belongs to the Sinhalese but there are minority communities and we treat them like our people... We being the majority of the country, 75%, we will never give in and we have the right to protect this country.

We are also a strong nation... They can live in this country with us. But they must not try to, under the pretext of being a minority, demand undue things.¹⁸

In any democratic country the majority should rule the country. This country will be ruled by the Sinhalese community which is the majority representing 74% of the population.¹⁹

It seems there is little space for minorities in the ruling mentality. Moreover there is a concerted move to marginalise the minorities politically, by bracketing them ideologically with global *jihadi* movements. According to the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), a militant Buddhist party which is still part of Rajapakse's coalition government, the 'Malik Group, Osama Group, Deen Malik Group and Mujahideen Group...are some of the Muslim terrorist groups operating in Maligawatte (in Colombo)'.²⁰

¹⁸ *The National Post* (23 Sept. 2008), p.5 [http://www.nationalpost.com/news/story.html?id=832374#ixzz0dSLHeoCQ, accessed 23 Jan. 2010].

¹⁹ *Daily News* (19 July 2008), p.3.

²⁰ 'We Want Muslim Terrorism Probed—JHU Front' [http://www.muslimguardian.com/pls/portal/mpnews.mp_gl_sum.set_newsId?p_news_id=10995, accessed 9 Dec. 2008]. The JHU was founded by Buddhist monks in February 2004, and is inherently pro-Sinhalese in its ideology. The party's major goal is 'to promote the interests of the Sinhala-Buddhists and to make Buddhism a guiding principal of state affairs, as well as to wipe out Tamil violence by force. The JHU shuns non-violence as a means to seek political alternatives for the Tamil national question, and has been urging young Sinhala-Buddhists to sign up for the army'. The party has broad appeal among Sinhalese, particularly urban Sinhalese, and thus was able to form an electoral coalition with the ruling United People's Freedom Alliance led by the SLFP. See A.R.M. Imtiyaz, 'Politicization of Buddhism and Electoral Politics in Sri Lanka', in Ali Riaz (ed.), *Religion and Politics in South Asia* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp.146–78. Furthermore, the JHU completely opposes the United Nation panel report on the Sri Lanka war which highlights 'credible allegations' that the Sri Lanka military and the LTTE had both committed violations that could constitute crimes against humanity. The report claims that the Sri Lankan military 'knowingly shelled in the vicinity of humanitarian actors' and systematically killed some tens of thousands of Tamil civilians. The report also alleges that between January and May 2009, the Sri Lanka military forces indiscriminately shelled civilian hospitals located in the government-established no-fire zone. See 'Reports of the Secretary General's Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka' (31 March 2011) [http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Sri_Lanka/POE_Report_Full.pdf, accessed 3 May 2011].

Understanding the Muslims' Non-Tamil Identity

In Sri Lanka the north-eastern Muslims, who share close blood, linguistic and cultural ties with the Tamils, prefer to be recognised by their religious and cultural identity which has played a defining role in shaping their ideas, values and lifestyle.²¹ This is in sharp contradiction to the Tamil Nadu Muslims and the Christian Tamils who both describe themselves as Tamils.²²

In order to understand the contradictions surrounding Muslim identity in Sri Lanka, this section will address two key questions: What are the key markers of non-Tamil identity among the Muslims of Sri Lanka, and do those markers actually make them distinct from the Tamils?

Islam has been radically successful in giving a faith-based identity to its adherents at the level of both the masses and the elites, wherever they may be around the globe. The Muslim elites centred in south Sri Lanka are aware of this trend, and thus have opted to push the Muslim masses to vigorously seek a religious identity to build up their ethnic identity and to renounce their primordial Tamil identity traits (such as the use of the Tamil language). Thus Muslims in the south increasingly study in Sinhalese—even though they may use Tamil at home—which has helped them commercially. Also the government has tried to wean Muslims away from Tamil by granting permission for them to study in the English medium. Previously the law required a person to study in his or her mother tongue. This policy has created a class of southern Muslims versatile in the English language, which explains their disproportionate presence in positions requiring the daily use of English—the private sector, the Executive Service at universities and so on.

Thus one major imperative driving the Muslim elite decision to seek a non-Tamil identity is their business orientation. The Muslim elites were aware of the trade-related consequences that could follow if they intentionally assimilated with the Tamils. Hence the elites centred in the south opted to co-operate with the Sinhalese authorities and to this end they deliberately constructed and promoted a non-Tamil identity for the Muslims of Sri Lanka.

In many cases, elite political leaders believe they can win support for, and strengthen their position by, mobilising along ethnic cleavages. They anticipate

²¹ F. Zackariya and N. Shanmugaratnam, 'Communalisation of Muslims in Sri Lanka: An Historical Perspective', *Women Living Under Muslim Law* (WLUML Dossier 22 November 1999), p.1 [<http://www.womenandislam.net/sri/articles/20051218205515.pdf>, accessed 14 Mar. 2011].

²² 'Sri Lanka Tamils' [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sri_Lanka_Tamils_%28native%29, accessed 10 June 2007].

that appeals to ethnicity are particularly effective in expanding their power. Leaders sometimes encourage followers to use crude violence—pogroms or ethnic cleansing—or exploit ethnic tensions in electoral politics.²³ In Sri Lanka, politicians emotionalise ethnic identities. The trend may be discerned from the early years of the Legislative Council which was organised mainly along ethnic lines.²⁴ Even though Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan (1851–1930), a Tamil, was hailed as a great Ceylonese by Sinhalese leaders, this was partly by way of thanks for his arguing, in London, against the harsh treatment meted out to the Sinhalese by the colonial authorities over the 1915 communal riots between the Sinhalese and Muslims.

The Muslims however took Ramanathan's speaking up for the Sinhalese as a sign that he was siding against them. This affront came on the heels of Ramanathan and I.L.M. Azeez arguing, in 1885, that the Muslims were not a community distinct from the Tamils (and therefore not deserving of separate representation in the Legislative Council).²⁵ In a lecture to the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, Ramanathan claimed that the Muslims were but recent converts, arguing that (1) the language they spoke at home, (2) their history, (3) their customs and (4) their physical features²⁶ all cumulatively showed that the Moors of Ceylon were ethnologically Tamils.²⁷ Significantly Ramanathan was at the time the British-appointed representative of the Tamil-speaking communities—both Tamils and Muslims—in the legislature.

He was partly right. In the late nineteenth century Muslim identity was still fissiparous. The contemporary literature talked of Indian Moors, Coastal Moors and Ceylon Moors. These identities would later coalesce as ethnic politics, accentuated by the ethnic representation in the legislature, grew. Ironically, too, Ramanathan's claim that Muslims were 'Hindu converts' inadvertently forged a case for a 'Muslim' identity. And the perception that the Muslims were a different people was strengthened by the 1950s parliamentary debate on the language issue. Razik Fareed, who had emerged as an articulate Muslim leader, 'railed against what he called "political genocide" of the Moors under the Tamil yoke'. In reply, a Tamil member of parliament sarcastically

²³ A.R.M. Imtiyaz and Ben Stavis, 'Ethno-Political Conflict in Sri Lanka', in *Journal of Third World Studies*, Vol.25, no.2 (Fall 2008), pp.135–52.

²⁴ Mohan, *Identity Crisis of Sri Lankan Muslims*, pp.23–4.

²⁵ Ponnambalam Ramanathan, *Riots and Martial Law in Ceylon, 1915* (London: St. Martin's Press, 1916).

²⁶ Ramanathan's claim that Muslims share common physical features with Tamils is somewhat true at village level although features such as the Arab nose can be seen there. Among the elites however blue-grey eyes and very light complexions are more common.

²⁷ P. Ramanathan, 'Ethnology of the Moors of Ceylon', in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (Ceylon Branch), Vol.X, no.36 (1888), pp.234–62.

accused him of being a ‘Sinhala [*sic*] defector’. Fareed continued to maintain that the Moors ‘were not Tamil converts’, and that ‘any attempt to bracket the Moors with the Tamils would amount to the political genocide of my race, the Moor community, by another race, the Tamil community... We will not tolerate being called a Tamil and that from South India. We the Moors, will fight to the last drop of our blood and our last breath to counter this falsehood (that we are Tamils)’.²⁸

But did this make them more, or less, part of the larger society? As McGilvray points out, Sinhalese intellectuals like the historian K.M. de Silva have emphasised the Muslims’ cultural assimilation into Sinhalese society and presented ‘their pragmatic accommodations policies as the mark of a “good” minority, implicitly contrasting them with the troublesome and recalcitrant Tamils’.²⁹ Such paternalistic platitudes were increasingly swamped, though, by openly anti-Muslim attitudes. Again, 1915 seems to have been a watershed. Following the riots, Sinhalese reformist Anagarika Dharmapala declared: ‘The Muhammedans, an alien people...by Shylockian methods [have] become prosperous like Jews’.³⁰ Gradually a sense of siege overtook the Muslim community. Their anxieties were not allayed by the coming to power in 1956 of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, who effectively sought to ethnicise relations between the different ethnic groups—thus outbidding his opponents—through his Sinhala-first language policy.³¹

As a response, Muslim elites and politicians, both in the south and in the north and east, vigorously promoted a non-Tamil identity to the Muslims of the north and east based upon their Islamic faith and their (male) Arab ancestors. Their objective was to win elections and public office. From the perspective of elite theory, identities are elite-driven. Hence, elites with political agendas and economic goals carefully construct identities.

One example was I.L.M. Azeez’s contribution in rejecting a Tamil identity for the Tamil-speaking Muslims as proposed by Ramanathan. Ramanathan was

²⁸ Quoted in Nadesan Satyendra, ‘Muslims & Tamil Eelam, The Forced Evacuation of Muslims in 1989: Some Reflections’ (1996) [<http://1seythi.wordpress.com/2006/09/09/forced-evacuation-muslims-1989-tamil-eelam/>], accessed 3 May 2011]. Also see Dennis B. McGilvray and Mirak Raheem, *Muslim Perspectives on the Sri Lankan Conflict* (Washington: East-West Centre, 2007), Report 41, p.14 [<http://www.eastwestcenter.org/fileadmin/stored/pdfs/ps041.pdf>], accessed 25 Jan. 2010].

²⁹ McGilvray, ‘Tamils and Muslims in the Shadow of War: Schism or Continuity?’, pp.239–53.

³⁰ Wikipedia on Answers.com: Anagarika Dharmapala [http://www.answers.com/topic/anagarika-dharmapala#cite_note-33], accessed 22. Jan. 2010].

³¹ *Ibid.*

active at a time when the colonial rulers were debating whether to increase nominated native representatives to the Legislative Council. Muslim elites made a strong campaign to win a separate seat in the Council because they believed themselves to be a distinct group. The British governor, Arthur Hamilton Gordon, did not buy Ramanathan's Tamil theory and granted a separate seat for the Muslims. In 1889 he appointed M.C. Abdul Rahuman, a merchant and shipper from Colombo, to represent them in the Legislative Council.³² This decision, which acknowledged a separate identity for the Muslims based on their Islamic faith and Arab ancestry, contributed significantly to the emerging Muslim consensus. Much heartened, the Muslim elites decided to open negotiations with the British authorities with the aim of getting the government to introduce a law to regulate Muslim marriage. This campaign too was successful, resulting in the passage of the Mohammedan Marriage Registration Ordinance.³³ Interestingly, Ramanathan lobbied hard to get the bill through,³⁴ which rather subverts the view that he had an 'inherent dislike' of his Muslims countrymen.

Meanwhile the Muslim elites sought to defend their gains by an appeal to history. The Moors, they argued, were descendents of Arab male ancestors, and therefore racially distinct from the Tamils. As A.M.A. Azeez, one of the early champions of Muslim identity formation, put it:

The ancestors of the Moors came from Arabia pursuing commerce...to the place where their primitive father, Adam, was exiled by God...Its seaports were the centres of trade visited by Arab merchants...Most of the ancestors of the Ceylon Moors were, according to tradition, members of the family of Hashim...

At such a critical moment [when they were being persecuted at home] what other country could have been more attractive to them, as a place of refuge, than Ceylon...³⁵

However there were flaws in Azeez's logic, as Qadri Ismail explains: 'Azeez claims that only Arab *men* came to Sri Lanka and they "took Tamil

³² Mohan, *Identity Crisis of Sri Lankan Muslims*, p.22.

³³ Mohammedan Marriage Registration Ordinance No. 8 of 1886 and No. 2 of 1888.

³⁴ M. Vythilingam, *The Life of Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan, Vol.1* (Colombo: Ramanathan Commemoration Society, 1971), pp.261–6.

³⁵ See A.M.A. Azeez, *Criticism of Mr. Ramanathan's Ethnology of the Moors of Ceylon* (Colombo: Colombo Moors' Union, 1907) [<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~lkawgw/ethnomoor.html>, accessed 3 May 2011].

wives". Logically, this would make the Moors a "racially" mixed construction'.³⁶

In plain fact this is how it was. Moreover, the local Tamil and Sinhalese women who married the Arab Muslims were basically alien to the Muslim cultural identity in that they had practised Hinduism and Buddhism respectively before their conversion to Islam on marriage. In the event, of course, both non-Muslim and Muslim Arab traders mostly took *Tamil* wives because the Tamils populated the coastal areas and were similarly engaged in trading activities. For instance those Muslims who headed for the island's eastern coast to avoid Portuguese persecution³⁷ arrived and settled, first, in the then Tamil village of Kattankudy near Batticaloa. Here they married local Tamil women from the dominant Mukkuvar caste of fisherfolk.³⁸ In short, scholarly-based history clearly shows that the Muslims of Sri Lanka are *not* of pure Arab blood, and are *not* racially distinct from the Tamils as Azeez and other partisan commentators have passionately claimed.³⁹ And this sanguinary connection to the Tamils was not the only hurdle that the Muslims had to jump in order to claim a distinct identity.

Consider the problem of language: the Muslims are 'not seen to have their own language'.⁴⁰ The male Muslim and non-Muslim Arab ancestors of today's Muslims who took Tamil wives adopted Tamil as their primary spoken language, while those who took Sinhalese wives eventually became skilled at the Sinhalese language. Today's Muslims, depending on their place of origin and domicile, speak Tamil or Sinhalese. Many, particularly those who live in the south, speak both, thereby showing their Tamil affinities, if not outright roots. All this categorically confirms that the Muslims of Sri Lanka, by denying their kinship with the Tamils, have made themselves into a language-less social group in modern Sri Lanka. Yet language is supposed to be one of the primary cultural symbolic markers for any group looking to establish a claim of distinctness.

As a consequence, a section of Muslim scholars and elites have tried to *construct* a distinct language for the Muslims of Sri Lanka. The result of this effort is the origin of Arab-Tamil or Arabic Tamil or Muslim Tamil, a form of

³⁶ Qadri Ismail, 'Unmooring Identity: The Antinomies of Elite Muslim Self-Representation in Modern Sri Lanka', in Pradeep Jeganathan and Qadri Ismail (eds), *Unmaking the Nation: The Politics of Identity and History in Modern Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 1995), pp.55–105, italics added.

³⁷ This was well before thousands of Muslims escaping from the Dutch in the sixteenth century were given shelter by the Kandyan kingdom headed by King Senarath.

³⁸ Balachandran, 'Lankan Muslims' Historical Links with India'.

³⁹ Azeez, *Criticism of Mr. Ramanathan's Ethnology of the Moors of Ceylon*.

⁴⁰ Imtiyaz, 'Eastern Muslims of Sri Lanka: Special Problems and Solution', pp.404–27.

communication that employs a mixture of both Tamil and Arabic. And many Muslims in Sri Lanka in fact still employ this language. However it is only widely used at home and has not won state recognition. Moreover it suffers from two further impediments: (1) it is neither pure in its nature nor distinct in its history. While this is mainly because the language of traders in South India and Sri Lanka was Tamil, Muslims do speak the Tamil language with some Arab admixture and sometimes employ the Arabic script to write Tamil;⁴¹ and (2) it failed to carve out a place in the country's professional environment, or gain acceptance as a formal subject in public schools.

Lacking a distinct racial or linguistic identity, what else can the Muslims point to? Recently urban Muslim elites and politicians have sought to promote a communal identity based on their ancestors' Arab-Islamic cultural orientation 'which has severed them from the Dravidian separatist campaign of the Hindu and Christian Tamils'.⁴² Islam is appealed to here as well. Muslims are even encouraged to think of themselves as members of one 'family', the *ummah*. A potential problem with this strategy, though, is that the *ummah* is a family of *all* Muslims, not just those from Sri Lanka.

Pushing their common Islamic identity has allowed the Muslims of Sri Lanka to override other non-Islamic identity markers of theirs. But these days professing Islam can send out mixed signals. After all, it is a faith which commands its adherents to instil terror in the hearts of unbelievers (Quran, 8:12–17). Also, the campaign for identity formation based on the Islamic faith has had the effect of stamping the Muslims with a false veneer of homogeneity. 'Muslim', as Shukri observes, 'denotes a religious denomination and not an ethnic [one]. . .not necessarily an ethno-cultural one, but an ethno-religious one'.⁴³ It is 'incorrect to regard the Sri Lankan Muslims as constituting an ethnic group' based on religion.⁴⁴ Last but not least, the sacralisation of identity by the Muslim elites and political establishment has radicalised the Sri Lankan Muslim masses' political choices. The post-1980 decades have seen the emergence of Islamic movements such as the Jammathi Islami, Tabligh Jamaat and Salafi, particularly in pockets of the north and east. These organisations,

⁴¹ Dennis B. McGilvray, 'Muslim Folklore in Sri Lanka', in Margaret Ann Mills, Peter J. Claus and Sarah Diamond (eds), *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopedia: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2003), pp.421–3.

⁴² Dennis B. McGilvray, 'Arabs, Moors and Muslims: Sri Lankan Muslim Ethnicity in Regional Perspective', in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol.32, no.2 (1998), pp.433–83.

⁴³ M.A.M. Shukri, *Muslims of Sri Lanka: Avenues to Antiquity* (Beruwala: Jamiah Naleemia Institute, 1989), p.iv.

⁴⁴ Izzeth Hussein quoted in M.A. Nuhman, *Sri Lankan Muslims: Ethnic Identity within Cultural Diversity* (Colombo: ICES, 2007), p.5.

particularly the Jammathi Islami and Salafi, strictly urge Muslims to reject un-Islamic practices such as Muslim women wearing modern attire rather than the *abayah* or Islamic dress, attending programs in Hindu temples, or consuming alcoholic drinks. As a result Muslim women are increasingly giving up the once-traditional sari in favour of full covering. In Kattankudy near Batticaloa, females, even tiny tots in nursery schools, now cover themselves from head to foot.⁴⁵ This growing tendency is considered one of the fundamental factors which turned the Muslims' animosity towards the Tamils.⁴⁶ At the same time the rise of Islamic piety, particularly in the east, has silenced the voices of Islamic pluralism, particularly Sufism.⁴⁷ In October 2004, for example, some young Muslims who were influenced by strict Islamic ideas demolished a mosque and several houses and buildings belonging to a Sufi sect which was led by Payilvaan, an Islamic scholar who wrote extensively against mainstream orthodoxy.⁴⁸ And in December 2006, when Payilvaan died, strictly orthodox Muslims objected violently to him being buried in the Tharikathul Mufiheen Mosque's burial grounds in Kattankudy. The corpse of Payilvaan was later exhumed and buried instead in the common Muslim burial grounds.⁴⁹

Politicisation of the Islamic faith by Muslim politicians not only pressures the Muslim masses of the north and east to reject all forms of liberal Islamic interpretation, but it also emotionally discourages them from building healthy communal relations with Hindus and Christians of Tamil ethnic stock, whether at the level of the masses or at the level of the elites.⁵⁰

Identities are fundamentally symbolic, and religions obviously fit into this symbolic category since they typify distinct forms of symbols, especially when they are characterised by dietary, clothing and other practices. However, symbols have effective power to construct ethnic identity if they are able to represent community perceptions of common ethnic markers such as language and dress. Therefore, it is academically correct to maintain that the identity of the Muslims of the north and east is at the crossroads because the strategies of their leaders,

⁴⁵ Imtiyaz, 'Eastern Muslims of Sri Lanka: Special Problems and Solution', pp.404–27.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Sufism, or Tasawwuf as it is known in the Muslim world, is a mystical form of Islam.

⁴⁸ 'Mosque Demolished as Mobs Attack Sect in Kattankudy' [<http://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=13277>, accessed 12 Dec. 2008].

⁴⁹ 'Payilvan's Remains Exhumed, Sufi Building Demolished' [<http://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=20628>, accessed 12 Dec. 2008].

⁵⁰ Author interview via telephone with some Eastern Muslims who practise Sufism, 15 May 2009. It is important to point out that unbelievers are described by the Quran as 'the vilest of animals' and 'losers' and the Quran plainly commands believers not to take unbelievers as friends. See Quran verses 5:51, 5:80, 3:28, 3:118, 9:23, 53:29, 3:85, 3:10, 7:44 and 1:5–7.

particularly those from the south, have placed them ‘in an awkward and dangerous position’.⁵¹ The Muslim elites of the north and east patently need to engage in a comprehensive review of their current identity formation strategy. Arguably they should look to the past as a way of redefining their identity.

Jaffna-Centred Politics and Hindu Resurgence: Muslim Turncoats?

In pre-independence years, as Dharmadasa shows, ‘ethnicity seemed to provide the strongest and most reliable base for political action’ for Sri Lankan nationalists. Accordingly in 1934 the All Ceylon Moors Association was formed, followed by the Sinhalese Maha Sabha in 1935, the Burgher Political Association in 1938, and the Ceylon Indian Congress in 1939.⁵² In this milieu, language and religion became prime symbols of identity. Tamils, too, particularly the land-owning Vellala caste,⁵³ self-identified in this way. For instance in the 1952 parliamentary election for the seat of Kankesanthurai, Ponnambalam Ramanathan’s son-in-law S[ubiah] Nadesapillai of the UNP (often mistaken for S[omasundaram] Nadesan who was a senator in later years), was pitted against the emerging Tamil leader, S.J.V. Chelvanayakam of the new Federal Party. Chelvanayakam being a Christian, Nadesapillai’s slogan was ‘Curusa Vela?’ (meaning the Christian cross or the god Murugan’s spear). Chelvanayakam lost. We argue that this Hindu resurgence in Tamil politics would have made it more difficult for all those groups on the periphery of Tamil-speaking society to identify themselves fully as Tamil.

In all societies there are elements that claim an exclusiveness that threatens those on the periphery. As the Sinhalese started to assert themselves politically in the early pre-independence years, the Tamil leader G.G. Ponnambalam hit back by referring to them as ‘a hybrid mongrel race split off from the aboriginal Tamils and mixed with Aryan invaders’.⁵⁴ The land-owning Vellalas at the top of the Sudra caste dominate public life in the Tamil zone and regard themselves

⁵¹ McGilvray, ‘Arabs, Moors and Muslims: Sri Lankan Muslim Ethnicity in Regional Perspective’, pp.433–83.

⁵² K.N.O. Dharmadasa, *Language, Religion and Ethic Assertiveness: The Growth of Sinhalese Nationalism in Sri Lanka* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1992), p.246.

⁵³ In an arrogant display of caste hegemony, Tamil-language school books, the same books used by Muslims and members of other castes, teach that only the Vellalas truly live. This is done through Kural–1033, which in G.U. Pope’s translation reads: ‘Who ploughing eat their food, they truly live: The rest to others bend subservient, eating what they give’ [<http://tamilweek.com/news-features/archives/1889>, accessed 26 Jan. 2010].

⁵⁴ *The Hindu Organ* (1 and 19 June 1939) cited in Sebastian Rasalingam, ‘Tamils Must Ask for What is Reasonable and Accept Their Role in the Conflict’, *The Island* (27 Feb. 2008) [<http://www.island.lk/2008/02/27/midweek5.html>, accessed 20 Jan. 2010]. Also see Jane Russell, *Communal Politics under the Donoughmore Constitution 1931–1947* (Dehiwala: Tissara Prakasakayo, 1982).

as ‘high-caste’ and ‘elite’, a claim which Western scholars have uncritically accepted.⁵⁵ Thus we have Ponnambalam asserting the right of the ‘pure’ Tamils to rule over others. (This is rather ironic, given the high-caste status of the Vellala community of which he was a part. However possibly because of Manu’s prohibition against crossing the waters, most Indians who migrated to Sri Lanka were Sudra.⁵⁶) And this assertion surely must have confirmed the Muslims’ sense that they were right in not wanting to be counted as Tamils.

At the next polls in 1956 Chelvanayakam and his Federal Party, to the credit of Tamil Hindus, were returned with big local majorities. The central government’s colonisation plan for the Eastern Province, which had begun with the Gal Oya Scheme in 1951, settled Sinhalese in traditionally Tamil-speaking areas, so altering the demography there. As a consequence, Tamils and Muslims saw advantages in working together. Muslims rallied behind Chelvanayakam, and several became stalwarts of his party as members of parliament.

Yet even in these times of good relations between the Tamils and north-eastern Muslims, there were simmering problems. The Federal Party, centred in Jaffna, pitched to a monolithic community of ‘Tamil-speaking peoples’. Despite being strong supporters of the concept that the Tamil and Sinhalese peoples should be allowed to decide what was best for their respective areas, the party failed to go further and say that the same applied to the north and the east, and to Tamils and Muslims.

Until the Vaddukoddai Resolution of 14 May 1976 that called for the constitution of Tamil Eelam as a separate state, all Tamils and many Muslims in the region had continued to stand together.⁵⁷ And a separate state was certainly not an option for the Estate Tamils or for Tamils based in the south. Upon passage of the Resolution the Ceylon Workers’ Congress immediately broke away from the Tamil United Front—afterwards renamed the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF)—with the result that the Tamil United Front ceased to represent half the Tamil people.

The priorities of Jaffna’s people were the TULF’s priorities—rights, university admission, public signs in Tamil in Colombo, etc. To the people of the

⁵⁵ S.R.H. Hoole, ‘Caste as a Hate Crime: Reassessing Arumuka Navalar and Vellala Dominance in Sri Lanka’, in *Indian Church History Review*, Vol.XLIII, no.2 (Dec. 2009), pp.113–47.

⁵⁶ S.R.H. Hoole, ‘Sri Lankan America: Caste’, in Jonathan H.X. Lee and Kathleen Nadeau (eds), *Encyclopedia of Asian American Folklore and Folklife*, Vol.3 (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2011), pp.1049–51.

⁵⁷ Rajan Hoole, *Sri Lanka: The Arrogance of Power—Myths, Decadence and Murder*, Chap. 2.

relatively undeveloped east who rarely ventured elsewhere or sought admission to the universities, and who often knew Sinhalese, agriculture, roads, tanks and irrigation were far more important. Yet the party gave little recognition to these needs and, according to Eastern Province MP A. Thangathurai, forbade him from seeking favours for his constituents from government ministers—although Jaffna MPs were permitted to do so. M.M. Mustapha, who became Pottuvil's Federal Party MP in 1956 and referred to Chelvanayakam fondly as the 'Old Man', protested that as an MP from an electorate with pressing agricultural needs, erasing Sinhalese letters from vehicle number plates was not what his constituents expected from him.⁵⁸ Nor could the Jaffna leadership carry the Muslims and hill-country Tamils with it. Even its hold over Eastern Tamils was tenuous. This tendency to take non-Jaffna people for granted reached its most vulgar extreme in 2009, when overseas Tamils tied to the Jaffna leadership, who were demonstrating to save the Tamil Tigers, refused to say a word about the dire plight of the people of the Vanni who had been forcibly recruited by the LTTE.⁵⁹ Not surprisingly therefore, given Sri Lanka's 'outbidding' style of populist electoral politics, several Muslim MPs crossed the floor to sit on the government benches despite being elected on Federal Party tickets. Although Tamil MPs did the same, Tamil opinion nevertheless used this episode to caricature the Muslims as untrustworthy turncoats (in Tamil, *thoppi piratty*, i.e., hat-changers). Thus we see Muslim MPs Gate Mudaliyaar M.S. Kaariyappar (MP for Kalmunai) and M.M. Mustapha (MP for Nintavur), both elected on the Federal Party ticket in 1956, crossing over to the government. The strains within the broader Tamil community were further exacerbated over the idea of a university. By 1960 the Federal Party had formulated the concept of a 'Tamil University' in Trincomalee, neutrally located between the Northern and Eastern Provinces, as one of its major

⁵⁸ Both Thangathurai's and Mustapha's statements were made in interviews with Rajan Hoole in 1993, Mustapha in Nintavur and Thangathurai in Colombo.

⁵⁹ Robert Mackey, 'Is the World Ignoring Sri Lanka's Srebrenica?', *The NY Times News Blog* (17 April 2009) [http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/04/17/is-the-world-ignoring-sri-lankas-srebrenica/, accessed 30 Jan. 2010]. As the government of Sri Lanka gained the upper hand by Dec. 2008 in its battle against the Tigers, the latter began forcibly arming Tamil civilians in the Vanni, the LTTE's last stronghold. These included the very young, women and even the deaf. The LTTE remnants forced these Vanni civilians to retreat with them into an ever-shrinking zone, thereby using some 300,000 civilians as a human shield. Nevertheless the government still fired on the LTTE killing many civilians, seemingly intent more on victory over the LTTE than the safety of its own citizens. According to civilians interviewed by S.R.H. Hoole, they tried to leave but were refused permission by the LTTE, which fired on those who persisted in trying. During loud demonstrations in Western cities, overseas Tamils, dominated by the Jaffna leadership, could find fault only with the government and did not say anything about the sufferings of the Vanni Tamils. For further information, see International Crisis Group, 'War Crimes in Sri Lanka: Asia Report No. 191' (17 May 2010) [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/191_War_Crimes_in_Sri_Lanka.ashx, accessed 30 Mar. 2011].

planks. It entered the 1965–70 government of Dudley Senanayake as a partner, based on an agreement on District Councils. The university would soon be established. Thereupon G.G. Ponnambalam of the Tamil Congress (now reduced to a small party since the emergence of the Federal Party), which was also a coalition partner, asked for a Hindu University in the Tamil-dominated north which would result in the exclusion of Muslims and Eastern Tamils. It was the cue for the government to do nothing.

With Chelvanayakam's death in 1977 and the increasingly repressive nature of the Sri Lankan state, Tamil militants gradually became the dominant force in Tamil politics. The LTTE murdered Chelvanayakam's successor, A. Amirthalingam, in 1989 and wiped out other rival movements. By 1990 the LTTE was the only significant militant group. But it would be wrong to attribute the political shift that followed solely to the LTTE. Recruited generally from the depressed castes and largely uneducated, the Tigers were dependent on Vellala intellectuals for administrative support and the latter, in turn, were happy to exercise power through them. Thus university vice-chancellors and professors made fiery speeches, encouraged and deducted 'contributions' from salaries—ostensibly for charities, but destined for the Tamil Tigers—and drafted petitions and wrote articles praising Tiger policies. For example the University of Jaffna's vice-chancellor Prof. A. Thurairajah asked its English Unit to allocate staff for the translation work of the Tigers.⁶⁰ In exchange they were given exit passes from Jaffna for their children, although among the general population, people of military age were prohibited from leaving. Also the intellectuals who sold out to the Tigers were given a free hand to pursue their private agendas. Thus a Vellala suspended from the university for 'examination offences' initially joined the EPRLF (Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front), and became its spokesman at government talks. But when the EPRLF was almost wiped out by the LTTE, he quickly became an ardent Tamil Tiger supporter and began singing their praises, later running a Tiger website which pushed a sharply ethnic line. There was a tendency to argue that Christians must accept that a Tamil is a Hindu;⁶¹ and he was not alone in that view. Following the appointment in 2006 of a Christian to the vice-chancellorship of the University of Jaffna on the vote of the university's Council of Tamils in Sri Lanka, a group of Jaffna intellectuals editorialised in a British Tamil newspaper that:

⁶⁰ Confidential testimony in 2009 to S.R.H. Hoole from several former members of the English Unit now residing in North America. Others in Jaffna have since confirmed this information.

⁶¹ S.R.H. Hoole, 'The Tamils of Sri Lanka: The Problem of Religion and Identity', in *Indian Church History Review*, Vol. XXVI, no. 2 (June 1992), pp. 88–135.

'[T]here are a few Christians who are unable to reconcile their minds to the fact that *they had deserted the religion of their forefathers*. This grievance they carry against the whole community. The Hoole brothers,⁶² [and] Lakshman Kadirgamar... belong to this category. As for Ratnajeevan Hoole as Vice-Chancellor of Jaffna University, this much has to be said. *He should not be allowed to roam free in Jaffna's Tamil Hindu society, particularly in the university campus where there is even a Saiva temple.*⁶³

Note the allusion to the polluting effect of those outside the caste system entering Saiva temples. This is of a piece with the new Tamil nationalist practice of hosting Thai Pongal (a festival originally unique to the Tamil Vellala Hindus) in mid January and presenting it instead as a pan-Tamil festival replete with symbols of sun worship and auspicious times.⁶⁴ Yet another man ingratiated himself by becoming the Tiger leader's biographer and arguing that the expulsion of Muslims from Jaffna was not genocide.⁶⁵

Today, following the seeming demise of the Tigers, in a twist of irony the Tamil society that caricatured the Muslims as turncoats is itself full of turncoats. The University of Jaffna, both staff and students, are now largely with the government. A former dean of Arts, who kept his independence during the time of the Tigers, stated: 'All those who supported the Tigers are now against them. Poor Prabhakaran made a great mistake in trusting this lot'.⁶⁶

⁶² The other brother is Dr. M. Ratnarajan R. Hoole, commonly known as Rajan Hoole. Amnesty International, 'Sri Lanka: Fear for Safety: Professor Ratnajeevan Hoole' (2006) [<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ASA37/010/2006>, accessed 10 July 2009].

⁶³ S. Sivanayagam, 'Who is this Man called Ratnajeevan H. Hoole? Here is an Introduction to the Man Inside Out!', *Oru Paper* (7 April 2006), p.7, italics in original. This newspaper is also available in Canada.

⁶⁴ Thai Pongal usually falls on 14 January (called *Thai* in Tamil). It celebrates the harvesting of the rice crop from the September–December monsoon rains. Rice is boiled in thanksgiving to the sun god, timed to boil over (*pongal*) at the auspicious time as the sun begins to show itself at dawn. It is important for the froth to not only pour out but to do so in the direction of the sun or it will bode ill for the household, so expert elders ensure that this happens by manipulating the pot and the fire. Thai Pongal therefore is a Vellala (agricultural) caste festival replete with religious significance. However it was unique to Tamil Vellala Hindus while other Hindus in India did not generally celebrate it. Tamil Vellalas being dominant in Tamil intellectual and nationalist life, it was easy for them to put one over the others by claiming the celebration as purely Tamil. Despite the flaws in the argument claiming it to be free of religion, many Tamils looking for a common unifying symbol and perhaps to caste elevation, have bought into it as being the only pan-Tamil festival.

⁶⁵ Sachi Sri Kantha, 'Expulsion of Jaffna Muslims: A Response to the Claim of Cultural Genocide' [http://www.sangam.org/traki/articles/2005/12-10_Expulsion_of_Jaffna_Muslims_A_Response_to_Cultural_Genocide_Claim.php?uid=1365, accessed 20 Jan. 2010].

⁶⁶ Telephone interview by A.R.M. Imtiyaz, 20 Jan. 2010.

Hinduisation was not the only feature of the changing nature of Tamil politics during these years however. From the late 1950s the Federal Party became avowedly pro-Israeli because many Tamils saw themselves to be like ‘the Jews’, clever but put down, and capable of setting up their own state. The Manavar Peravai or youth wing of the Federal Party was in close contact with the Israeli embassy in Colombo. As the Left-leaning government moved towards severing contacts with Israel in the 1970s, Federal Party MPs spoke out against the move. This too made it difficult for Muslims to be on the Tamil bandwagon. It is interesting, however, to record that even as the leaders of the Muslims were openly working with the Sinhalese political establishment and politicians, the latter, in their war against the Tigers, sought help from Mossad and other Israeli agencies, which led to their training troops and introducing rather cruel methods of punishing Tamil civilians.⁶⁷

Thus besides the elite politics of the Muslims’ southern leadership, several other factors were at play behind the drive for a separate Muslim identity. Having taken note of these, this essay will now examine the evolution of the fraught relationship between the two Tamil-speaking communities of the north and east—the Tamils and the largely Tamil-speaking Muslims.

Tamil–Muslim Relations: Hatred Breeds Hatred

The efforts of the Muslim elites to construct an identity based on Islam did not trouble the Sinhalese political establishment in any way, since the activities of the Muslim political establishment, largely led by south-centred elites, often supported the Sinhalese political leaders and government in Colombo. Notably it did so in the war that crushed the Tamil Tigers’ three-decades-old violent struggle to secure a separate state.⁶⁸ The key reason for the Muslim elites’ good relations with the Sinhalese political class, apart from their commercial interests, is a fear for their physical security in the island.⁶⁹

Muslim leaders are well aware that their community could suffer if ‘unfriendly’ attitudes developed towards them among Sinhalese leaders. The latter could lobby to deny state support for their business activities; or they could possibly unleash violence against them. Accordingly ‘it was Muslim leaders like Sir

⁶⁷ Rajan Hoole, *Sri Lanka: The Arrogance of Power—Myths, Decadence and Murder*, p.218.

⁶⁸ ‘Tigers Finished as Military Force’, BBC News (18 May 2009) [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8055138.stm, accessed 18 May 2009]. See also ‘Political Parties Salute Valiant Security Forces’ [http://www.dailymirror.lk/DM_BLOG/Sections/frmNewsDetailView.aspx?ARTID=49210, accessed 18 May, 2009]. This page is no longer available.

⁶⁹ International Crisis Group, ‘Sri Lanka’s Muslims: Caught in the Crossfire’, pp.3–10.

Razik Fareed and Badiuddin Mahmud who fervently campaigned for the “Sinhalese Only” policy⁷⁰ which sought to make Sinhalese the sole official language of the country, replacing English’.⁷¹ Again Badiuddin’s period at the helm of the Ministry of Education bred much ill-will against Muslims among Tamils. His implementation of the ‘standardisation scheme’ for university admission from 1970 onwards, which set much higher marks for university admission for Tamils on the grounds that they were ‘advantaged’ (as if a top Sinhalese civil servant’s son at Colombo’s elite Royal College is disadvantaged in life compared to a Tamil tea-plucker’s child from an estate school) sparked the formation of the Manavar Peravai, from which many leaders of the armed Tamil uprising came. However even some Sinhalese, for whom Badiuddin helped clear an educational path, remained resentful of Muslims, possibly because, ironically, a few rich southern Muslims also benefited from the new system of university entry. But this was poor recompense for the damage the collaborative policy did to the Muslim community as a whole. Increasingly the policy came to be caricatured as the Muslim elites systematically aiding Sinhala dominance of the Tamils, even those north-eastern Muslims who were too poor to seek university admission. Yet appeasement by Muslim political leaders continued. As Izeth Hussein remarks, ‘during the State terrorism of 1983 a Muslim Minister disgraced Islam by unleashing his thugs in central Colombo against the Tamils’⁷² and later the Muslims of the Eastern Province ‘got together with the STF [the murderous elite special task force of the military] in terrorist exploits against the Tamils there’.⁷³

Gradually the Muslims were pushed into opposing a unified North East Province or an ethnic Tamil state aspired to by Tamil nationalists. Moreover,

⁷⁰ Badiuddin Mahmud was minister of education in the United Left Front Government of 1970–77. He went to the extent of making Sinhalese the medium of instruction almost everywhere outside the northeast, except perhaps in the Puttalam and Chilaw areas.

⁷¹ Asiff Hussein, ‘The Obvious Link between the Muslims and the Sinhalese’, *Sunday Observer* (10 June 2001), p.7.

⁷² Izeth Hussein, ‘State Terrorism’ (July 2007) [<http://www.dailymirror.lk/2007/07/09/opinion/02.asp>, accessed 2 May 2009]. This article is not available at present. Witnesses prove some Muslim involvement in the 1983 pogrom against the Tamils in Colombo South. Some supporters of a leading Muslim politician, attached to the then ruling party, the United National Party, led a gang consisting of poor Muslim youths who robbed Tamil-owned grocery stores and restaurants in the areas of Armour Street and Grandpass. Similar Muslim involvement occurred on the outskirts of these areas. These Muslims also actively lent a hand to Sinhalese thugs in Colombo in their bloodthirsty campaign against Tamils from 25–27 July 1983. Telephone interviews by A.R.M. Imtiyaz, 17 and 18 November 2008, with some Muslims who actively participated in the pogrom. The respondents spoke on grounds of anonymity. Imtiyaz himself witnessed the Muslims’ role in aiding Sinhala thugs in Central Colombo areas such as Layards Broadway, Grandpass and Armour Street.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

the Muslim leaders' co-operation with the Sinhalese ruling political class increased tensions at the level of the masses between the two Tamil-speaking communities. This further entrenched Tamil perceptions that the Muslims were untrustworthy. In turn Muslim leaders, particularly the south-centred politicians, articulated a position against the Tamil struggle for political autonomy. One key rationale for the formation of the SLMC (Sri Lanka Muslim Congress) in 1986 may be that the politics of accommodation engineered by southern Muslim elites had left the Muslims of the Tamil-speaking north-eastern region vulnerable to nationalist Tamil reprisals.

But the formation of parties based on symbolic identities in non-liberal societies deeply divided along ethnic lines is not likely to reduce tensions; indeed, it is more likely to sharpen them. This has been well proven by the case of the SLMC which is led by M.H.M. Ashraff, once an ardent supporter of the ethnic Tamil state and an accomplished writer and poet in the Tamil language.⁷⁴ As suggested above, the poorer and marginalised Tamil-speaking Muslims of the east seem to have believed that the formation of the SLMC would ease their concerns and bring peace and stability to their region.⁷⁵ In point of fact, though, the rising popularity of the SLMC among eastern Muslims, particularly poor farmers worried by the direction the militant Tamil polity was taking, tells a different story. Tamil militants targeted both ordinary Muslims and the new political agent of the North East Province Muslims; they intimidated the eastern Muslims and outlawed the activities of the SLMC and put Ashraff on their hit list.⁷⁶ This development destructively challenged the foundation of Tamil-Muslim relations. The SLMC responded swiftly and vigorously by mobilising religious symbols:

If the LTTE is killing us, if the LTTE is leaving us out of our homes, simply because we happen to be Muslims, simply because we say '*La ilaha illallahu, Mammmdur-Rasoolullah*' because of our belief in Allah and Prophet Muhammed (peace be upon him). . .if that is the only reason, it is the commandment of the Holy Quran that we should declare Jihad against them and kill every LTTEr.

⁷⁴ In 1977 Ashraff stood for the TULF and campaigned for Tamil Eelam. He later vowed that even if the late TULF leader, Appapillai Amirthalingam, had not achieved Tamil Eelam, he would do so.

⁷⁵ Interview with undergraduate students at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka on 14 Oct. 2007. See also R.Hariharan, 'Rise in Muslim Discontent: M.H.M. Ashraff's Leadership is not Filled Yet!' [http://www.muslimguardian.com/pls/portal/mpnews.mp_gl_sum.set_news_id?p_news_id=8384, accessed 18 Dec. 2008].

⁷⁶ V. Ameerdeen, 'A Separate Muslim Administrative Unit: A Revolution or Disaster?', paper presented at the South Asian Anthropologists' Group (SAAG), 4 July 2006, Goldsmiths College, University of London, London.

We shall now intend to slaughter every LTTEr including Mr. Prabhakaran. In a personal note, I will be the happiest if I can die in battle at the time of slitting the neck of this bloody Prabhakaran.⁷⁷

What this rhetoric shows is that the party saw Islam as its best chance of making electoral gains. In this it was sadly mistaken.

On 3 August 1990, 103 Muslim men from Kattankudy, the key commercial hub of the Eastern Province Muslims, were killed by the LTTE at prayer time inside their mosque.⁷⁸ Immediately afterwards, the property and possessions of Muslims in the Batticaloa and Amparai Districts of the Eastern Province were confiscated. In October 1990 the LTTE violently expelled Muslims from pockets occupied by them in the Northern Province, beginning with the Muslims of Chavakacheri.⁷⁹ On 30 October 1990, quite unexpectedly, the LTTE announced over loudspeakers in the streets of the Muslim settlements in the Northern Province that all Muslims were required to vacate their homes within 48 hours, leaving all their valuables behind, or face death. In Jaffna town the time given was only two hours.⁸⁰ *The Hindu's* longstanding Colombo correspondent, Nirupama Subramaniam, ascribed this incident directly to the Muslims' adoption of an Islamic identity, asserting:

The incidents drove a wedge between Tamils and Muslims. The Muslims—who are linguistically Tamil—decided to strengthen a separate religion-based political identity rather than continue to affiliate themselves with Hindu and Christian Tamils on the basis of language...the Tigers...are treating them the same way as [Sinhalese] politicians treated Tamils.⁸¹

Ethnic cleansing was the last straw. Now few bridges connected the Muslims to the Tamils. Even today the chances of reconciliation are small. However Subramaniam overstates the Islamic angle. Equally relations were destroyed by the Muslim leaders' collaboration with pro-Sinhala governments in Colombo,

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ McGilvray, 'Tamils and Muslims in the Shadow of War: Schism or Continuity?', pp.239–53.

⁷⁹ 'The Expulsion and Expropriation of Muslims in the North', University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), Report 6 (4 Feb. 1991), Chap. 3 [<http://www.uthr.org/Reports/Report6/chapter3.htm>, accessed 28 Jan. 2010].

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* See also Imtiyaz, 'Eastern Muslims of Sri Lanka: Special Problems and Solution', pp.404–27.

⁸¹ Nirupama Subramaniam, 'LTTE and Muslims', *The Hindu* (21 Oct. 2003), Op-Ed page [<http://www.thehindu.com/2003/10/21/stories/2003102101211000.htm>, accessed 20 Jan. 2010].

and the decision by some Muslim youths to throw in their lot with the state security forces as low-level cadres and informants. We have already described the attack on the Tamils of Karaitivu in April 1985 at the instigation of President Jayawardene and a Muslim minister in his government based in Colombo. In the wake of this event, Muslim youths, apparently with the support of the security forces, went on a rampage, killing several people and burning hundreds of houses in Karaitivu and nearby Samanthurai.⁸² Moreover, according to the International Crisis Group, ‘Some Muslims were armed by the government for their own protection but they were also involved in vigilante action against neighbouring Tamils, provoking more reprisals’.⁸³

Conclusion

In heterogeneous societies, identity markers such as language, ancestry and heritage bolster a group’s sense of belonging. These markers are often associated with symbols, which can be used to appeal to values, refer to ideas, stir emotions, and stimulate action.⁸⁴ Symbols thus become tools for politicians and ethnic leaders.⁸⁵ Ethnic elites can construct new identities or deploy interpretations of them to consolidate their community’s position in a time of crisis.

This study argues that the Muslim elites’ efforts to construct a distinct identity for their community were mainly a direct result of the exclusive nature of Tamil politics. Ironically, though, these efforts were mainly counter-productive. Identity markers such as a distinct race of Arab origin, and a mixed language that Muslims called Arab-Tamil, or Arabic Tamil, or Muslim Tamil, did not help the quest for a distinct non-Tamil identity for the Tamil-speaking Muslims. More particularly it demonstrates that the Muslim elites’ endeavours to form a non-Tamil social formation based on the Islamic faith also did not offer *legitimate ethnic* recognition to the Muslims. Rather, they helped configure the Muslims as a narrow religious group rather than empowering

⁸² Telephone interviews by A.R.M. Imtiaz on 12 and 17 Feb. 2010 with some Muslim youths from Samanthurai and Sainthamaruthu who have knowledge about these incidents, and their savagery. They declined to reveal their names for their own safety. The interviews strongly suggested that some Muslim young men sexually abused and raped several poor young Tamil women in Karaitivu. It was rival communal politics associated with ethnic and religious symbols which played a significant role in motivating these young men.

⁸³ International Crisis Group, ‘Sri Lanka’s Muslims: Caught in the Crossfire, Asia Report 134’ (29 May 2007), pp.3–10.

⁸⁴ Zdzislaw Mach, *Symbols, Conflict, and Identity: Essays in Political Anthropology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), p.37.

⁸⁵ S.J. Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp.29–47.

them as an *ethnic* group. Religion is a powerful symbolic marker, but it cannot serve as the primary ethnic boundary-marker in societies deeply divided along ethnic lines.

Muslims may not be a community distinct from the Tamils, but they have some special problems pertaining to their security.⁸⁶ They expect these issues to be discussed at the negotiating table by their own representatives with the major stakeholders in the context of the core issues thrown up by the recent civil war. Viable measures backed by political will on the part of the government and the Tamils in the northeast need to be taken to redress Muslim grievances without delay. Tamil support for Muslim security and peace could open a new chapter in Tamil–Muslim relations. Encouragingly, President Rajapakse told the BBC in January 2010: ‘From today onward, I am the president of everyone, whether they voted for me or not’.⁸⁷ But the question remains: will his Sinhala political establishment deliver justice to the Tamils and the Muslims?

Elite-driven ethnic identities are a product of human actions and choices. Elites can employ any markers and symbols to win and consolidate power. Equally such strategies can help motivate the socially- and economically-distressed masses to seek social changes outside the regular democratic channels, as happened in Sri Lanka.

⁸⁶ Imtiyaz, ‘Eastern Muslims of Sri Lanka: Special Problems and Solution’, pp.404–27.

⁸⁷ ‘Sri Lanka may “Take Action” over Opposition Candidate’, BBC News (29 Jan. 2010) [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8486025.stm, accessed 30 Jan. 2010]. Cf fn.17.