

ICES Ethnicity Course Series 4

Understanding Sri Lankan Muslim Identity

Lecture delivered by
M. A. Nuhman

at the
Course on Ethnicity, Identity and Conflict
ICES Auditorium, Colombo
August 10, 2002



International Centre for Ethnic Studies
Colombo

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The International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES) was established in August 1982 with two offices in Colombo and Kandy. To celebrate its twentieth anniversary in August 2002, the ICES introduced a 25 day study course on **Ethnicity, Identity and Conflict** bringing together Sri Lankan scholars living abroad and as well as in Sri Lanka as the faculty members.

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Understanding Sri Lankan Muslim Identity¹

M.A. Nuhman

Introduction

Ethnic conflict, a legacy of colonialism is an acute socio-political problem in the post-colonial Sri Lanka, where more than sixty thousand people were killed and nearly a million people were displaced internally and externally during the last two decades due to the ethnic conflict.

Sri Lanka is a plural society that consists of three major ethnic communities namely Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims. However, it is widely believed in the outside world that the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka is between Sinhalese and Tamils and that Muslims are not involved. But, in fact, the Muslim community is also a victim of the conflict and the Muslim factor has become one of the major problems in the present peace process in the country.

The first largest communal violence took place in modern Sri Lanka in May 1915. It was between Muslims and Sinhalese and Muslims were severely affected. According to an official statement issued by Robert Chalmers, the Governor, in November 1915, 25 Muslims were killed, 189 were wounded and 4 women were raped. 4075 shops were looted, 350 shops were burnt to the ground and 103 mosques were destroyed or damaged (Najimudeen, 2002:143).²

¹ The author is very much thankful to Mr. A.J. Canagaratna and Prof. S. Sivasegaram for their valuable comments and suggestions in revising the first draft of this paper.

² The statistics vary in different literatures on the subject. The Inspector-General of Police, at that time, has reported 52 murders and 14 rapes during the riots. (Source: Ceylon Administration Report for 1915)

It took place all over the Southern Sri Lanka except in the North and East where Muslims lived peacefully among the predominantly Tamil community.

Seventy five years after the first communal violence against Muslims in the South, in August 1990 a group of Tamil militants entered two neighbouring mosques at Kathankudi in the Batticaloa district in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka during late night prayers, and opened fire and killed 125 devotees on their prayer mats and wounded many more. A week later, at night, another group of Tamil militants entered a Muslim village called Eravur in the same district and hacked to death more than 120 people including women and children. In October in the same year, the entire Muslim population of the Northern Province, more than seventy thousand in number, were forcefully evacuated by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in an act of ethnic cleansing.

As a logical consequence, the Muslim political leadership of the Eastern province now demands a separate political unit for the Muslims of the region as a guaranty. For the permanent political solution of the ethnic conflict in the North and the East, that has become one of the major hurdles of the ongoing peace process in Sri Lanka.

In this paper an attempt is made to understand the Muslim factor in the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict. I would like to understand why the Muslims seek a separate ethnic identity based on religion apart from the fact that they are also linguistically Tamils and why the Muslims have become a target and vulnerable to both the Sinhala and Tamil ethno nationalisms.

I hope a proper understanding of the problem will help us to accept the plurality of the Sri Lankan society and to live in harmony with others.

Muslims in Sri Lanka – Sub groups

Muslims in Sri Lanka are traditionally divided into five different subgroups, namely, Ceylon/Sri Lankan Moors, Coast/Indian Moors, Malays, Memons and Borahs.

The Memon and Borahs are North Indian business communities settled in Sri Lanka during British rule and mainly live in Colombo. They constitute less than 0.5% of the total Muslim population. They speak Gujarathi and Urdu, respectively, as their home languages and are exclusively endogamous. They live under a very rigid religious leadership.

The Malays settled in Sri Lanka mostly during the Dutch period. They were brought by the Dutch from Java and the Malay Peninsula as either political exiles or to serve in their military establishment. They constitute around 4% of the total Muslim population and maintain their distinct ethnic identity. They are mostly bi-lingual or multi-lingual; they speak Tamil, Sinhala and/or English. They also speak a variety of Sri Lankan Malay as their home language. However, there is a tendency among them to assimilate with local Muslims through 'inter-marriage'. There are also instances of inter-marriage with Sinhalese.

The coast Moors/Indian Moors came and settled in the urban areas, especially Colombo during the British period as a strong business community, mostly from Southern Tamilnadu. They are no longer a significant ethnic group in Sri Lanka. Most of them returned to India due to the citizenship problem while others gradually assimilated into the Sri Lankan Muslim community.

The Ceylon Moors/Sri Lankan Moors are the largest Muslim community in Sri Lanka. They constitute around 8% of the total Sri Lankan population and they are the second largest political minority in this country. They claim a pure Arab origin, although historically they are a mixed community.

Moors, Mohammedans and Muslims

From the mid 19th century the English educated elite of the Muslim community interchangeably used the terms Moors, Mohammedans and Muslims to refer to themselves. However in the course of time they dropped the terms Moors and Mohammedans which were originally used by the non-Muslims to refer to Muslims, and chose

the word Muslim for themselves. Since the 1950s onwards the community has constantly used the term Ceylon/Sri Lanka Muslims to refer to themselves. No Muslim currently uses the term Moors to refer to the community. I do not think that the community as a whole ever used this term to refer to itself. Only some sections of the Colombo based Muslim elite persistently used this term to refer to the Muslim community for their own class interest during the colonial period and also after independence, in order to differentiate themselves from the Indian Muslims and Malays. That was also only when they wrote in English. But when they wrote in Tamil they used the Tamil term *Sonakar* as a substitute for Muslim.

The 'Moor' identity was imposed upon the Muslim community by the colonial rulers, first by the Portuguese and then by the Dutch and the British. The word 'Moor' is supposed to be of Phoenician origin and was borrowed by the Europeans to denote the Muslims of mixed Arab origin found in Western Spain and in North Africa. The Portuguese who first arrived in Sri Lanka used the word 'Moors' to refer to the Muslim community of mixed origin they found in the coastal cities. During the British period the word gained currency and was widely used in colonial administration and the other domains. A section of the Muslim elite borrowed this word to refer to their ethnic identity.

This elitist group formed a Moor Union in 1900 in the process of consolidating their ethnic identity. Later they established institutions like Ceylon Moor Association and Moor Islamic Cultural Home to promote Moor identity. However, there was another group of Muslims who did not want the Moorish identity. Instead they preferred a Muslim identity and formed an organization called Ceylon Muslim League. They wanted to refer to themselves as Muslims, not as Moors. There was a controversy over the Moor/Malay identity in the 1920s. T. B. Jayah, a prominent Muslim leader from the Malay community "realized the divisive nature of this term Moor and pleaded for the all inclusive religious identity (that is) Muslim." (Ameer Ali 2001:5). Sir Sikandar Faried, a more prominent leader, was on the other side and strongly advocated the Moor identity. The Moor –

Muslim controversy continued for decades within the Muslim elite. As Dennis McGilvray (1998:452) has pointed out, "at one point in 1945 the leaders of the Muslim League threatened to pronounce a *fatwa* expelling anyone who calls himself a 'Moor' from the Muslim Faith." After independence the Muslims gradually dropped the word Moor. It was used only by the non-Muslims and a section of the English-educated Muslim elite, before and after independence. To my knowledge, the common Muslim folk never used this word to refer to themselves.³

The term Mohammedan was used by the British in their official and legal documents for more than a century. However, in 1924 the Muslims appointed a committee to look into the use of the term Mohammedan and the relevance in continuing the use of it. The committee headed by M.T. Akbar recommended the use of the term 'Muslim' instead of Mohammedan. The committee felt that the term Muslim is more appropriate to cover the totality of the community who practiced the religion-Islam. When the Government amended the Mohammedan code of 1806 in 1929, the name of the ordinance was changed to Muslim Marriage and Divorce ordinance, and the terms Moor or Mohammedan which were used in the earlier Code were replaced by the phrase adherents of Islamic Faith, according to this recommendation (MWRAF, 1999:25).

Sri Lankan Muslims, except for a few, always preferred the term 'Muslim' as their identity symbol than Moors or Mohammedan.

Cultural Diversity of Sri Lankan Muslims

It is widely believed that, the Sri Lankan Muslims are a homogeneous community. Although, we can see a visible homogenizing tendency among Sri Lankan Muslims due to the development of ethnic consciousness and religious fundamentalism, in reality the Muslims too are a heterogeneous community as the Sinhalese and Tamils in this Country.

³ For more discussions on the Moor identity see Qadri Ismail (1995)

The pattern of the population distribution of the Sri Lankan Muslims is the major determining factor of the diversity of their culture, economy and their political behaviour. Nearly 70% of the total Muslim population lives in the South, outside the North and East. They are a thinly scattered minority distributed all over the country. They are concentrated in considerably large numbers only in a few urban cities like Colombo and Kandy in the South; nearly 30% of the Muslim population is distributed in the North and East. They were living in the North until they were forcibly evacuated in 1990 by the LTTE. More than seventy thousand Northern Muslims have been living in Puttalam, Anuradapura and some other places as refugees for the last fourteen years. We can see a high concentration of Muslims in the Eastern Province. They are numerically, economically and politically dominant in the Ampara District. They are also considerably concentrated in the Batticaloa and Trincomalee Districts.

The Muslims who are distributed in a scattered fashion predominantly in the Sinhala speaking areas in the South are mostly bilingual speaking Tamil and Sinhala. However, their mother tongue or home language is Tamil and only a few upper class Muslims tend to use Sinhala or English as their home language. The northern and eastern Muslims are mostly monolingual and speak only Tamil as their mother tongue. The linguistic attitudes and language loyalty of Muslims differ according to this socio-linguistic situation.

There has been a growing tendency among Southern Muslims to switch over to the Sinhala medium in education during the last two or three decades. At present nearly 20% of the Muslim student population is in the Sinhala medium. It will definitely increase in the future. At present there is a considerable Muslim youth population in the South who use Sinhala for their in-group communication and do not read or write in Tamil due to the Sinhala medium education. This may lead in the future to the emergence of a new Sinhala speaking Muslim community in the South. In 1948, A.M.A Azeez, the first Muslim Civil servant and a respected Muslim scholar, who hails from Jaffna, warned the Muslim community not to choose

Sinhala as the medium of education for their children. He stated that if they chose to do so, in the future it would divide the community into two different linguistic groups. Fifty years after his warning, the situation is close to what he predicted. If this tendency prevails for some time one can foresee that the community will be divided into two different linguistic communities within another fifty years. However, the choice of Sinhala medium is not merely a natural preference for the Southern Muslims. As they are a thinly scattered minority in the South they couldn't maintain good and enough Tamil medium schools in their vicinity and the state is also reluctant to provide them sufficient material resources for their continued education in Tamil. Since education has become a tool for upward social mobility they are compelled to send their children to Sinhala medium schools.

Southern and North-Eastern Muslims differ also in their language loyalties. The bi-lingual Southern Muslims mostly use Tamil for their in-group communication and Sinhala for other purposes due to social necessity. Their language loyalty towards Tamil is naturally not so strong. But most of the monolingual North-Eastern Muslims consider Tamil as their mother tongue and it is the only tool for their personal and socio-political communication. This diversity was reflected in parliament in 1956 when the Sinhala only Bill was debated. The Colombo based, bilingual Southern Muslim political leadership supported the bill while the Northern and Eastern Muslims opposed it. Mr. M. M. Mustafa, the representative of Pottuvil electorate, and Mr. A. M. A. Azeez, a Jaffna born Senator, expressed their opposition to the bill.

Southern and Eastern Muslims also differ in various cultural aspects. The Eastern Muslims, especially those who live in Ampara and Batticaloa districts, follow a matrilineal and matrilocal family system. That is they are divided into different *kudies*, or clans. A *kudi* is a group of families, all supposed to be originally descended from one family. They don't marry within the clan, and the children belong to the mother's clan but not the father's clan. The bridegroom has to stay at the bride's residence. He does not take her to his residence.

But the Southern Muslims follow a patrilocal system where the bridegroom takes the bride to his residence. These two systems mostly correspond with the local Tamil and Sinhalese systems, respectively. They also significantly differ in their folk culture, customs and rituals.

The traditional and major economic activities of the Eastern and Northern Muslims are paddy cultivation and fishing while the southern Muslims engage in trade and commerce. The professional, technical and other employment in the government and private sectors is comparatively less among the Muslims.

The political behavior of Southern Muslims as a thinly scattered minority has always been dependent on the majority political parties. However, the Eastern Muslims were able to mobilize themselves to form a separate political party during the recent past and stake out a claim for island-wide Muslim political leadership. They made a visible impact on national politics with repercussive implications for the entire Muslim population of the country. The growing anti-Muslim sentiment among the Sinhalese in the South is one of the results of this political change, although, there are some other important socio-economic factors which contribute to such anti-Muslim sentiment.

Although there is a visible diversity in the culture, economy and politics of the Sri Lankan Muslims, their religion, Islam has been a strong unifying factor of the community as a whole. Owing to the various socio-historical conditions, Islam has been used as a symbol of ethnic identity and a unifying force of the community. However, in the process of identity formation in terms of Islam, we see the emergence of fundamentalism which itself contains visible ideological diversity that divides the community into opposing religious groups or sects.

Muslim Identity: Religious or Ethnic?

At this point, one may ask the question whether Sri Lankan Muslims are a religious community or an ethnic community. To answer it we

should ask another question: what is an ethnic community? Or, what constitutes an ethnic community? This is a theoretical question and has been discussed enough in the relevant literatures on ethnicity. However, for my purpose I can define ethnicity or ethnic identity as the awareness of the group identity of a community, be it racial, national, tribal or religious, aroused by political motivation and confrontation with other such communities.

The Social Science Encyclopaedia defines ethnicity as a “fundamental category of social organization, which is based on membership defined by a sense of common historical origins and which may also include shared culture, religion or language” (Adam Kuper & Jessica Kuper, 1996:260). Max Weber describes ethnic groups as “human groups (other than kinship groups), which cherish a belief in their common origins of such a kind that it provides a basis for the creation of a community” (ibid p.261). But, I don't think that the belief of common origin is an essential aspect of the formation of ethnic groups.

Paul Brass (1991:19) defines an ethnic group as follows:

“A group of people... of any aspect of culture in order to create internal cohesion and differentiate themselves from other groups. An ethnic group that uses cultural symbols in this way in a subjectively self-conscious community that establishes criteria for inclusion into and exclusion from the group... Ethnicity or ethnic identity also involves, in addition to subjective, self-consciousness, a claim to status and recognition either as a superior group or as a group at least equal to other groups”.

This definition is especially relevant in the Sri Lankan and South Asian contexts. In the construction of ethnicity the differentiating feature is the essential aspect. It can be anything like race, religion, language or colour of skin. These are called ethnic symbols or ethnic markers.

In the Sri Lankan context Sinhalese and Tamil ethnicities are marked by their languages, Sinhala and Tamil respectively. Each of these ethnic groups includes a minority religious group—that is Christian, Catholics or Protestant. Sinhala Buddhists and Sinhala Christians are primarily identified as Sinhalese by their language. In the same way Tamil Hindus and Tamil Christians are primarily identified as Tamils, because they choose Tamil language as their primary ethnic marker. But Sri Lankan Muslims behave differently. Although, they are also linguistically Tamils like the Tamil Christians and speak Tamil as their mother tongue or home language not only in the North and East but also in the interior Sinhala dominated villages in the South, they don't want to be identified themselves or by others as Tamils. They reject linguistic identity and choose religion as their primary ethnic marker. Ethnicity and religion are inseparable as far as the Sri Lankan Muslims are concerned. In the Sri Lankan context, it is clear that the Muslims constitute not only a religious category but also an ethnic category. Hence, the term Muslims is used to refer to both religion and ethnicity.

Ethnicity or ethnic identity is neither given by others nor inherently natural to a community. It is constructed by the community for itself in accordance with its socio-political conditions. Sri Lankan Muslims constructed their identity on religious lines rejecting Tamil language as their ethnic marker.

In this respect we can see a distinct contrast between the Tamil speaking Muslims of Tamilnadu and Sri Lanka. Although, these communities speak Tamil as their mother tongue, the Tamilnadu Muslims never hesitated to refer to themselves as Tamils because they are linguistically Tamils. But, referring to a Tamil speaking Sri Lankan Muslim as a Tamil has become a social taboo because the historical experiences of these communities are different. In Tamilnadu, unlike in Sri Lanka, the Muslim community did not face any major challenges from the Tamil majority, economically and politically since the Muslims were not a competing community in Tamilnadu as in North India. However, the situation is gradually changing in Tamilnadu too in recent times due to the challenges the Muslim community faces from the RSS and Hinduthwa forces. But,

Tamilnadu Muslims have not rejected the label of *Islaamiyat Tamilar* (Islamic Tamils) so far.

A Sri Lankan Muslim feels uncomfortable when he hears a respectable Tamilnadu Muslim calling himself a Tamil in a public meeting. Similarly, for Tamil speaking Hindus and Muslims in Tamilnadu, it is very difficult to understand the conflict between Tamils and Muslims in Sri Lanka, because they knew only of Hindu-Muslim conflicts. In Tamilnadu the contrast is between Hindus and Muslims, which is clearly based on religion. But in the Sri Lankan context, the contrast is between Tamils and Muslims or Sinhalese and Muslims. This contrast is not between the same categories of religion as in Hindus and Muslims or of language as in Sinhala and Tamil but between two different categories of language and religion. This clearly shows that the ethnicity of Sri Lankan Muslims is not defined by language as in the case of Sinhalese and Tamils but by religion⁴. That is why Sri Lankan Muslims have been giving more importance to their religion than to their language.

Historical Background of Ethnicity Formation

What are the factors that motivated Muslims to seek separate ethnic identity based on their religion-Islam instead of their language-Tamil?

To answer this question we have to trace the historical context of ethnicity formation among the Sri Lankan Communities.

Sri Lankan Muslims have co-existed and interacted harmoniously with other major ethnic communities in this country for centuries from the medieval period to the modern era until the end of 19th century. Until then the Muslims of Sri Lanka were merely a cultural and business community without a politically motivated separate ethnic identity. There was room for cultural assimilation to some degree, and they shared several significant cultural features with other communities.

⁴ Prof. S. Sivasegaram brought to my notice the Muslim community in Bosnia, as a parallel to this and the fact that Yugoslavia had recognized Muslims as a nationality.

The social transformation from the feudal system to mercantile capitalism that gradually took place during the 19th and early 20th centuries, the introduction of the British educational and political systems, and the consequent competition for economic and political power between the different social groups contributed heavily to the polarization of Sri Lankan society along ethnic lines. In the post independence period we witnessed a virtual ethnic segregation propelled by the emergence of ethno-nationalisms and the on-going ethnic war. The development of ethnic identity among Sri Lankan Muslims should be understood from this historical perspective. The resurgence of Islam as a political power at the global level from the middle of the 20th century has also been a contributing external factor in this respect.

Muslims, a scattered minority in the ethnically tense Sri Lanka, have been more vulnerable to the emerging Sinhala and Tamil ethno-nationalisms and domination in the South and North-East respectively and they have had experiences of ethnic violence levelled against them in the past and the present history of this country. This has led to the development of a sense of insecurity in the psyche of Muslims and has motivated them to seek a consolidated ethnic identity based on Islam.

As Paul Brass (1991:25) has pointed out,

“ethnic communities are created and transformed by particular elites in modernizing and post industrial societies undergoing dramatic social change. This process invariably involves competition and conflict for political power, economic benefits, and social status between competing elite, class and leadership groups both within and among different ethnic categories.”

As I mentioned earlier, Sri Lankan Muslims were merely a silent cultural community until the beginning of the modern era, which is marked by the semi-capitalist transformation of the Sri Lankan society which had been taking place during the 19th century under British rule.

The underdeveloped new colonial economy that replaced the older, somewhat self-reliant social system was not capable of adequately catering to the needs of the newly emerged social classes, and this inevitably led to the different communities competing with each other for their economic prosperity on communal or ethnic lines.

Although, the Sri Lankan Muslims were a closed and traditional society and were comparatively backward in economy and modern education, there was a tiny elit group which included the affluent mercantile class and the emerging educated middle class centred mainly around Colombo and Kandy⁵. It was this elitist group which was ethnically sensitive and politically motivated and led their community into the modern era through its revivalist activities. The Turkish, Egyptian and Indian Islamic revivalist and political movements of that time were the sources of inspiration to them. This period can be considered the first phase of the development of ethnic identity coupled with religious consciousness among Sri Lankan Muslims. Like their Christian, Buddhist and Hindu counterparts, the Muslim elite too used journalism as a powerful instrument to create ethnic awareness among the community. About 15 journals and newspapers were published by the Muslims during the late 19th and early 20th century in Tamil and English and also in *Arabic Tamil*⁶. These journals played a major role in formulating a religiously oriented ethnic ideology of Sri Lankan Muslims.

Ethnic consciousness developed among Muslims mainly in response to the Sinhala and Tamil hostilities towards them during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This was mainly because of competition in trade and commerce in the urban areas.

The Sinhala elite felt that the ‘alien’ Muslims and other foreigners were dominating the external and internal trade, and

⁵ For more details on the emergence of Muslim mercantile class see: Kumari Jayawardena (2000:220-230).

⁶ *Arabic Tamil*— a variety of Tamil written in Arabic script exclusively used by the Tamil speaking Muslims in South India and Sri Lanka.

because of this the Sinhalese-the sons of the soil- were in a disadvantageous position. In 1915, just before the communal riots against Muslims began, Anagarika Dharmapala the veteran Buddhist revivalist leader wrote this:

The Mohammeden, an alien people by Shylockian method, became prosperous like the Jews. The Sinhalese sons of soil, whose ancestors for 2358 years had shed rivers of blood to keep the country free from alien invaders.... are in the eyes of the British only vagabonds... The alien South Indian Mohammeden comes to Ceylon, sees the neglected villager without any experience in trade... and the result is that the Mohammedan thrives and the son of the soil goes to the wall. (Kumari Jayawardena 1990:24).

This animosity due to the competition in the economy was the main reason for the anti-Muslim riots in 1915. This was the first largest communal violence in modern Sri Lanka.

Muslims were severely affected by the riots. The British rulers imposed martial law to suppress the riots and arrested several Sinhala Buddhist leaders who were supposed to have had a hand in the riots. The government's reaction to the riots was criticized by Buddhists as well as by Tamil leaders especially by Ponnambalam Ramanathan, a Tamil aristocrat and a long time member of the Legislative Council. Ramanathan (1916) in his book on the riots severely criticizes the government for victimizing the Sinhalese while giving more importance to the losses suffered by the Muslims and in the very first sentence of the book he tries to put the blame on the Muslims. According to Ramanathan (1916:1) "The intolerance and aggressiveness of a small section of the Mohammedans known to the Sinhalese as "Hambayas" (boatmen), and their insistence of the Sinhalese Buddhists passing in silence before their mosques in Gampola and Kandy, were the earliest of the causes of the resent riots." Ramanathan also persuaded the British rulers to release the

Sinhalese leaders and in turn the members of the Sinhalese elite celebrated the event and pulled the cart on which Ramanathan was seated through Colombo streets⁷. Understandably, these events made the Muslim elite feel helpless and alienated from the two major competing communities and to rely on themselves for their political future. The anti-Muslim sentiment of the Sinhalese elite and the 1915 riots and the behaviour of the Tamil leadership had a lasting impact in consolidating the Moor/Muslim identity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Disowning Linguistic Identity

There was a strong political motivation for disowning linguistic identity by the Muslim elite in the late 19th century and after. Since Muslims were emerging as a politically conscious minority, they had to safeguard their socio-political interests also from the Tamils who were not only numerically the largest, but also socially a powerful minority in this country. This fact led the Muslim elite to seek a strong separate identity for themselves, which could totally differentiate them from the Tamils apart from the fact that Muslims were also linguistically Tamils.

This was evident in the famous debate between Ponnambalam Ramanathan and the Muslim elite in the late 1880s and after. In 1880s there was a demand by the Muslim elite to appoint their representative to the Legislative Council on a racial basis and the government was seriously considering it. This was the time Mr. Ramanathan strongly argued that the Moors were not a distinct race but they were also Tamils by language and blood. He was insidiously implying that Muslims did not need a separate representation in the Council.

In 1885 in a Legislative Council debate on the Muslim Marriage Registration ordinance, Mr. Ramanathan stated his idea that the Muslims were ethnologically Tamils though they followed a

⁷ The author remembers a huge oil painting of this incident hanging on the wall of the Ramanathan Hall at the University of Jaffna.

different religion, and later he substantiated his thesis in a paper he read at the Royal Asiatic Society (Ceylon Branch) in 1888. The title of his paper was '*On the Ethnology of the Moors of Ceylon.*' It was published in the journal of the society in the same year.

In his paper, Ramanathan (1888:28) described the Moors as "Petty traders, peddlers, boutique keepers, boatmen, fishermen, agriculturists and coolies," and he carefully excluded the affluent upper class elite of the Moor community. And refuting the claim of Arab origins he went on to say that:

"I have shown the utter worthlessness of a tradition among them that a great colony of Arabs of the house of Hashim made settlements at Beruwala and other parts of the island, and have adduced reasons for accepting as far more probable the tradition reported by Mr. Casie Chetty, that the original ancestors of Ceylon Moors formed their first settlement at Kayal Paddanam, and that many years afterwards a colony from that town - the fatherland of Chonagar - migrated and settled at Beruwala" (p.28).

He also tried to ridicule the first Muslim settlers at Beruwala as follows:

We may also safely conclude that this colony was an offshoot of Kayal Paddanam, and that the emigrants consisted largely of a rough and ready set of bold Tamil converts, determined to make themselves comfortable by methods usual among unscrupulous adventurers. Having clean shaven heads, and straggling beards, wearing a costume which was not wholly Tamil nor yet Arabic or African even in part, speaking a low Tamil interlarded with Arabic expressions; slaughtering cattle with their own hands and eating them; given to predatory habits, and practicing after their own fashion

the rights and the Moha nmedan faith; - they must indeed have struck the Sinhalese at first as strange peoples deserving of the epithet 'barbarians' (p.22).

Ramanathan logically argue. the linguistic evidence for Tamil affinity of Ceylon Moors. He says:

The Arab exiles were, or were not accompanied by their wives and daughters. If they were so accompanied and settled with them in purely Sinhalese districts like Kalutara and Galle, why did they abandon both the Arabic and Sinhalese and take to the Tamil? Or, if they came to Ceylon without their women and took Sinhalese wives, why has the same survival of the Tamil language occurred?

And he arrives at the conclusion that "the early ancestors of the Moors, Ceylon and Coast, were mainly Tamils on the father's side as admittedly they are exclusively on the mother's side" (p.28).

Finally Ramanathan states that "taking (1) the language they speak at home in connection with, (2) their history, (3) their custom and (4) physical features, the proof cumulatively leads to no other conclusion than that the Moors of Ceylon are ethnologically Tamils" (p. 29).

Ramanathan considered language the important marker of a race and he stated that "Language in Oriental countries is considered the most important part of nationality, outweighing differences of religion, institution and physical characteristics. Otherwise each caste would pass for a race" (p.29).

Ramanathan's thesis was rejected by the Muslim elite and they reacted to it angrily. They thought that it was a plot to prevent their separate representation in an expanded Legislative Council in the future.

Several Muslims, including Siddi Lebbey expressed their views on the debate. Siddi Lebbey wrote a series of articles on the history

of Ceylon Muslims in his paper *Muslim Nesan* from September 1885. The Muslim views got a comprehensive form with the publication of *A criticisms of Mr. Ramanathan's Ethnology of the Moors of Ceylon* later in 1907 by I.L.M. Abdul Azeez, a disciple of Siddi Lebbey and a Muslim ideologue who formed the Moor union in 1900 and was also its founding president.

Commenting on Ramanathan's motivation Azeez (1957:2) says that,

His object in calling the Moors Tamils in race was to dissuade the government from appointing a Moorish member in Council, it having leaked out then that Government were contemplating to appoint such a one, and to make them understand that there was no necessity for taking such a step, as Moors did not form a distinct race... Mr. Ramanathan approached the subject of his paper with a prejudiced mind. (p.2)

Commenting on Ramanathan's description of Ceylon Moors, Azeez says:

Mr. Ramanathan has thought it is sufficient to refer to the Moors as petty traders, peddlers, boutique keepers, boat men, fishermen, agriculturists and coolies, but I think, had he been a little candid, he would have said that they included wholesale merchants, large shop keepers, planters, and wealthy landed proprietors, and in point of wealth, they were only next to the Sinhalese among the native races of the Island. In the matter of their influence and position Mr. Ramanathan has not done justice to the Moors (p.3).

It is very clear now that both Mr. Ramanathan and Abdul Azeez were expressing the competing elitists' sentiment for social status and political power.

While insisting on the Arab origin of the Moors, Azeez also admits that they had a Tamil connection. He says that, of these Arab settlers some had their Arabian wives with them and others converted and married Tamil women, that the Arabs came in contact with. The entire cessation of intercourse with their own country, made the Arabs adapt themselves to their surroundings, and they gradually adopted the language, customs, habits and manners of the people (Tamils) amongst whom they had settled. (p. ii)

Here we cannot see much difference between the claims of Ramanathan and Azeez. Both accept the mixed origin of the Muslims. But Ramanathan gives much importance to matrilineal decent while Azeez gives much importance to patrilineal descent. Azeez couldn't reject Ramanathan's logical argument for the linguistic evidence of Moors' ethnology. However, his counter argument is interesting. I quote from Azeez:

I see the force of his (Ramanathan's) argument, that the language spoken by Moors is an exponent of their nationality because, though diversities of creed, custom, and facial features prevail among the low-country and Kandian Sinhalese, and among the Tamils of high caste and low caste, yet they pass respectively as Sinhalese and Tamils for reason that they speak as their mother tongue those languages. But what he has to consider, in the case of Moors, is whether they speak Tamil as their own national language as Tamils and Sinhalese do their respective languages, or as a borrowed one and whether there is possibility of one race borrowing the language of another, and continuing to use it forgetting its own. Among the Vellala and Paraya caste Tamils, and among the Kandian and low country Sinhalese there is no class claiming foreign descent, hence the test of language can be applied to their cases without any paucity; but as the Moors are making such a claim not for years nor decades, but for centuries, one need pause before applying the same test to their case too. (p.11)

Here, Azeez admits that the Muslims also speak Tamil, but what he wanted to emphasize that, it is not their inherently native language but merely a borrowed one and the language test cannot be applied to them in determining their racial origin or ethnicity. And Azeez goes on to say that "Though there is nothing humiliating in being Tamil in race, the persistent attempt of that gentleman (Ramanathan) in attributing to the Moors an origin which they do not claim in spite of their assertion, to the contrary, is annoying if not offending" (p. i). However, after a lengthy discussion Azeez concludes that "neither the language spoken by the Ceylon Moors, nor their history, social custom & physical features have singly or cumulatively proved that they are ethnologically Tamils" (p.48).

Whatever fallacy one can find in this argument, it is very clear that the Muslim elite did not want to be identified as Tamil even though they speak Tamil as their primary language, because of some obvious socio-political reasons.

As I said earlier, ethnic identity is not given by others or inherently natural to a community but it is constructed by the community for itself to fulfill its socio-economic and political needs in given historical and socio-political conditions. The Sri Lankan Muslim community rejected Tamil identity because they wanted to differentiate themselves from the Tamils to safeguard their own economic and political interests.

Unfortunately the Tamil political leadership did not recognize this fact then and now. In the contemporary Sri Lankan political context the Tamil separatist movements especially the LTTE repeats the Ramanathan thesis to include the Muslims under their political umbrella and try to call them as *Islaamiyat Tamilar*. After more than a hundred years of consolidated Muslim identity no Muslim accepts this claim. During the period from 1950s to early 1970s the Federal Party and the TULF under the leadership of S.J.V. Chelvanayagam were using rather an ethnically neutral term *Thamil Peesum Makkal* (Tamil speaking People) to include the Muslims too under their political leadership. Sri Lankan Muslims, especially the North East Muslims, did not see anything wrong in this category, and at least a

considerable section of the North-East Muslims participated in politics under their leadership; since the term *Tamil speaking people* as a linguistic category includes the Muslims, but, the term *Tamils* as an ethnic category excludes the Muslims.

Institutionalizing Muslim Identity

As we have seen so far, a strong foundation was laid for a separate Muslim identity during the pre-independence period in Sri Lanka. The under-developed colonial economy, the emergence of new social classes, and the introduction of communal representation in political organizations were the major factors contributing to this development

The post-independent period can be considered the 2nd phase of the development of Muslim identity in this country. Muslim identity consciousness was deepened and institutionalized throughout this period. Two eminent political leaders, Sir Razik Fareed in the 1940s and 1950s and Baddudeen Mahmood in the 1960s and 70s made significant contribution to institutionalize the Muslim identity in Sri Lanka.

By institutionalization I mean organizing separate social institutions in the public sector exclusively for Muslims, and legitimizing some of the Muslim interests. The first such institutions were set up in the field of education. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries following the Christian missionaries, the Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim revivalists established separate schools for the benefit of their community. Those are private organizations but now in Sri Lanka we have three categories of Govt. schools namely Sinhalese schools, Tamil schools and Muslim schools. The first two categories are in principle medium wise categories, but in practice they are also ethnic categories. The Muslim schools are exclusively an ethnic category although the medium of instruction is Tamil in these schools. I don't think there is a legal provision for this categorization. But I understand that there is a circular issued by the ministry of education for this purpose. According to this circular

(if I am correct) if a particular school consists of more than 50% of the students belonging to a particular ethnic group, that school come under the category of that group. The principal and the majority of the teachers should be from that group. This provision was especially made for establishing *Muslim schools* under the pressure of the Muslim elite especially by Razik Fareed in the 1940s and 50s, mainly to promote Muslim education and to accommodate the increasing number of Muslim teachers. W. Dahanayake, the then Minister of Education, did much for Muslims in this respect in order to satisfy the Muslim political leaders in the late 1950s.

Earlier, mostly Tamil teachers were teaching in the Muslim dominated areas too. Most of the older generation of Muslims was taught by them. Gradually the Tamil teachers were replaced by Muslim teachers in the Muslim schools. All the Government schools follow a common curriculum except for a few subjects like language and religion. However Muslim schools follow a separate calendar to accommodate special Ramzan vacation.

Two Muslim Teachers Training colleges were also established; one at Addalaichchenai (for males) another at Aluthgama (for female) in the 1940s. At the beginning, the Addalaichchenai Training College was meant for both Tamils and Muslims but after a few years, a separate training college was established for Tamils in Puttimaloa. One of the reasons for this I was told, was that, there was a controversy over providing meat for lunch on Fridays. The Hindu Tamils do not eat meat on Fridays but Muslims prefer meat especially on Fridays. It is evidence of cultural intolerance between these groups.

Another kind of educational institution which was set up on ethnic lines is colleges of Education. When Tamil medium Colleges of Education were proposed to be established in the 1990s automatically two were allocated exclusively for Muslims one at Addalaichchenai and another at Aluthgama. On principle there is no ethnically based university system in Sri Lanka. All the Universities are supposed to be national Universities. However, in practice the University of Jaffna and the Eastern University are exclusively for Tamils. South Eastern University for Muslims and the other

universities except Peradeniya are mainly for Sinhalese. Peradeniya still maintains the multi ethnic character of the country. Thus, institutionalization of ethnicity is prominently visible in the field of education.

Another area of institutionalization of Muslim identity is personal law. "The Mohammedan Code of 1806 marks the beginning of a complementary and integral system of legislation that has had significant implication for Sri Lankan Muslims" (MWRAF, 1999:23). Originally this code applied to the Muslims in Colombo only, but was later extended to cover the whole Island (by the Section of ordinance no 5 of 1852). From the 1920s Muslim elites expressed their dissatisfaction with the code of 1806 as a repository of their laws. M.T. Akbar (later Justice Akbar) was one of the foremost critics of the code (Goonesekere, 2000:6). Up to the 1920s the Mohammedan code of 1806 was administered in the ordinary civil courts. In 1925 the leaders of the Muslim community agitated against a divorce case and the Mohammedan Code of 1806 was replaced by a new Muslim Marriage and Divorce Registration Ordinance in 1929. Under this ordinance separate Quazi Courts were set up exclusively to deal with matrimonial disputes in the Muslim Community. The 1929 ordinance was repealed by the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act of 1951. "Quazi courts were now given exclusive jurisdiction to handle all matters pertaining to marriage and divorce. Section 98 specifically mentions that "The status and the mutual rights and obligations of the parties shall be determined according to Muslim law governing the sect to which the parties belong". The jurisdiction of the district courts was thus removed totally and transferred to the Quazi courts (MWRAF, 1999:23-26). According to Savitri Goonesekere (2000:9) "the introduction of special Quazi Courts was a unique development in the Sri Lankan legal system, since all other indigenous or customary laws were applied in the ordinary civil courts".

The Muslim elite also succeeded in setting up Government institutions to look after the maintenance of Mosques and charitable trusts from the 1930s. *Muslim Intestate Succession and Wakes Ordinance*

of 1931 was in operation till the mid 1950s. It was replaced by the *Muslim Mosques and Charitable Trusts or Wakfs Act of 1956*. Under this Act a separate Government department with an executive Wakf Board was established.

Muslim identity was institutionally recognized also in the Government owned electronic media. A Muslim unit was set up in the SLBC nearly 40 years ago. They broadcast a separate Muslim Service exclusively for Muslim affairs. There is also a tiny Muslim Unit at the SLRC, which telecasts weekly Muslim programs. These electronic media promote ethnic and religious awareness among Sri Lankan Muslims. Although, there is no strong print media owned by Sri Lankan Muslims as in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a few tabloids and little magazines are published with a limited circulation and they are ethnically and religiously very sensitive.

Apart from these institutions, numerous social and cultural organizations and NGOs have been moulding and activating Muslim identity in Sri Lanka for the last several decades.

Eastern Sector: A New Phase of Muslim Identity

The 1980s marked the 3rd phase of the development of Muslim Identity in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan Muslim political leadership had its base mainly in the Western province for a long time because the Muslim mercantile class and the educated elites were centered around that province. Although nearly 25% of the total Muslim population of this country is concentrated in the East, and they are an economically strong majority in the Ampara district, they did not seek a strong ethnic identity and separate political leadership till the 1930s because their socio-political situation did not demand such a development. They were mostly engaged in agriculture, fishing and petty trades. They did not enter into the modern education system nor produce an educated middle class elite. They had a cordial relationship with the Tamils, the other major ethnic community of

that area and did not face any severe competition in economical or political matters from them.

However, with the introduction of the universal franchise in 1931 under the Donoughmore constitution the situation had been gradually changing. The Eastern Muslims too were becoming more and more ethnically conscious, and gradually entering into the modern education system and politics. The formation of Kalmunai District Muslim Association in 1936 was an outcome of this consciousness. The following four objectives of this Association show their collective identity consciousness (Nuhman, 1997).

- The unity of the Muslims of the region for their political victory.
- Their economic advancement.
- Modern education for Muslim men and women.
- Employment opportunity for the Muslims in the government sector.

During the post-independence period the Eastern Muslims seriously engaged in political battles for seats in parliament. Political opportunism, scarcity of land, and economic competition created a mood of suspicion and hostility between Muslims and Tamil in the region and led to some violent clashes in the 1950s and 60s. Later developments resulted in the significant ethnic segregation of these communities.

With the introduction of standardization for university entrance and a special quota for the backward district in 1974, the Eastern province youths both Tamils and Muslims were greatly benefited while the Jaffna Tamil youth were badly affected. The introduction of this system paved the way for better opportunities in higher education for Muslims and created a new professional class and an educated elite among them. They are the more ethnically sensitive and opinion making social groups. These groups were the base for the new Muslim political leadership in the East and they formed a Muslim political party, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) in 1980.

The need for a separate political party was felt even two decades before in the East, especially in the Ampara District. The All Ceylon Islamic United front was formed in 1960 by Mr. M. S. Kariyappar, a popular Muslim politician of that time, for his immediate political benefit, but the party did not succeed because there was no strong social base as such at that time. But in the 1980s the situation was entirely different.

The development of Tamil militancy in the North and East and their hostile attitude towards Muslims since 1985 created a strong feeling of insecurity among Muslims, and intensified their ethnic sentiment. The S.L.M.C under the leadership of the late M.H.M Ashraf sparked off this sentiment by its verbal militancy with religious colouring and became a major political force in the East, especially in the Ampara district. The SLMC almost monopolized Muslim politics in the East after the first Provincial Council election held in 1987. This had a severe repercussive effect on the Muslims. The LTTE started its ethnic cleansing campaign in 1990. The entire Muslim population, around seventy thousand, were forcibly evacuated from the North and several hundreds were massacred in the East. After a short period of lull, the ethnic tension has been reactivated in the East after the MOU. Now the LTTE monopolizes Tamil politics in the North and East and has become the sole representative of the Tamils. The only resistance they face is from the Eastern Muslims and the LTTE does not seem to be ready to share political power with anyone in the North and East. Now the East is more vulnerable to become a Gujarat in the future, if there is no amicable settlement to the ethnic problem. This was evident in the post MOU violence (August 2002) against Muslims in Mutur and Valaichchenai.

The Muslim community, had to face challenges for survival also in the Sinhala dominated South during the last two decades. There were acts of violence against Muslims in many places in the South. Twenty such incidents were recorded during the last six years only. In Mawanella, the violence was very severe. The main reason I think is business competition. Still in several Sinhala urban areas,

Muslims are the main competitors to the Sinhala traders ranging from small boutique keepers to large shop owners.

There was also an SLMC factor in recent times. The SLMC has become an important political force even in the South due to the numerical weakness of the major political parties in the parliament. The SLMC too has tried to capitalize on this political opportunity. Consequently it had a repercussive effect on the Muslims, although they mainly support the major national political parties in the South.

Since Muslims are in a more vulnerable position caught between the two opposing strong ethnic majorities in this country, they have also become more and more assertive of their separate identity based on religion and culture. Because of this, there has been a growing tendency among the Muslim community towards fundamentalism and cultural purism throughout modern history, especially after independence. The worldwide resurgence of Islamism as a resistance ideology against Western domination during the last few decades is also a supportive external factor to this development.

Towards Cultural Purification

In this final section of my paper I will try to give a brief account of the development of religious awareness or fundamentalism among Muslims and its impact on the society. Since religion is the primary marker of the Muslim ethnicity, Islam has become the fundamental base for Muslim existence, as language is for the Tamils. Without Islam, there is no Muslim. Hence, Islam is everything for a Muslim. This is deeply rooted in the Muslim psyche. As Paul Brass (1991:22) pointed out,

“the subjective meanings of symbols of identity are intensified and become more relational (interpersonal) than personal or instrumental. Language becomes not merely a means of communication, but a priceless heritage of group culture; religion becomes not only a matter of personal belief and of a relationship between

a person and a deity, but a collective experience that unites believers to each other, familiar places and historical sites become sacred shrines and 'freedom trails.'"

In the late 19th century the Muslim elite felt that religious awareness and spiritual development were necessary for the social mobility of the Muslims in Sri Lanka. Until the mid 20th century, Sri Lankan Muslims mostly depended on South India for their traditional religious education and they had to go to Keelakkarai or Kayalpattinam to be trained in Islamic theology and scholarship, and to become *Ulammas* (religious leaders). However an Arabic college was established in Sri Lanka in 1884 at Weligama to train Sri Lankan Muslims in Islamic scholarship. Subsequently several Arabic Colleges were established in Galle (1892) Kinniya (1899), Maharagama (1913) and Matara (1915) and hundreds of *Alims* were produced by these colleges. They were responsible for preaching Islam and for developing religious consciousness among Muslims before independence. After independence, the numbers of Arabic colleges gradually increased and at present there are 125 registered Arabic colleges functioning island-wide including 13 colleges for women. This is one indication of the development of religious awareness among Muslims.

Most of the revivalist leaders of the late 19th Century were also responsible for the development of religious awareness among Muslims. They thought that Islam should be the foundation for any modernization process. They wanted to modernize their society based on Islamic principles. Siddi Lebbey was a good example of this. He wrote several articles and books on Islam and Spiritualism. His book '*Asrarul Alam*' deals entirely with Islamic spiritualism. He also published a journal *Gnanatheepam* (the light of wisdom) dedicated to religious affairs in 1882. His journal 'Muslim Nesan' tried to politicize the Muslim community while his *Gnanatheepam* and other religious writings tried to give it a spiritual foundation.

He published a novel *Asanbey Sarittiram* (the story of Asanbey), the first Tamil novel from Sri Lanka in 1885. He interestingly depicts his ideas on modernization and Islamization in this novel. The hero Hassan of the novel is an ideal Muslim youth who falls in love with a British upper class modern Christian girl and marries her after she is converted to Islam overcoming a chain of difficulties. That Siddi Lebbey couldn't find a local heroine suitable to his hero is an interesting fact. This novel can be interpreted as a marriage between Islam and the West. Siddi Lebbey rejects both conservative or traditional Islam and total Westernization. He wanted modernization through Islamization. This could be seen as a progressive ideology of his time.

The beginning of the post-independence period also marks the second phase of the development of Islamic awareness among Sri Lankan Muslims. Two important Islamic organizations were established in this country in the mid 1950s. They are *Jamaate Islami* and the *Tableq Jamaat*. Both the movements are inherently anti-Western and ideologically conservative in different degrees and ideologically opponents in religious affairs. Apart from these two, several other religious organizations function within the community. Some of them get funds from Muslim countries like Iran, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to promote the Islamic faith.

The impact of these organizations on the process of Islamization of Sri Lankan Muslims is great. They played a very significant role in the development of religious awareness and in deepening the ethnic consciousness and in almost creating a visible cultural homogeneity among the Muslim community during the last few decades although there are serious ideological differences between them.

The process of Islamization is visible in the extensively increasing number of mosque goers during the past few decades and also in the increased number of mosques in the rural as well as in the urban areas. It is also visible in the renovation and expansion of mosques almost in all cities and in many villages in order to accommodate more people who go to pray especially for the Friday prayers.

The development of religious and ethnic consciousness led the Muslims to seek a separate cultural identity based on what they think are the fundamentals of Islam, and to establish themselves as a distinct ethnic community in order to differentiate themselves from the other ethnic groups. They use the dress as one of the cultural markers. Most of the religiously sensitive men wear a white lace cap as their ethnic symbol. Many of them also grow beards. Members of some religious movements wear a long loose *Kurta* instead of shirts. Muslim women did not observe *purdah* or *hijab* (the head cover) till the 1980s. Traditionally they covered their heads with the headpiece of their sarees. The educated and employed Muslim women did not observe even this practice. But, after 1980 the *hijab* was imposed on all the Muslim women in Sri Lanka, and has become the school uniform for Muslim girls in all the Muslim schools. The white lace cap has become a part of the school uniform for Muslim boys. Due to the process of Islamization, the question of whether a cultural practice is Islamic or un-Islamic became very important and was seriously discussed and sometimes provoked violence between various religious groups and even individuals. Various sects and groups have developed their own interpretation of Islam and sincerely believed and tried to prove that only their interpretation is truly Islamic and to impose it in practice upon others. We may call this a tendency towards cultural purification.

Most of the traditional and folk cultural practices, such as folk theatre, folk religious rites and rituals, marriage customs, have been considered un-Islamic and been gradually eliminated or curtailed or become unpopular.

Although the tendency of cultural purification appears to have homogenized the Muslim community, I think it is only in appearance and only in certain aspects of religious culture. Diversity in the socio-political interests among the Muslim community at regional level is more prominent while the ideological diversity among religious groups is even deeper. Religious identity has not eliminated the political diversity among Muslims. The continuing confrontation within the SLMC and between SLMC and the Southern Muslim Leadership illustrates the point.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we can say that Muslim identity is a reactive politico-cultural ideology that has been constructed and developed in relation to and as a response to Sinhala and Tamil ethno-nationalistic ideologies. Sri Lankan Muslims are basically a heterogeneous community like other ethnic communities, although there is a growing homogenizing tendency within the community motivated by prevailing socio-political conditions of the country.

The ideology of ethnic identity has its roots in particular socio-political conditions, local as well as global, that activate and intensify ethnic tension in a plural society. Ethnic tension can be neutralized only through a political process, which would grant equal and democratic rights to each community to enable them to develop independently with mutual interaction. It is a precondition for social integration and ethnic harmony.

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