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Religious change in a minority context: Transforming Islam in Sri Lanka

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Religious change in a minority context: Transforming Islam in Sri Lanka

Scholarly work exists on how Muslim minority positioning affects identity and politics, but what is less known is its impact on religion. Sri Lanka's nine percent Muslim population, the country's second largest minority, has undergone a series of recent changes to religious identity, thinking and practice, which have been shaped by its relationship to the dominant and warring 'ethnic others.' As Sri Lanka plunged deeper into armed conflict in the 1990s, Muslims experienced significant shifts in religious thinking and practice, identifying strictly with a more 'authentic' Islam. After the war ended in 2009, Muslims became the target of majoritarian Sinhala-Buddhist violence, resulting in a re-interpretation of Islam and a counter process of change. Using the Sri Lankan Muslim case study to engage with scholarly critiques of majority-minority binaries, this article analyses how religious change is brought about through the interjection of minority status with ethno-nationalisms and conflict. Its focus on Islam in Sri Lanka contributes to area studies and to Islamic studies, the latter through a rare analysis of Islamic reform in a Muslim minority context.

Introduction

How a group's numerically diminutive and/or non-dominant status produces different forms of identity is more often explored in scholarly work than the effect of these on religious thinking and practice. This article analyses how Muslim identity and religion in a minority context is reproduced through a prism, constituting their specific minority positioning in relation to the dominant other. Using my case study of Muslims in Sri Lanka, I explore how their specific minority positioning influenced not only their politics and identity, but also religious thinking, norms and practices and their religious interpretations of the 'other'.[i]

Part of the change discussed in this article was a process of Islamic reform, at times described by some groups as 'fundamentalist' or 'extremist.' This article also

interrogates how Islamic reform occurs in a Muslim minority context, a subject which remains much under-researched. Islamic reform is very often conceptualised in Muslim majority situations or in Islamic states presenting problematic definitions, tainted with generalisations, exceptionalism and essentialism.[ii] The exceptions from anthropology can be too microcosmic, from politics and international relations too generalised, or 'western' centric from north America or Europe, and lastly can be consumed by securitisation or rights based discourses. I argue that where Muslims are a minority group, their distinct minority positioning is fundamental to both the reproduction of religion and to Islamic reform processes.

Categories of 'majority' and 'minority,' in addition to being colonial constructs, are problematic for a number of reasons including their potential to include and exclude.[iii] Developing on the work of Saba Mahmood, I argue that modern states in conflation with nationalism, religion and ethnicity, produce and reproduce 'minority' 'majority' categories and this article analyses how religion and identity in the case of Muslims, responds to this.

Sri Lankan Muslims hold the 'precarious' position of being the country's 'second minority,' frequently caught between the power struggles of the majority Sinhalese Buddhists and the larger minority Tamils.[iv] Amounting to 9.3 percent of the population and speaking both Sinhalese and Tamil they should be a power block themselves, but spread across the country, their political, economic and social profile is heterogeneous.[v]

Ethnicity rather than religion was the defining factor in Sri Lanka's three decade long armed conflict. After gaining independence from the British in 1948, the Sinhalese political elite indulged in majoritarian nationalistic state building leading to Tamils' demand for self-determination. Successive repressive policies against minorities, including making Sinhala the country's official language and giving constitutional superiority to Buddhism, conjoined with repetitive incidents of mob violence and pogroms against Tamils culminated, in the 1970s, in calls for secession by Tamil militant groups. Tens of thousands were killed and the country was torn apart by nearly three decades of civil war, which from the late 1980s was fought between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and government forces. Despite being deemed an ethnic

conflict, the role of religion was unmistakable in the Buddhist state as monks from the majority Buddhist community sanctioned and supported critical military and government decisions; re-interpreting core Buddhist principles of non-violence to enable a 'just war.'[vi] Buddhist extremist violence and political Buddhism were prevalent throughout the conflict, escalating in the latter years, but were generally eclipsed by the conflict's ethnic preoccupation.

On 19 May 2009, amidst a serious humanitarian crisis and allegations of both parties committing war crimes, the Sri Lankan government, with triumphalism and celebrations, declared the war over having annihilated the leadership of the LTTE, .[vii] The 'victor's peace' in Sri Lanka was primarily accorded to the Sinhalese and to Buddhism and was void of a sense of reconciliation and lacked a multi-ethnic vision.[viii]

In the years following the end of the armed conflict, Buddhist extremist groups such as the Sinhala Ravaya, Ravana Balaya and the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) began to rise, gaining uncontested space in public with the support from some in government. The country's new found 'peace' was challenged as Muslims and evangelical Christians became targets of hate campaigns and religious attacks culminating in, at times, days of violence resulting in injuries and property damage[ix].

The influence of Muslims' minority status on their identity and politics has already been established in scholarly work.[x] My focus in this article is on religion. In the post-war period, in response to Buddhist violent extremism, Muslim national leaders began to reverse a previous process of religious change that was marked by a powerful Wahhabi/Salafi uprising against the established Sufi based order. From around the 1990s, Muslim identity and Islam began to transform with Muslims identifying more closely with their religion, externalising it and expanding it to cover all areas of their life. Parallel to this was a 'purification project,' influenced by Wahhabi and Salafi ideologies, shifting religious, cultural and social practices to represent a more authentic Islam.[xi]

This is the first process of change identified in this article. The second was driven by Muslim leaders as a consequence of violent Buddhism where identity has been

reconstituted in line with ethnicity and 'Sri Lankan-ness,' easing off on 'purifying' Islam and re-branding Islam to meet the country's urgent demand for peace and reconciliation.

The exception to this shockingly transpired on 21 April, 2019, when 253 people were killed in eight suicide bombings across Sri Lanka, for which the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) claimed responsibility, and was reportedly carried out by a little known group called the National Thowheed Jama'at (NTJ).[xii] Following the attacks the Jammiyathul Millathu Ibrahim (JMI) and NTJ were banned by the Sri Lankan government and state authorities claim that a few hundred Muslims are believed to be associated with these groups.[xiii] While these events point to a previously unforeseen level of violent extremism amongst Sri Lankan Muslims, I argue in this article that it is very much the activity of a small fringe group and not in line with the religious positioning of the larger community.

Sri Lanka, in spite of its specificity, makes a strong case study because it enables an exploration of the interjection of ethnicity and nationalism with religion and minority positioning in a conflict situation. The two complicated processes of religious change this article goes onto discuss challenge theory and conceptualisation of Islamic reform and religious change.

Historical origins and identity construction of Muslims in Sri Lanka

Sri Lankan Muslims can trace their origins to Arab, West Asian and South Indian traders who married Indian and local women, and South East Asian Malays brought to work in the country by colonialists.

The Portuguese (1505-1658), were responsible for the embryonic categorisation of the majority of Muslim traders as 'Mouros' and in pre-independence nationalist struggles, threatened by Tamil political assimilation, Muslim political elites argued for a separate 'Moor' identity based on their 'Arab origin' and religion of Islam. Though gendered, exclusivist and poorly substantiated, the British accepted the argument, creating and legitimising the Ceylon Moor, Indian Moor and Malay identities.[xiv]

Through most of their modern history; from colonisation through to independence and during the conflict, Muslims have adapted their identity, politics and religious positioning in relation to the 'other.[xv]' Persecuted and economically throttled by Portuguese and Dutch policies, large numbers of Muslims sought refuge in the only remaining Sinhala kingdom, Kandy, and 'structurally assimilated' including into Buddhist cultural and religious roles.[xvi] Post-independence, as Sinhala-Tamil ethno-nationalisms strengthened and moved into conflict, Muslim political leaders swung between the groups, seeking the allegiance of both, though Colombo-based elites were most often aligned with the Sinhalese.[xvii] During the armed conflict many of the Muslims living in the north and east (almost a third of the total Muslim population) initially supported Tamil militancy, but were later deemed traitors by the LTTE, partly because of their political support of Sinhalese in the South.[xviii] Consequentially, Muslims became victims of some of the worst LTTE atrocities. These include the massacre of 103 people who were observing prayers in a mosque in Kattankudy in August 1990, a similar attack a few days later which killed 130 people in Eravur, and the forcible eviction of northern Muslims in October the same year.[xix]

The lack of understanding and indifference shown by southern Muslim politicians partly contributed to the formation of a Muslim political party, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress.[xx] Though the SLMC's formal position has been to emphasise that it is a 'Muslim' party and not an Islamic one, which scholars generally agree with, its formative ideological positioning was undoubtedly Islamist and through occasional dabbling in political Islam it successfully developed a sense of communal identity throughout the 1990s and its success in national politics gave fervour to Muslim identity and politics .[xxi]

Despite the SLMC's influence in coalition politics, no Muslim delegation was included in the two separate phases of peace negotiations between the government and LTTE; in 1995and later with Norwegian facilitation in 2001-2006.[xxii] The side-lining of Muslims had particular consequences in the conflict affected areas, but across the country it affected their sense of national identity and inclusion which contributed to them seeking belongingness elsewhere and identifying with a 'global ummah'. By the 1990s many

Muslims had begun to slowly isolate themselves, look inwards and focus on religion, leading to the first process of change identified in this article.

The first phase of religious changes

The first phase of change involved identifying with Islam, externalising this identity and attempting to live every aspect of life in accordance with Islam. This was fraught at a fundamental level by varying definitions of Islam.

Changes to Muslim identity were best evidenced in the rapid and drastic shift in dress code amongst most women; from Indian influenced sari and salvar kameez to the Arabian one piece dress, *abhaya,* and the *hijab*, or head scarf. Islam became predominant in Muslim life and quickly became more institutionalised with the emergence of new Islamic schools, *madrasas*, financial and social institutions. Combined with this, several *da'wa* and Islamic educational centres were established, offering courses in Arabic language, history, Islamic studies, Quranic recitation and transliteration, and Sharia. These enabled people to identify with and learn about Islam whilst also embodying the religious reforms, for instance, by enforcing their own specific dress code or permitting only *halal* practice. Sharia compliance, with more demand for halal products, including in banking and finance, gave way to an entire industry ranging from food, clothing to banking products swamping the market[xxiii].

This awakening to Islam was led by the three main religious movements: the Tablighi Jama'at,[xxiv] a global transnational Islamic reform movement originating in India; the Jama'at-i Islami,[xxv] founded in India by a renowned Islamic ideologue, Sayyid Abu'l-A'la Mawdudi; and the Tawhid, which refers to a number of different groups and networks which broadly adhered to both Salafi and Wahhabi ideology.[xxvi]

Considering Islam in Sri Lanka to have become infiltrated and corrupted by Buddhist, Christian and Hindu religious thinking and practices, the religious movements made it their aim to establish 'true' Islam by differentiating and at times denigrating the religious other. Arab scholars were invited to clarify this position and a range of

literature and online resources were circulated explaining 'true Islam' as it was practiced in 7th century Arabia.

An important dimension of this religious reform process was a hard-line purification project, led by the Tawhid groups, based on Wahhabi/Salafi ideology, calling for the removal of *shirk* and *bid'a* (polytheism and innovations) from Muslim religious, cultural and social practices.[xxvii] This first phase had two inter-connected but separate components; borrowing from Bayat, I found it was a 'condition' as well as a 'project,' the Tawhid pioneering the latter.[xxviii]

The purification project mainly targeted the four big Sufi Tariqas in Sri Lanka: Naqshabandi, Shadhilli, Qadiriyya and Rifaya and other spiritual or mystical leaders, known as *mowlanas* or *bawas* who while, not necessarily united, had hegemonically defined and determined Muslim religious, cultural and social practices.[xxix] The purification project began scrutinising and demanding the removal of many common practices: recitation of Mawlids, prayers venerating the birth and life of Prophet Muhammad, was deemed *shirk* because aspects of the text made divine associations to him or to Sufi saints; as was praying at the tombs of saints, many of which existed inside mosques. Aspects of Muslim weddings, funerals and coming of age celebrations were said to be innovations as they were not practiced by Muhammad and his followers in the same way. As part of the process, Mawlids and other religious texts were translated into local languages and deemed 'sinful' and in contradiction to 'true Islam.'

The third dimension of what constituted a trinity of sin, was *kufr*, denying or rejecting the existence of Allah. A *kafir*, or person who commits *kufr*, was a term commonly associated with non-Muslim, with the exception of when some Tawhid members used it to attack Sufis on the grounds they, by committing *shirk* and *bid'a*, were rejecting Allah's orders and were therefore *kafir*. Haniffa, through analysis of the bayans of a 'piety movement,' Al Muslimaat, shows how Islamic identity is separated from the 'non-Muslim other', which she argues is a consequence of Muslims being caught between the increasingly nationalistic positions of Sinhalese and Tamils.[xxx] I found that purity of identity was insufficient, religion itself had to be cleansed. Whilst a Muslim was fundamentally identified in opposition to a *kafir*, who was seen to be misguided, ignorant and sinful, the

religious movements were less preoccupied with the external other than the internal other, which had to be reformed or removed, emphasising a level of superiority and exclusivity of the group.

Caroline and Philippo Osella, in similar research in Kerala, India, strongly criticise the scholarly tendency of creating dichotomies of traditional, or Sufi, with 'reformist' groups and exaggerating tensions amongst these groups whilst presenting them as something new.[xxxi] Although not necessarily articulated in terms of such group dynamics, the binary typology of Islam was prevalent amongst Muslims in Sri Lanka and was not limited as the Osellas would argue, to political elements.[xxxii] These were not fixed categories: both 'new' and 'old' Islam were evolving and contested, the religious landscape was multifaceted, complex and dynamic, with tensions over defining what constituted 'true Islam' dividing neighbourhoods and families, sometimes due to which mosque they attended or what prayers they felt should be conducted at a funeral.

At times these tensions led to violence. The most serious incidents were between December 2006 and February 2007 in Kattankudy, and involved shooting and damaging a mosque, burning religious texts, and desecrating the burial site of a prominent local Sufi leader.[xxxiii] Hasbullah and Korf refer to Kattankudy's unique enclave geography, claiming it 'inspired a politics of purification and cohabitation,' particularly as a consequence of the brutal LTTE attacks it faced in 1990, resulting in politics and religion converging to find order within, initially through 'radical action against the internal enemy.' [xxxiv]This was not limited to the confines of a geographical enclave such as Kattankudy, but was in fact, perhaps with less extremity, noticeable everywhere I conducted field research prompting me at the time to conclude that Muslims were engaging in their own form of separatism. Affected by the armed conflict, yet not considered party to it, and unable to comfortably place themselves within a contested nation, Muslims commenced their own separatist struggle to differentiate and separate from the ethnic other. However, whilst doing this they found it difficult to differentiate between self and the ethnic and religious other, hence an internal purification process began. Purification which Spencer alludes to as 'same people in the same place' is not unique to Muslims as other groups have engaged in ethnic purification processes; an example being the LTTE expulsion of Muslims from the north.[xxxv] This process however, was non-territorial and whilst it was linked to a sense

of an imagined community, the larger Muslim *ummah*, it was rooted in the country's conflict context.

From migrant workers to transnational Islam: factors contributing to the first phase of changes

A complex constellation of political, religious, social and economic factors contributed to the changes experienced by Muslims. The large numbers of Muslims going to the Middle East to work, exposed there to a different, unfamiliar, version of Islam, produced the preliminary transformation upon their return. Women domestic workers especially contributed to the shift in dress code. My research found that some Arab states, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in particular, were involved in indoctrination programmes aimed at male foreign workers. Interviewees explained how the 'camps' they lived in were regularly visited by preachers often from their own country, who spoke the local language and conducted sermons to explain 'true Islam.' Scholarships were also awarded to *mowlavis* to pursue their religious learning in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and in all research destinations I was by met with several '*Madanis*' or '*Riyadhis*,' in reference to the Islamic institution they attended. The new mosques and religious institutions were receiving Arab funding and much of this was associated with the propagation of particular Islamic theories.[xxxvi]

The economic and social development of the Muslim community, including higher education levels, especially amongst women, resulted in a new professional class who found the rationalist, modern, literal interpretations of Islam attractive, and the space for debate and discussion of what constituted 'true Islam' engaging. With greater internet access and increased travel they became part of transnational Islam.[xxxvii] The overly ritualistic and somewhat mystically oriented Sufi groups were unable to reposition themselves to appeal to the recently educated Muslim population, who were also traveling for work and pilgrimage to Arab and other countries where some of this new thinking was validated.

Each of the religious movements played their part in driving the changes. The Tablighi jama'at, by far the largest, most popular and powerful group in Sri Lanka, increased mosque attendance through quiet missionary work. They avoided controversy and debate

on what constitutes true Islam, but many of them in private appeared to shun *shirk* and *bid'a* practices, though refusing to impose this position on others. The Jama'at-i Islami, with their ideology of Islam encompassing all areas of life, spearheaded some of the changes, particularly by introducing economic and social systems in line with Islam. They were at the forefront of debates and discussions on Sharia compliance and living an 'Islamic life.' Many of their members subscribed to the larger discourse of identifying with and purifying Islam, but while they were publicly working on the former, they did not campaign for the latter. The Tawhid groups were the most controversial, operating in microcosms across the country; their members acted as lay preachers and activists aggressively advocating for change and, when necessary, physically establishing it. They bore no qualms about their approach asserting; 'If I speak softly you will not hear what I am saying but if I am loud, you will,' and 'Only the Tawhid movement was not afraid to stand up against what was wrong.' The Tawhid were seen by some other groups, Sufi ones in particular, as 'extreme,' 'radical' and 'fundamentalist.'

As fighting intensified during the end of the armed conflict between 2007-2009, I found most Muslims less engaged with the conflict and instead heavily preoccupied discussing and defining 'true Islam'. The reform process at the time was widespread, intense and appeared to be established.

End of the armed conflict and the rise of Buddhist violent extremism

After the war ended in 2009, Muslims became targets of religious violence and hate campaigns. In the early stages incidents typically involved mob and arson attacks on religious shrines and places of worship complemented by well organised anti-Muslim social media campaigns. These were built on the core claim that Muslims, through population growth, religious conversions and economic development, were planning to take over Sri Lanka.[xxxviii] Muslim business establishments were targeted for attack as were religious centres and mosques, the former on the basis that they were dominating the economy and the latter because of their association to Islam, and occasionally on claims of being involved in religious conversion.[xxxix] The violence peaked in June 2014, when three people were killed, 78 people injured and scores of Muslim homes and business establishments were destroyed in three-days of mob attacks in the southern town of

Aluthgama.[xl] Between 2015-2017, after a change in government, such incidents of violence receded though Islamaphobic social media campaigns continued. The period of respite for Muslims was short lived, attacks restarted in 2017 and in February 2018 the government had to declare a state of emergency and impose a curfew after the worst outbreak of mob and arson attacks since 1980s started in the hill capital Kandy and spread to other towns over a period of three days.[xli]

The Muslim leadership's response

The Muslim response to these events has mainly been framed by scholars through an analysis of the community's historical relations with Buddhists, their contentious identity construction and mitigating politics and Buddhist majoritarian ideologies.[xlii] Haniffa discusses how Muslims who had always portrayed themselves as the peaceful community that did not take up arms against the state, was in crisis, unable to fully fathom the Buddhist rage and subsequent violence.[xliii] When it became evident that the violence against Muslims was organised, systematic and enjoyed a level of state support, Muslim religious and community leaders converged and in an unified response condemned the incidents, calling on the government to protect Muslims and drawing international attention to the violations they faced. However, in private, they engaged in a process of introspection and generally concluded that Muslims had breached the 'boundaries' of minority status and some of their activities had provoked the Buddhist response. As one community leader explained 'we were a minority behaving like a majority.' Muslim leaders concluded that in identifying strictly with Islam they had firstly compromised on their national identity, and secondly externalised it too much, making themselves vulnerable and earning the wrath of Buddhists.[xliv] Community leaders thus began advocating for another process of reform, this time it was to re-identify as an ethnic group, as Muslims, who had a well-established history in Sri Lanka and have made a significant contribution to the state. This identity does not undermine religion, but it is not expected to be the only marker and more importantly is not meant to be excessively visible. The second aspect of this change was to reduce visibility of Islam in the public space, for instance by reducing some symbols like Arabic name boards, and limiting practices such as multiple calls for prayers amplified from mosques in close proximity. Thirdly, suppressing the 'purification' project. The zealous emphasis on removing practices that were associated with the ethnic/religious 'other' appears to be fading as the Muslim

national leadership recognise that this position had caused damaging divisions within the community and because it validated Buddhist extremist claims of Muslims' exclusivity, which did not auger well for reconciliation. Similarly, heightened debates and discussions on what constituted 'true Islam' and what was *shirk* and *bid'a* have evolved into conversations on accommodating the religious and ethnic other.

Islam remains omnipresent in this process too, and as in the previous one it is all encompassing, but in this instance, given a new image. The re-branding of Islam, a critical aspect of the latest reform, has two features; one is to assert its integral closeness to Sri Lanka and the second is to portray it as inclusive and peaceful. The second is especially significant because it stands in contrast with militant Buddhism and ironically replaces Buddhism's reputation of being a religion of peace. In order to achieve the first, Buddhist political and religious leaders are invited to Muslim events and encouraged to speak about Muslim contributions to Sri Lankan state-building, which are then extensively publicised in mainstream and social media. This contrasts with previous events where foreign Islamic scholars were invited to speak about the exceptionality of Islam.

In a post-conflict context where peacebuilding between the previously warring factions, Sinhalese and Tamils, is stalling, Muslim religious and community leaders have begun to spearhead reconciliation activities. Some mosques are open to non-Muslims, Buddhist monks are invited to Islamic events and Muslim community and religious leaders partake in Buddhist communal and religious activities, which previously could have been akin to *shirk*.

Resultantly Muslim religious leaders have reassessed their relationship with the *Kafir* and *Mushrik*, softening the barriers they had put up and opening up to the religious other at various different levels. By inviting Buddhist monks to Muslim events and listening to them speak the words of Buddha, Muslims are exposing themselves to the very ideologies that they had warned people to protect themselves from. In examples cited in interviews, Muslim community leaders talked of cleaning up Buddhist temples after natural disasters as goodwill gestures, which included restoring idols in the knowledge that they will be used for worship. Whilst there is clearly a distinction between this and the Tawhid categorisation of *shirk*, where Muslims were accused of venerating or worshiping symbols and idols as part of Islam, it nonetheless symbolises a significant shift in Islamic interpretations of the external and internal 'other'. The purification project attempted to

identify and remove any practice which had even the remotest resemblance or association to the religious other and condemned, discredited and ostracised individuals or groups that engaged in such practices. This onslaught, particularly against Sufi groups, appears to have reduced.

Conspicuous in the first phase of Islamic reform was the fraying of religious authority which was partly delegitimised because of its association with 'traditional' Islam and the nature of the Tawhid movement which proliferated new learned religious leaders. Whilst the main theological body, the All Ceylon Jamiathul Ulamma (ACJU), was active and each of the religious movements had its own hierarchy of leaders, they were dwarfed by the level of engagement and activity of the lay preachers.

In the post-war context, the ACJU have placed themselves in central command of religious authority, forcing the different religious movements to come together and imposing strict control on religious content circulating through publications and sermons. High ranking Islamic leaders have realised that internal friction made them vulnerable to Buddhist extremist attacks and through a process of inclusive negotiations, leaders of various Islamic movements have been brought to work together. [xlv]

There has also been a reconfiguration of Muslim community leadership; Islamic movements which previously claimed civil society space have made way for lawyers and community leaders, centralised by an umbrella body known as the Muslim Council of Sri Lanka (MCSL). The MCSL and ACJU formed the core of the Muslim leadership, managing information flow, negotiating at the local and national levels with political and security figures and intervening at international forums to draw attention to the discrimination faced by Muslims. Their interventions have not all been successful, the most prominent example being the ACJU, under pressure from the BBS, conceding to handing over their authority on halal certification to an independent body.[xlvi] Despite this the MCSL and ACJU leadership had influence, especially in contrast to the political leadership. The Sri Lanka Muslim Congress and the All Ceylon Makkal Congress, both in government, were unable to exert much influence and at the time of the violence seemed incapacitated.[xlvii]

Fraying of Tawhid as a movement and the need for a national level agenda

As with the previous phase, here too there were a number of factors that contributed to these changes beyond the obvious external threat. One of the main features was the internal fissures and subsequent collapse of the Tawhid as a movement. The groups, in some instances unable to agree on minute theological details, had broken away and were largely divided. They had also been tainted by claims of being driven by Saudi Arabian or other Middle Eastern agendas rather than purely on Islamic reform. With the securitised narratives of Islamic extremism developing in the post-war scenario, promoted in part by Buddhist extremist groups and additionally in line with global events, many of these groups slowly lost their appeal amongst the larger Muslim population. With the exception of the SLTJ and NTJ, the others that have remained under the Tawhid banner have been able to show a level of adaptability, at least among their leadership. In some sense it is arguable that much of the work of the Tawhid movement has successfully been implemented, leaving little demand for their work and, in the new climate, little appetite for their aggression and divisiveness. Many Muslims, though not all, have moved away from practicing *mawlids*, *kandhuris* and other features of 'traditional Islam;' Sufi groups remain alive and active though not necessarily increasing in popularity.

Despite their powerful position, the religious movements were ill-equipped to deal with the extremity and enormity of the violence against Muslims. Through their networks they were able to provide relief supplies and use mosques for protection but the scale required a national response that they were too divided to meet. State culpability in the events, through impunity for perpetrators and failing to offer protection to victims, underscored the need for a united national response which the ACJU and SLMC rose to.

This systematic and organised religious position taken by Muslim leaders came into serious question after the 2019 Easter Sunday bombers were found to be Sri Lankan Muslims with links to ISIS. The NTJ, one of the groups involved in the bombings, was a breakaway fraction of the (SLTJ. Very little is known about the second group, the JMI, and at the time of publication details on the association of both these groups with ISIS remains sketchy. What is known is that the NTJ leader, Zaharan Hashim, had begun preaching violent extremism, including suggesting the targeting of non-Muslims for attack, as early as 2014, which Muslim leaders nationally and in his hometown Kattankuddy had protested against and reported to the police. According to security officials Hashim has a following of about 200 people, with some 100 already under

arrest.[xlviii] Community and religious leaders maintain that Hashim and his following are part of a fringe group, disassociated from the larger community, radicalised in isolation, not representative or associated with other Tawhid groups and pursuing transnational objectives unrelated to the local context or situation. Whilst the existence of this radicalised element of the Tawhid movement needs to be captured in the Islamic landscape of Sri Lanka it is a minute element and its presence does not affect the main thesis in this article. The response and measures taken by Muslim civil society and religious leaders in the aftermath of the bombings, such as calling on mosques not to conduct burial prayers for the bombers, jointly condemning and disassociating themselves from the NTJ, using mosques as spaces for protest and to show solidarity with Christians, and not objecting to the government's ban on the face veil for Muslim women validates arguments made here about the accommodating religious positioning of the Muslim religious and civil society leadership.[xlix]

Conceptual challenges posed by the Sri Lankan case

The changes that Muslims experienced in the 1990s problematize conceptual definitions and descriptions in the literature of Islamic reform, which are often derived from Islamic states or Muslim majority contexts. This shift towards Islam cannot be described as a 'revival' or 'resurgence', which would suggest bringing to life something that pre-existed but was not the case in Sri Lanka. The changes represented identification and demonstration of specific interpretations of Islam. This is arguably a political act, as was the competition between the main Islamic movements, however based on the existing literature on this subject the changes explained in this article cannot be described as 'political Islam', 'Islamism,' or 'Islamisation,' which are generally associated with politics of the state or as a threat to the state.[l] Religious identity was a critical element, there was indeed some self- fashioning,[li] but religious thinking and practice were more at stake. Osella and Osella's definition of 'reformism' acknowledges the historical and modern aspects of the term and differentiates between more problematic labels such as 'fundamentalist' or 'radicalist', but in the Sri Lankan context this definition fits only the Tawhid groups, excluding the Tablighi Jama'at and Jama'at-i Islam, which are also reformist though very different in ideology and approach. In Sri Lanka, the first process of change called for a return to the fundamentals of Islam, but the critique of

westernisation, secularism and modernisation often associated with definitions of Islamic fundamentalism were not dominant,[lii] with no 'de-territorialisation' or 'de-culturisation,' 'neo-fundamentalism' was equally inappropriate[liii] as was 'post Islamism.'[liv] The dual character as a process and 'a project'; the larger shift towards Islam promoted by all religious movements and the firmer articulation of the Wahhabi influenced, Tawheed purification project, layered the reform process in ways that existing conceptualisations appear too simplistic to capture. The changes had facets of 'piety;'[lv] 'politics,'[lvi] 'identity,'[lvii] 'radicalism'[lviii] and 'reformism'[lix] and they were concerned with defining, understanding and practicing Islam.

Islamic change can also be portrayed in the literature as novel, modern and exceptional but as Robinson argues they can be rooted in historical projects and processes.[lx] Identity construction in the 19th century, Tamil militant attacks on Muslims, and the SLMC's attempts at political Islam all contributed to shaping the nature of the reforms, linking it with Arab Islam and culture and demeaning the Indian and Tamil influence, identifying with a 'global *ummah*' and absolutist positioning of aspiring towards one, 'true' Islam. Muslims have faced violence and persecution when their economic and religious position has been interpreted as a threat by the dominant group, as was the case in the early colonial period, pre-independence during the infamous 1915 Buddhist-Muslim violence and in the present context. The latest response by Muslims to integrate with Buddhists bears some resemblance to what their ancestors did when, in peril, they migrated to the Kandyan Kingdom in the 17th century; as does the present rebranding of Islam to Muslim political elites' claims during the 19th century of historical links between Islam and Sri Lanka.[lxi] The influence of transnational Islam, globalisation, Wahhabism and Muslim geo-politics in the post-war context make the current Muslim religious position different, yet not without precedent. It is evidently fluid and evolving. Binary evaluations of transnational versus local Islam also do not hold firm in the Sri Lankan case because the first phase, though influenced by global factors, had a very particular 'local,' conflict dimension, and the latter phase, through apparently seeking a Sri Lankan Islam, is not void of international campaigns on minority rights and freedom of religion for Muslims.

Mahmood urges scholars to take up "the opportunity to explore the structurally precarious position that minorities (religious, racial, and ethnic) have come to occupy in all modern societies, and how the modern state produces and conditions their precarity." Clearly, the

modern Sri Lankan state, in its Sinhala nationalist embodiment and majoritarian ideology, has dictated when ethnicity as opposed to religion dominates, and thereby produced and reproduced minority categorisations. The second largest ethnic group, Tamils, have preferred to identify themselves as a nation rather than a minority, which was not accepted by the state and partly led to the armed conflict. Muslims on the other hand, and as this article demonstrates, shifted their identity and religion to respond to the state and to ethno-nationalisms. In this Sri Lankan Muslim case, the minority categorisation was a colonial construct which preceded the modern state, though arguably existed in anticipation of it, but most importantly was a response to growing ethno-nationalism. It therefore, illustrates how minority identity, politics, and as I highlight, religion, are produced and reproduced by complex constellations of ethnicity, conflict, nationalisms, transnationalism, for which the modern state may or may not be responsible.

Conclusion

During the armed conflict Muslims were made to feel inconsequential at the highest level by not being considered a party to the conflict and by being insufficiently protected by the state from militant attacks. This led to a process of identity and religious construction marked through separatism; removing *kafir* influence which existed in the community in religious, social and cultural practices in the form of *shirk* and *bid'a*. Whilst the *Quran*, *sharia* and *hadith* were quoted extensively to define 'true Islam' Tawhid adherents also critiqued these practices on the grounds that they were from other religions and cultures. This separation did not, however, resemble a quietist piety movement, rather, by externalising it Muslims wanted to emphasise to the other their different identity and religious exceptionalism. They used religion to be on par with the others in Sri Lanka's competitive and conflicting ethno/religious/national landscape.

In the aftermath of the war this threatened the new Buddhist 'victors' who wanted to enjoy unchallenged majoritarianism. Muslims could have responded with violence, considered militancy or at the least held on to their positions on the grounds of religious freedom, but they instead responded through reform. The state's association with violent Buddhism and its brutal crushing of Tamil militancy would have been critical considerations. It is also arguable that Muslims, facing an existential threat, were left with no choice but to interpret minority status as being submissive to the majority and subservient to their

dominance. This however, would be too simplistic a conclusion. Muslims have a long history of co-existence and they have always sought to be accepted and part of the national fabric. Arguably, even amidst the hate and violence, Muslims recognised that through adaptation they would have an opportunity to participate as equals in post-war nation building. They saw an opportunity in the threat that fed their long-held desire for inclusion and acceptance by the dominant other. Once again, their minority status determined their religious identity, norms and practice, underscoring its importance to the study of identity politics and religion.

As the latest venue of ISIS carnage, understanding the Islamic terrain in Sri Lanka provides broader analysis of how religion, identity, conflict merge in reform and even radicalisation processes. The Western and Christian targets of the NTJ and ISIS attacks reveal how the activities of the violent extremist group were disconnected and unrelated to the larger threat faced from Buddhist extremists. However, that this element of radicalisation was cultivated in an environment mainly focused on non-violence and peace building shows how the transnational dimension can co-exist even if marginal and incongruous to the local political reality. The awareness of the existence of this radical element has shocked Muslims, left them in disarray and brought to the surface religious ideological fissures identified in the first phase of change. The events have also exacerbated Muslims' vulnerability to reprisal attacks, hate campaigns and violence. This article has argued that even amidst the influence of Islam, religious change amongst Muslims has been determined fundamentally in relation to the ethnic and religious other. As Sri Lanka's conflict trajectory enters new grounds with Muslims at the centre, Islam and Muslim identity are likely to face new levels of scrutiny, challenge and much uncertainty.

Acknowledgements

Note

This article was ready for publication when the Easter Sunday bombings took place in Sri Lanka. The author has attempted to update it through minor revisions, but at the time of going to press details of the events remain scarce.

Notes

[i] Though these were not clearly identifiable phases with respect to time frames and were indeed not the first and second time they were witnessed in Sri Lanka, for the purpose of this article I will henceforth refer to them as the first phase (during the armed conflict) and second phase (post-armed conflict).

[ii] Osella and Osella, "Introduction: Islamic reformism," i and Soares and Osella, *Islam, politics, anthropology*, i.

[iii] Mahmood, *Religious difference*, 25 and Wickramasinge, *Sri Lanka in a modern age*, 48.

[iv] Department of Census and Statistics, 2012 Census. The Sinhalese population amounted to 74%, Tamil population was at 15.3 percent, Muslims numbered 9.3. The following is the population breakdown according to religion: Buddhists amounted to 70.1 percent, all of who are Sinhalese in ethnicity; Hindus were at 12.6 percent, Tamil in ethnicity; 9.7 percent of the population identified with practicing Islam and 7.6 were Christians, Sinhalese, Tamil and Burgher in ethnicity.

[v] The reference to 'Muslims,' 'the community,' 'the group' does not suggest they are homogeneous and is with acknowledgement to the difference and diversity which the article itself highlights. There are also sub groups amongst the Muslims such as Malays, Bohras and Memons.

[vi] Bartholomeusz, *In defence of dharma*.

[vii] UN OHCHR, *UN OHCHR Investigation*, ii and 6.

[viii] Minority Rights Group, *No war no peace*, 5 and Jayawickreme et al, "Triumphalism, fear and humiliation," 208.

[ix] Holt, *Buddhist extremists and Muslim*, introduction.

[x] Haniffa, "Piety and politics;" Mc Gilvray and Raheem, "Muslim perspectives" and Nuhman, *Muslims in Sri Lanka*.

[xi] This article is based on several rounds of field research in Sri Lanka. The first phase of research was conducted in 2007, in four areas: Dharga town, Kattankudy, Mawanella and Colombo, and was part ethnographic and qualitative. Between 2007-2010, I conducted more

qualitative interviews during research trips to Colombo. This phase of research fed into my PhD; completed in 2016. A second phase of field research took place in 2016-2017 when I conducted qualitative interviews with religious and civil society leaders in Colombo, Dharga town and Kattankudy.

[xii] The Guardian, "Pressure builds on Sri Lankan."

[xiii] The Guardian, "Sri Lanka police" and phone interviews with Sri Lankan Muslim community leaders.

[xiv] Shanmugaratnam and Zackariya, "Communialisation of Muslims," and Ismail, "Unmooring identity."

[xv] Ali, "Sri Lankan Muslims;" Haniffa, "Piety and politics;" Mc Gilvray and Raheem, "Muslim perspectives" and Nuhman, *Muslims in Sri Lanka*.

[xvi] Deveraja, *Muslims of Sri Lanka*.

[xvii] Mc Gilvray and Raheem, "Muslim perspectives" and Nuhman, *Muslims in Sri Lanka*.

[xviii] Mihlar, *Coming out of the margins*, 11.

[xix] ICG, Sri *Lanka's Muslims*, 7. In October, 1990, the LTTE forcibly evicted the entire Muslim population from the northern province in 24 hours- 3 days.

[xx] Mc Gilvray and Raheem, "Muslim perspectives;" Knoerzer, "Transformation of Muslim political identity" and Johansson, *Pragmatic Muslim politics*

[xxi] Mihlar, *The pursuit of piety*, 105.

[xxii] Muslims not considered as a party to the conflict were thereby not included in the Norwegian facilitated peace negotiation (2001-2006). In 2002, the Norwegians organised one meeting with the head of the SLMC, Rauf Hakeem, and the LTTE leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran in 2002, as part of their attempts to keep Muslims involved in the process. They also set up the Muslim Peace Secretariat to research and report on conflict related violations suffered by Muslims.

[xxiii] Haniffa, "Under cover" and Mihlar, *The pursuit of piety*.

[xxiv] The Tablighi Jama'at was founded, in Mehwat, India, by Mawlana Muhammad Ilyas Kandhlawi (1885-1944). It is believed to have started in Sri Lanka in the early 1950s. For a good introduction to the movement see; Metcalf, *'Traditionalist' Islamic activism*.

[xxv] The Jama'at-i-Islami, was founded in 1941 in India and was started in 1954 in Sri Lanka. Irfan Ahamed's work provides a sound introduction to the Jama'at-i-Islami, see; Ahmad, "Genealogy of the Islamic state."

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xxvi The movement's origins can be traced to Abdul Hameed Bakri who founded the Jamiyyathu Ansaris Sunnathul Mohammatiyya (JASM) in 1947 in a small town called Paragahadeniya, in the Kurunegala district, in north central Sri Lanka. Some of the groups and individuals would say their ideology has Salafi influences, but few would acknowledge the Wahhabi links as the latter was seen as derogatory.

xxvii Commins, *The Wahhabi mission* and Haykel, *On the nature of Salafi thought.*

xxviii Bayat, *Post Islamism.*

xxix McGilvray, "Sri Lankan Muslims.".

xxx Haniffa, "Piety and Politics."

xxxi Osella and Osella, "Islamic Reformism," 252 and 255.

xxxii Osellas and Osella, "Islamic Reformism," 252.

xxxiii Hasbullah and Korf, "Muslim Geographies" and Klem, "Islam and Muslim politics."

xxxivHasbullah and Korf, "Muslim Geographies."

xxxv Spencer, "A nation living in," 3 and Klem, "Islam and Muslim politics"

xxxvi *Mowlavi* and *Mowlavia* refer to those who qualify from the local madrasa system, they usually take on roles of religious pedagogy and preaching in mosques. *Madhani* and *Riyadhi*, refer to those who qualified from the University of Madina and Riyadh, in Saudi Arabia.

xxxvii Eickelman and Anderson, *New media in the Muslim world.*

xxxviii Nuhman, "Sinhala Buddhist nationalism," and Mihlar, "Coming out of the margins."

xxxix Imtiaz and Saleem, "Muslims in post war Sri Lanka." Based on allegations that Muslim business establishments were planting fertility hampering drugs in women's undergarments and in food products, a boycott was called of Muslim shops and several, including the well-established clothing chain, Fashion Bug, were attacked and set fire to.

xl Nuhman, "Sinhala Buddhist nationalism," and Mihlar, *Coming out of the margins.*

xli Ibid.

xlii Holt, *Buddhist extremists and Muslim minorities*: Imtiyaz and Saleem, "Muslims in post-war Sri Lanka" and Nuhman, "Sinhala Buddhist nationalism."

xliii Haniffa, "Stories in the aftermath of Aluthgama."

xliv They cited examples of numerous calls for prayers amplified from mosques in the same village, excessive emphasis on halal products, including not paying sufficient attention to

Buddhist sensitivities during animal sacrifice for the hajj festival. They also noted that they had become cut off from the other religious communities and were too 'self-obsessed.'

[xlv] The deviant group the Sri Lanka Tawhid Jama'at (SLTJ), which continued to hold firm to their position were eventually side-lined by the central religious authority. In 2016, police arrested the secretary of the SLTJ for engaging in hate speech against Buddhists. The arrest took place just days after the BBS leader demanded the arrest of the SLTJ leader raising concerns on partiality of the law enforcement authorities.

[xlvi] Haniffa, "Conflict legacies."

[xlvii] Rauf Hakeem, of the SLMC, took some vocal stances and reportedly made international interventions, but neither the SLMC nor ACMC were able to significantly influence the previous government into taking action against violent perpetrators.

[xlviii] Guardian, "Sri Lanka police" and phone interviews with Muslim community leaders.

[xlix] Phone interviews with Muslim religious and community leaders.

[l] Ayoob, *The many faces of*; Roy, *Globalised Islam*.

[li] Osella and Soares, *Islam, politics, anthropology*, 7.

[lii] Choueiri, *Islamic Fundamentalism*; Davidson, *Islamic Fundamentalism*.

[liiiliii] Roy and Volk, *The failure of political Islam*.

[liv] Bayat, *Post-Islamism*.

[lv] Haniffa, "Piety and politics."

[lvi] Spencer et al, *Checkpoint, temple, church and mosque*.

[lvii] Nuhman, *Sri Lanka Muslims*.

[lviii] Choueiri, *Islamic fundamentalism*.

[lix] Osella and Osella, "Islamic Reformism."

[lx] Robinson, "Islamic reform and modernity."

[lxi] When Muslim identity came under threat in the 19th century, I.L.M Abdul Azeez's claimed that Ceylon was attractive to Arabs as the first prophet of Islam, Adam, had set foot there. Ismail, Unmooring identity.

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