

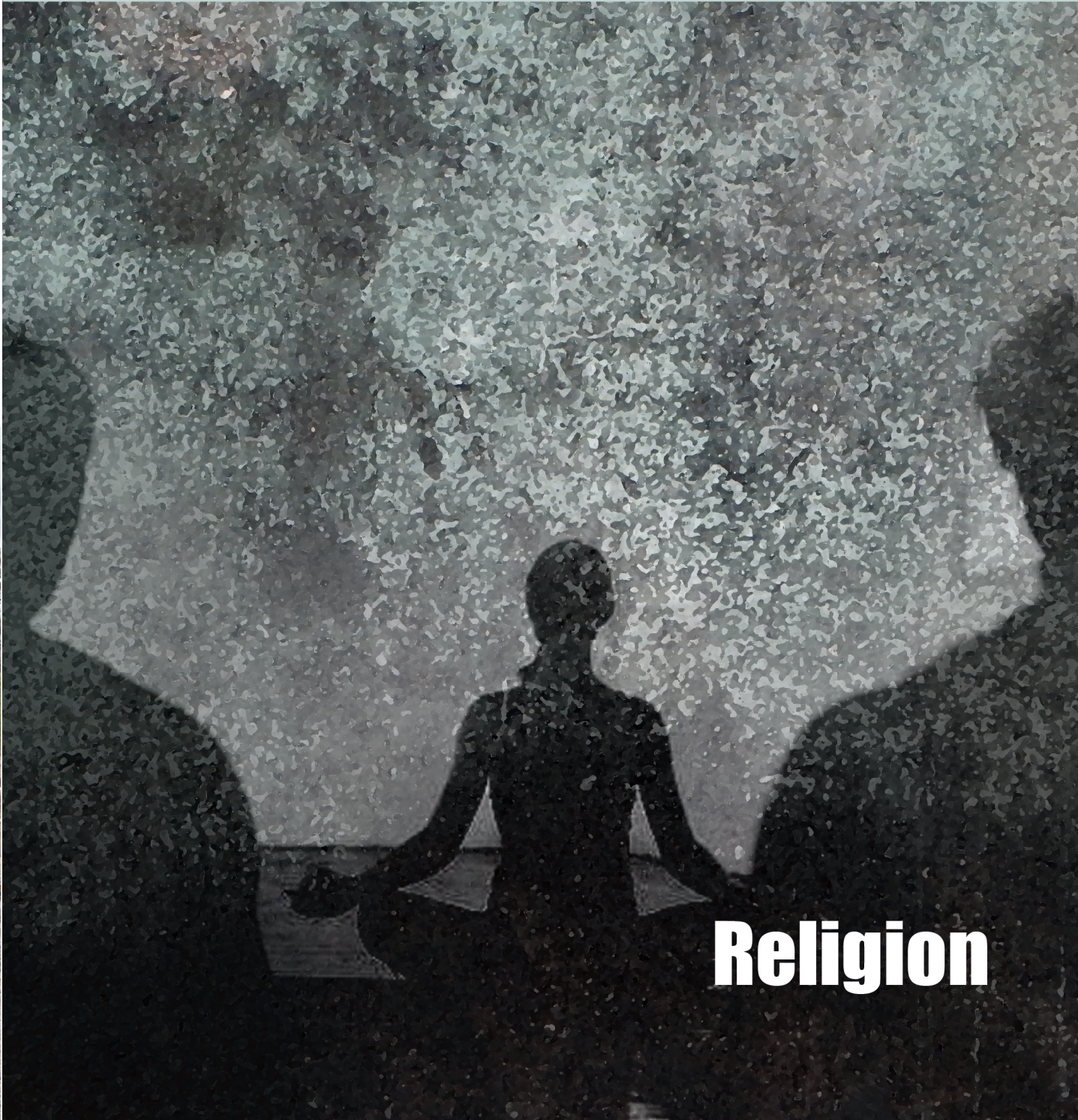
OPTIONS

49.

SRI LANKA | JULY - DECEMBER 2014

PHOTO ESSAY | PORTRAITS
POETRY | PROSE | ESSAYS
ARTS | LIFESTYLES | POLITICS

choice is power



Religion

think FEEL
consider
decide
BELIEVE ACT



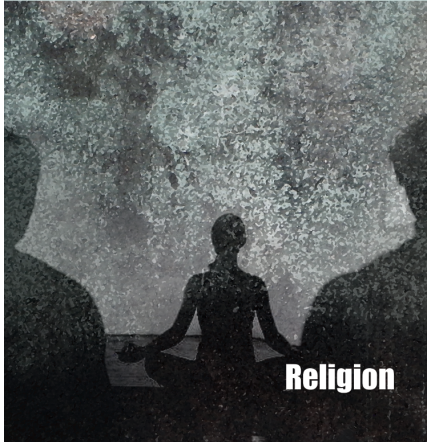
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THINK . FEEL . CONSIDER . DECIDE . BELIEVE . ACT

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This quarter's Options blog on Women and Religion was prepared in the months following the June 15th and 16th "troubles" in the southern part of the island where Muslim homes and businesses were attacked by mobs identifying themselves as Buddhist (and finalized nearly a year later). June 2014 featured the worst anti Muslim violence the country has suffered in decades. Known today simply as "Aluthgama," during the two days of violence, mobs attacked Muslim homes in Aluthgama, Dharga town, Welipanna and parts of Beruwela. Areas of Thunduwa and Mathugama were also badly affected. In Dharga town there were several Sinhala houses too that were damaged.

The pieces in this blog are a response to Aluthgama at a variety of levels. Avanka Fernando's poem explores her personal connection to the area. Chulani Kodikara's piece although written before Aluthgama – is very relevant to the incident since it looks at the Sinhala Buddhist ethnoreligious nationalism as it has impacted state policy on women. As Kodikara rightly points out this version of Sinhala nationalism not only marginalizes minority religions, it also has a specific project in mind for all women that is a rolling back of a host of positive and progressive reforms for which Sri Lanka has been celebrated for many years. Kodikara's important contribution draws attention to the fact that the very male, monk driven ethnoreligious nationalism that Sri Lanka experienced "othered" not just the country's religious minorities but also all of its women. Anushka Kahandagama looks at the manner in which ethnoreligious nationalism targets women by discussing the monk-led Bodu Bala Sena organisation's preoccupation with Muslim women's dress. Kahandagama states that both the Muslim community and Sinhala Buddhist extremism see Muslim women as embodying religious identity, and both groups—one by endorsing the actions of Muslim women who practice this form of dress, and the other by critiquing this dress as a security threat – recognize the power of the symbolism. The BBS in fact mobilized against it as part of its strategy to disparage the entire Muslim community.

Haniffa's article draws attention to the minimal response by local human rights and civil society groups to the anti Muslim sentiment that was rampant in Sri Lanka over the past few years. Haniffa names the problem as the human rights community's difficulty in accurately understanding who and what the Muslims are, and the ideologically "correct" position to take with regards to the obvious changes that have occurred within the several Muslim communities in the island over the past several decades. In response Haniffa posits some ideas regarding the troubling question of Muslim women and Islamic dress. Describing the now thirty year old preoccupation with Islamic dress as emerging due to the success of piety movements among the Sri Lankan Muslims, Haniffa draws attention to the manner in which both men and women within the Muslim community transformed themselves through recourse to piety. Haniffa argues finally that any analysis of the issue of Islamic dress must be carried out taking in to account problematic gender relations that prevail in the country as a whole as well as the manner in which Muslim communities are affected by the experience of being a minority in the Sri Lankan context.

The writing by Asha Abeysekere and Tharindi Udalgama looks at personal religiosity as it impacts on everyday lives. Abeysekere explores what religious experiences are constituted by and constitutive of and concludes that both identity and spirituality are not necessarily states of being that lend themselves to “tolerance.” Abeysekere reminds us that what is termed “spirituality” can actually be achieved in collective action of various kinds including war. Udalgama explores the manner in which spirituality plays a part in the manner in which women are socialized in to choosing life partners and committing to marriages.

Unnathi Samaraweera's piece asks the difficult but perennial question as to why women's bodies continue to be considered unclean and denied access to sacred spaces. Samaraweera looks specifically at how women are denied access to the area surrounding the Shree Maha Bodhiya in Anuradhapura in case they might be menstruating. Retelling the stories about the transportation of the sapling from which the sacred Shree Maha Bodhiya was grown—at the hand of the Sanghamitta Theri—and the fact that the tooth relic was transported in to Sri Lanka in the hair of princess Hemamala, Samaraweera looks at how despite the woman's body being acceptable in narratives of bringing the relics to Sri Lanka, women's bodies remain “unclean” in cities of everyday religiosity.

Our final piece in the collection this time is the fact-finding mission to Aluthgama carried out by the Women's Action Network. This piece that has been in circulation without reference to the organization originating it was one of the first independent accounts of the violence of mid June. It calls attention to the fact of Police inaction and that women were among those that struggled to repel the attackers from Muslim homes and businesses.

In addition to the collection of essays and the report, we are also privileged to have three more wonderful artistic contributions: Vivimarie VanderPoorten's poem, Annunciation, Shani Jayawardene's photo essay on the worship of the goddess Kannaki-Pattini and Nayanahari Abeynayake's images of Aluthgama after the violence of June 2015.

One year later rebuilding has happened in Aluthgama. The state has restored affected buildings and completely rebuilt some. Community groups have purchased furniture for the rebuilt houses. The affected communities are attempting to move on with their lives. Relations between the Sinhala and Muslim communities in the affected areas remain strained. The impartial investigation that was promised, and measures to bring the perpetrators to justice remain unfulfilled and incomplete. One year after the event no one is talking about Aluthgama anymore. Muslims, however, continue to live in fear that despite *yahapalanaya* and the undoubted improvements to ethnic relations and general democratization that the current regime has brought about the anti Muslim sentiment lies dormant and may again emerge.

Dr. Farzana Haniffa

Religion and the Female body

“No woman can call herself free who does not control her own body.”

— Margaret Sanger

Sri Lanka experienced its' most recent communal violence in June 2014 in the *Aluthgama* and *Beruwala* areas. Sinhala Buddhist groups, led and incited by extremist Buddhist monks attacked the homes of Muslims. Three people were killed while many were injured and lost their properties. The violence that took place against Muslims in *Aluthgama* and *Beruwala*, were not isolated incidents but an extension of a chain of violent incidents that have recently taken place in Sri Lanka.

After forcing the All Ceylon Jamiathul Ulema (ACJU) to withdraw the *Halal* certificate and virtually banning it from retail shelves, these extremist Sinhala Buddhist groups demanded that the *hijab* worn by Muslim women be banned. On 08th July 2013, they called for such a ban by saying that, *hijab* is a threat to national security. On the other hand, wearing Hijab is gaining importance among Muslim women. The number of Muslim women who wear Hijab has increased due to various factors including the endorsement they gained from the community. Some of the female Muslim university students I spoke to, link the *hijab* to female-beauty. According to them, *hijab* is a way of emphasizing the features of the face and enhancing its' beauty. The encouragement of wearing *hijab* has taken another form, 'female-beauty.' In that sense, the Muslim community has shaped women's

Anushka Kahandagama

ideology through concepts of 'beauty' as most women are exposed to modern ideas about women's freedom. The Muslim community has used a modern idea of 'beauty' to encourage women to wear the hijab. On the other hand extremist Buddhist groups try to disparage wearing of the hijab by saying that these women looks like '*GoniBillas*'.¹ Both parties – the Buddhist monks and the Muslim community, have seen the body of the woman as marking 'religiosity'.

Extremist Buddhist groups in Sri Lanka try to denigrate the Muslim community by discouraging their cultural practices. One of their main targets was banning the '*hijab*'. One of the articles in 'Lanka News Web' reported that the 'demand to ban the *hijab* is similar to the situation in France which has legalized the ban on the face cover in public recently. Banning the *hijab* in France is connected with maintaining a secular state and a secular public sphere in France, 'The law was inspired by France's principles of secularism and equality and the belief that schools and public

buildings should be a neutral environment where people are not identified by their religion.' (The Local: Frances News in English 2014) But, in Sri Lanka, since the constitution itself encourages Buddhism, the secular nature of the state is debatable. Further, the people who ask to ban the *hijab* are speaking for extremist religious groups. These Buddhist extremist groups do not seek to ban the *hijab* saying that they need a secular country, they say instead that, *hijab* is a threat to national security.²

In addition to the demand to ban the *hijab* legally, some incidents of violence against Muslim women wearing hijab have been reported. Pulling the *hijab* off Muslim women, verbally threatening them to not wear the *hijab*, ridiculing the women in public for wearing the *hijab* have been reported. In Manampitya, two youths on a motor-cycle tried to snatch the hijab of the Muslim post-mistress on 16th of March 2013 (Jeyaraj 2013). On Friday March 15th 2013, four young Muslim girls, all of them law students were harassed

“ “ The Muslim community has used a modern idea of 'beauty' to encourage women to wear the hijab. On the other hand extremist Buddhist groups try to disparage wearing of the hijab by saying that these women looks like '*GoniBillas*'.¹ Both parties – the Buddhist monks and the Muslim community, have seen the body of the woman as marking 'religiosity'. ” ”

and their hijabs and abhaya pulled and tugged at, at Fort Railway station (Jeyaraj 2013). The disparagement of the Muslim community is not done through the male body; instead it is done through the *hijab* and the female body. These extremist Buddhist groups generalize the 'Muslim community' in Sri Lanka as the 'other' or the next enemy of Sri Lankan Sinhala Buddhists. These Buddhist groups see their 'Muslim enemy' as 'the fundamentalists.' They do not see the many differences within the Muslim communities, but understand them to be a single group that bases every aspect of their lives on religion. Creating the 'other' and generalizing certain characteristics to an entire community has its roots in colonial thinking, namely orientalism (Said 1978). Extremist Sinhala Buddhists who think they are 'pure' have based their ideology on Western colonial thinking! The generalization of 'Muslim' community and seeing them all as somehow similar, and further seeing them to be representative of other Muslims all round the world is politically questionable.

In capitalist societies women's bodies have been used as commodities in marketing of various goods ranging from cars to household items. In the present Sri Lankan context, the bodies of Muslim women are used to "market" a cultural and religious way of life. They have become symbols of *Muslimness*. By targeting these symbols, Buddhist extremist groups too have accepted the symbolic importance of female bodies and reinforced their further objectification. Religion, in the context of

Rajapaksha Sri Lanka by is made by 'men', preached by 'men' and secured through female bodies. By challenging these 'religio-cultural female bodies' the Buddhist extremists attack an entire community.

Jeyaraj D.B.S. 2013. "GoniBilla" Hate Speeches of BodhuBalaSena Cause Rise in Attacks on Muslim Women in "Abaya" Attire. <http://dbsjeyaraj.com/dbsj/archives/18678>

Waduge, Shenali, 2013. Who are the Racist? <http://lankanewsweb.net/features/203-in-sri-lanka-who-are-the-racists-shenali-waduge>

The Local: Frances News in English 2014. France urged to scrap veil ban for school trips. <http://www.thelocal.fr/20131223/france-urged-to-overturn-muslim-veil-ban-school-islam> Said, Edward (1978) *Orientalism*. New York, Pantheon Books.

(Footnotes)

¹ "GoniBilla" (scary person in a sack) (Jeyaraj 2013)

² In Sri Lanka there were many situations that people who wore robes as Buddhist monks and have done burglary and theft. If the 'Hijab' is a threat to a national security, any kind of dress used in thievery is a threat to national security.



Muslim women and Islamic Dress in Sri Lanka :

What is the issue?

Sri Lankan Human Rights community's response to the increase in hate speech and in June 2014, organized violence against the Muslim community was hesitant tentative and began to gather momentum only in the aftermath of violence against Muslims in Aluthgama. There were certain salutary developments – the early emergence of the Buddhist Questioning Bodu Bala Sena group, and the many statements against the violence in Aluthgama, and the mobilization to provide relief in the immediate aftermath of the violence was commendable. The Bar Association's assistance with filing cases after the violence and their repeated assertion of the need to use the law against hate mongering Buddhist monks are to be applauded. And the initiative to set up the Mawanella Friendship Association in response to the tension around the Devanagala Rock was also commendable. But efforts from Human rights and women's rights organisations to combat the impact of the hate sentiment

Dr. Farzana Haniffa

or to work with Muslims on ways to respond to threats they face have been slow to emerge. I feel that this delay in engagement is the consequence of a lack of clarity regarding who and what the Muslims are, and what might be the "correct" position on Muslim minority concerns. Questions regarding Muslim women's dress are part of a larger problem of the inability to adequately name or engage with the Muslim community.

For some activists that I have engaged with Muslim women's dress represents a difference in religion and culture and the need for tolerance in the face of such difference. For others it constitutes a symbol of oppression, backwardness or "extremism" and is an indictment of gender relations within the Muslim community.

Young Muslim men in universities today are known to police Muslim women's dress and compel them to wear the black *abhaya* and hijab. This is a problematic practice that is indicative of oppressive gender relations in the Muslim community and on our University campuses. Further, there are periodic press reports —generally from the Eastern Province— regarding communities reacting violently to women's behavior, and reports from the international context regarding honor killings in India and Pakistan and the Taliban

shooting Malala. (however irrelevant this may be to Sri Lanka) Such information compounds prevailing stereotypes regarding the oppressed Muslim woman here as well.¹ The stereotypical understanding is that Muslim women are compelled either by overt male policing, familial badgering or through subtle social pressure to wear distinctive Islamic clothing.²

Women's Islamic dress, in all its myriad forms is a response to the Quran's call for both women and men to be modest. In Sri Lanka both men and women may be seen wearing the marks of religiosity through their dress and on their bodies. For instance, in addition to the headscarf, women wear loose clothing—including the *abhaya* over other attire, and sometimes the *nikab* (face cover). The requirement for Muslim men is clothing that covers the body from the waist to the knees. Men wear a range of clothing including the long pants that reach above the ankles, long loose kurthas, and the *thwab*. Men also carry with pride the mark of piety – the bruise on the forehead from the head touching the ground during daily five times prayers, the ubiquitous beard and sometimes hair that rests on the collar – as supposedly practiced by the prophet. And also many men wear “halal” shorts, or shorts that reach below the knee.

Like all communities in the country, the Muslim community of Sri Lanka too went through many significant transformations during the last thirty years of war (early 1980s to 2009). It was during this time that the social movements propagating piety and purification of practice gained a substantial following in the country. During the war years the Muslims' political configuration at the national level transformed substantially. Powerful Muslim ministers in the south could do little to address the security crises faced by Muslims of the north and east. Later in the

war the manner in which Muslims were affected by the violence was little known and rarely acknowledged. While it is the period during which the first Muslim political party emerged, its' gains too remain tenuous to date. In this difficult time Muslims found great succor in the piety movement that articulated community not locally but globally. Therefore the call to be more religious was heard by many. Becoming more religious included not just the transformation in dress but more strictly adhering to the compulsory regime of praying five times, more stringent practices of halal – not just refraining from consuming alcohol but staying away from contexts where alcohol was consumed, a thirst for knowledge authenticating religious practices and using this knowledge to purify local ways of practice. These purifications extended in the early days to refusing photography, banning instrumental music, and discouraging Muslims from working in finance companies and banks due to prohibition of interest. Today they include engaging in Islamic finance and banking, buying only from the “white list” of equities and eating at halal certified restaurants. Currently there is inadequate information in the public domain regarding the complex and very particular local history of the piety movements in the Sri Lankan context. When referenced, they are lumped all together both in the media and over middle class dinner table conversations as “wahabism” or “extremism” without reference to the manner in which the movement (in its many manifestations) impacted people's lives.

In the 1980s when these movements had their first success they had some very problematically gendered practices such as pressuring women to change their dress, limiting girls' education after reaching puberty, and asking that women be accompanied at all times outside the house

by a “maharam” male relative. However, while this strategy was successful in changing dress practices other elements become difficult to maintain within the Sri Lankan socio-economic context where many Muslim communities were urban and pursued the promise of upward mobility brought about by economic liberalization. Today these practices of restricting education and limiting mobility are followed by very few. During the several decades when the piety movement has the most success they mobilized large numbers of men and women in the country and energized Muslim communities across class and region with a direction and purpose.

Muslim dress practices in all their variety are meant to desexualize women's bodies in a context where sexualization of women is being increasingly valorized by the market and by some dated “feminist” positions (as expressions of female sexual agency).³ In engaging in desexualization through dress, Muslim women are also arguably participating in a conservative discourse that sees the public sphere as populated by predatory males that the female needs to guard herself against and also refrain from arousing sexually.⁴ However, this is not the only meaning of the practice. In the multi ethnic and multi-religious Sri Lankan context the dress also marks women's Muslimness as the primary element of their identity and in the case of the niqab certain Muslim groups' symbolic refusal to engage with the larger polity. Additionally, the dress also becomes a marker of practicing Muslim women's piety and commitment to God. In wearing their Islamic dress Muslim women today, then are identifying primarily as pious Muslims and are becoming repositories of the community's symbols. However, in doing so women are also consciously engaging not only in an act of worship but in a collective process of defining and appreciating Muslim community and

carving out leadership spaces for themselves within that community.⁵ Also the manner in which Islamic dress desexualized women and ensured their commitment to community identity enabled Muslim women to claim greater mobility. Thereby higher education and work became more constant realities for a generation of pious Muslim women.⁶

Another element worth noting is also that Muslim communities in war affected areas of the northern and eastern provinces experienced this transformation brought about by reformist piety quite differently. The severe deterioration in security in the east for instance, encouraged the emergence of different community mechanisms in those areas such as Mosque federations consisting of male members only that acted as bodies that maintained community cohesion under severe threat of violence. This maintenance of community influenced by reformist ideas included marginalizing groups that did not follow certain prescribed rules of religious community. The activities of Mosque federations also included the policing of women's behavior according to supposedly “religious” rules. In these areas all elements of women's activities are policed and subject to severe censure. In this context, not just dress but speech too of women is sometimes subject to community scrutiny and violent criticism as was borne out by the case of Sharmila Seyyed a journalist from the town of Eravur.⁷ However, some of these strictures – that demand redress—are particular to war affected communities and not common to all Muslims across Sri Lanka.

The niqab that is raising the ire of many Sinhalese and some Muslims is undoubtedly symbolic of sections of the Muslim community refusing engagement with and thereby the rules and standards of sociality and values of the world outside the community. It can also

be read as a devaluing of engagement with “others” and thereby a devaluing of these “others.” In a country polarized by war where communities now live in their own social ghettos defined mostly by ethno-religiosity but also by class, the alienating impact of Muslim women’s dress is only one element of a larger national problem. Middle class Sri Lankans’ refusal today to recognize the niqab as representing a different value systems at work in a plural polity is a marker of the intolerance that has gripped the country during the war and bled into the post war years. It is important that these multiple elements that inform and impact the lives of minorities, women and Muslims in particular are examined in this time where our plural polity continues to be severely under stress.

It is perhaps difficult to comprehend why so many Muslim women in contemporary Sri Lanka are embracing the burden of piety and community either through compulsion or conviction.⁸ It is undeniable however, that it is an aspect of the manner in which Muslims have embraced their community identity in primarily religious terms today. Understanding this phenomenon calls for a greater sensitivity to how minority communities in this country are grappling with the manner in which prevailing discourses about Sri Lankaness, citizenship, democracy and progress marginalize minority voices. It is important to understand that the burden that Muslim women bare is a burden that comes not just of being a woman in the Muslim community but of being a member of a somewhat emasculated minority community in the country as a whole.

Gender relations within the Muslim community are complex. I would argue however, that the misogyny that Muslim women experience is not unique and is similar to that which is experienced by

women from all communities in the country. As Kodikara has pointed out women’s rights took a beating in the immediate post-war years. The problematic gender politics of the Muslim community and the non-availability of substantive analysis of these problems are no justification for the absence of sustained civil society activism against the anti Muslim sentiment and the spread of violence.

Footnotes

- 1 As scholars have noted the identification of head and face covering as oppressive to women is a colonial idea that was internalized by Muslim peoples in the Arab world—especially in Egypt—when the pursuit of modernity was the global ideal. Being modern for many Muslim women meant a casting off of Islamic dress in some instances—as in the case of Turkey, the state casting off of Islam itself. In the nine teen eighties the trend reversed and brought with it an identification of the headscarf and Islamic dress with positions against the failure of the modernist secularist project in some of these countries. The assertion of a late post colonial Islamic identity in a variety of contexts throughout the world included the embracing of Islamic dress not just for women but for men as well. See Ahmed, Leila (1992) *Women and Gender in Islam*, New Haven, Yale University Press, and Ahmed, Leila (2011) *A Quiet Revolution: The veil’s resurgence, from the Middle East to America*. New Haven, Yale University Press.
- 2 It is ofcourse rarely discussed that this is probably true of women’s clothing across ethnicities.
- 3 There is a substantial feminist literature on the topic and more recent feminist debates seriously critique the consumerist sexualization of women’s bodies in contemporary culture. See for instance, Evans Riley and Shankar (2010), “Technologies of Sexiness: Theorizing women’s engagement in the sexualization of culture;” *Feminism & Psychology* Vol. 20(1): 114–131; and M.A. Fabello (2013) “Lacking liberation: conflating sexual objectification with sexual liberation.” <http://everydayfeminism.com/2013/01/conflating-sexual-objectification-with-sexual-empowerment/>
- 4 Unfortunately, however, contemporary gender relations in Sri Lanka as a whole including the incidents of sexual assault and the fact that public space is still not a safe space for women alone renders it somewhat difficult to dismiss this discourse.
- 5 See for instance, my analysis of a Muslim women’s piety group in Haniffa F. (2008) *Believing Women: Piety and Power amongst Muslim Women in Contemporary Sri Lanka*. In **Islamic Reformism in South Asia**. Phillipo Ossella and Caroline Ossella Eds. **Modern Asian Studies**. Vol 42, Issues 2&3.
- 6 There is wide consensus among academics that the headscarf and Islamic dress in general has facilitated women’s greater engagement with the public sphere. See for instance Ziba Mir Hosseini’s commentary on the Islamic republic of Iran in Mir Hosseini, Z. (1999) *Islam and Gender : the religious debate in contemporary Iran*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- 7 Seyyed’s comment to the BBC on the possible legalization of prostitution caused such furor in her community that she feared for her safety and currently lives in exile.
- 8 This is of course not to say that all Muslim women wear Islamic dress. There are many that don’t due to commitments to different definitions of modesty, or through a refusal of the entire premise of religious dress or due to class privilege. They, however, are a minority.



Remembering Aluthgama

You believed in Allah,
I believed in Jesus
She in Gautama Buddha
Your head was covered
My hair short,
Her curls long,
Different,
But we were one.

Prayer to Allah
Under your breath
Silent grace to Jesus said,
She looks on
A little perplexed,
Eating together
A *bath* packet was
Our communion

Black *Abhaya*
Worn jeans
Filly pink skirt
We look strange
But we press on,
Unfazed
By curious glances round us

Our stories diverged at times
Steady love,
Broken promises
Fleeting crush,
But they converged
In the belief of something
Higher than transient things
Greater than ourselves

Going to the Lido
It was a first for you
Strange for me
Routine for her
The story Unravelling
Uppalavanna
Was a sister to us all
On the road rarely travelled

Avanka Fernando

Riveting lectures
 Agonizing exams
 Tedious assessments
 Sinister corridors
 Creaky orange chairs
 Were transformed
 In a twinkling
 To laughter and fun.

Post-exam euphoria
 A day in Aluthgama
 They tried to stop us
 Crossing the new bridge
 Indomitable females
 We marched on
 Eating raw mangoes,
 Then conquering the seas

Sandy black *Abhaya*,
 Sun scorched jeans
 Shells in cupped hands
 We walk home
 Through Dharga Town
 Past your school,
 Over broken tracks
 Back in Colombo our lives go on

June 15th 2014
 Mud splattered black *Abhaya*
 Khaki trousers
 Saffron robes
 Shards of glass
 Clenched fists.
 Fear and fury
 Where laughter and fun prevailed

You believe in Allah,
 I believe in Jesus
 She in Gautama Buddha
 Your head covered
 My hair tousled,
 Her curls strong
 Different,
 But we are still one.



In the name of LOVE

At a time where divorces are high in Sri Lankan society (Shanmugarajah 2014), it is worthwhile to look in to the relationship between marriage, women and religion. Ideally 'Marriage' is a manifestation of love and 'religion', of spirituality. The woman has been understood as an emotional being rather than a rational being in almost all knowledge paradigms (Gray 1993). Even in terms of religion, especially in relation to Hinduism and 'popular' Buddhism, women are portrayed as intensely passionate beings that would go to heights and lengths for the partner she loves. For instance, stories are told of acts of female selfless love in the mythical stories about the Hindu gods and goddesses, such as Shiva-Parvati, Vishnu-Lakshmi and Kannagi who is popularly known as 'Pattini Amma' among Buddhists. In turn, the girl child in the process of socialization is exposed to such depictions of intense, passionate love that develop in her ideals of love - that she will give and expect to receive in time to come.

Among Buddhist devotees the love between Siddhartha-Yashodara is the ideal love story that represents the mystery of love and marriage. Siddhartha-Yashodara had being together for 100,000 world cycles in four infinite periods as husband and wife. It is told that she aspired to be his consort in every life to support him in his quest to end samsara. They travelled samsara together and ended the cycle of life in their last birth as Siddhartha-Yashodara by attaining nirvana. As told in the Chandakinnara Jathaka, a story that is often repeated in Buddhist sermons, when they were born as Kinnara¹ named Canda and Candaa, she lamented the murder of Canda by the King of Benares so deeply that Sakra² came down from the heavens and restored Canda to life to honour her loyalty and dedication to her husband. The Buddha himself related this Jathaka when, after attaining Buddhahood, he visited Yashodara in Kapilavastu to signify her undying affection and devotion as a wife.

Tharindi Udalagama

Department of Sociology, University
of Colombo

Yashodara chose Siddhartha in marriage well knowing that he will leave the palace and his crown to pursue his goal to end samsara. She knew that one day she would have to let Siddhartha leave her for a greater cause and tolerate her loneliness. Yet, she willingly shared his struggle as she had vowed to do in many lives before. King Suddodhana explains her devotion to Buddha by saying: "When my daughter heard that you had taken to wearing simple yellow robes, she too gave up her jewels and wore yellow robes. When she heard that you had only one meal a day, she too had only one meal a day. When she heard that you slept on low, hard beds, she too gave up the luxurious palace couches and beds. And when she heard that you had given up garlands and perfume, she too gave up garlands and perfume. When her relatives sent messages of young men who wanted to support her she did not even look at a single one." Such accounts reveal that love between Siddhartha and Yashodara was higher than sensuality and desire; it was the oneness of their minds, a familiarity that had grown from knowing one another for many lives.

After entering the order of nuns, Yashodara Theri attained Arahatsip and was declared the chief disciple among the nuns who attained supernormal powers to recall infinite eras of the past. It is said that when her time came to pass away she visited the Buddha and referred to the fact that she had been the wife of no other but him during the entire period and had helped him to achieve in 100,000 world cycles and four infinite periods what other Buddhas take eight and sixteen infinite periods to achieve. Such statements show the support that was unconditionally given to the bodhisattva by Yashodara during

samsara to achieve his goal. Her contribution to his achievement of enlightenment is a reflection of her undying love and devotion. Her blessings, her tears, her thoughts and deeds were the underlying factors that fashioned Gautama Buddha.

The story above speaks of women's capability to selflessly and unconditionally love her 'male other'. In Greek mythology such kind of love is possible with the meeting of the two halves that were separated one time by the wrath of Gods (Gill 1999). It is through the combination of the correct two 'halves' that a harmonious whole is created. In such a union, as Plato suggests, love would transcend from beautiful bodies and souls to knowledge, the oneness of the mind (Gill 1999). A love that is based on the knowledge of knowing rather than of worldly sensual desires.

The story unfolded above speaks of the women's capability to love selflessly and unconditionally to her 'male other'. In Greek mythology such kind of love is possible with the meeting of the two halves that were separated one time by the wrath of Gods. It is through the combination of the correct two 'halves' that a harmonious whole is created. In such a union, as Plato suggests, love would transcend from beautiful bodies and souls to knowledge, the oneness of the mind (Gill 1999).

In a feminist viewpoint, such unconditional sacrificial portrayal of woman's love to her partner is questionable. Feminism has fought to empower women and dispose them of submissive roles (Lindsey 2011). The feminist effort has given women avenues to education and financial independence, liberating them from conservative social roles (Lindsey 2011). Yet, women do submit to their socialization that teaches them to idolise a love like Yashodara's and search for her ideal partner. The problem lies in identifying your 'other'; how would one know?

In a Buddhist perspective the answer lies in spiritual growth, the development of the mind. This calls for the development of a deeper spiritual understanding about one's self and the universe. Intuition should be sharpened more with meditation and spirituality. Hence, women should learn to develop their minds and listen to their intuition when choosing a partner. Not every man is worthy of the selfless, unconditional love the woman is capable of; only the 'male other' destined for each woman deserves that kind of love from her. A bond should be formed with that feeling of knowing, the feeling of familiarity rather than as a result of social pressure. Marriages should be formed on the basis of true love, as of Siddhartha and Yashodara, rather than on mere desire. The key is in identifying the right partner with the oneness of the mind by trusting your intuition. The one with whom you have travelled through samsara and will so till nirvana, ought to be the right one rather than the nice one.

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Footnotes

- ¹A mythical creature that could be similar to a mermaid or a centaur
- ² According to Buddhist cosmology, the lord of the gods and the ruler of the heavens



Mothers are not allowed: the question of women's entrance to sacred places in Buddhism

According to historical legend, Buddhist nun Sangamitta who was the daughter of emperor Ashoka in India brought the Siri Maha Bodhiya, as a sapling from the "Jaya Siri Maha Bodhiya." The "Jaya Siri Maha Bodhiya" was the Bo tree that gave shade and protection to the Siddhartha Bodisathwa to find enlightenment and become the Lord Buddha. There is another folktale which is accepted by Buddhists as well as non-Buddhists that, as this Bo tree helped Siddhartha Bodisathwa to find enlightenment, Lord Buddha had stared at the tree without blinking once for one whole week as gratitude towards the tree for helping him to find enlightenment. The "Siri Maha Bodhiya" which still exists in Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka is the focus of Buddhist religious devotion in Sri Lanka today.

A common belief among Buddhist devotees is that "Jaya Siri Maha Bodhiya" is one of the material objects that was used by Lord Buddha known as "Paribogika Chaithya". The "Siri Maha Bodhiya" at Anuradhapura is one of the well accepted "Paribogika Chaithya" worshipped by Buddhist devotees. The Lord Buddha's tooth relic which is in the "Temple of the Tooth" in Kandy is treated as the material heart of Sri Lankan Buddhists while the "Siri Maha Bodhiya" is treated as the spiritual heart. With all these mythologies the "Siri Maha Bodhiya" at Anuradhapura became an important religious place for Buddhists, part of the sacred pilgrimage circuit and is visited by large numbers of devotees' everyday.

According to the Archeological records the "Siri Maha Bodhiya" is situated on the highest plane of 5 terraces 21 feet above the ground level. The "Siri Maha Bodhiya" complex today has three main terraces and the Sri Maha Bodhiya itself is located on the topmost terrace. Meanwhile by the sides of the "Siri Maha Bodhiya" on the lower terraces, there

H. Unnathi Samaraweera

are many other Bo trees called "Parivara Bodhi". Today the "Siri Maha Bodhiya" is situated on the top of a third terrace where it is surrounded by a golden pillar fence. Women are prohibited to enter into this "Uda Maluwa" area that is fenced off by the golden fence. Today the "Sri Maha bodhiya" stands with huge roots and branches with green leaves, and only men including monks are allowed to enter inside of the gold fence and approach the "Siri Maha Bodhiya". The reason for the prohibition is women's menstruation which is treated as 'pollution.' And therefore 'non-pure' women are not allowed to enter inside of the golden fence and be close to the "Siri Maha Bodhiya".

The irony with regards to the prohibition is that on the one hand the sapling of "Jaya Siri Maha Bodhiya" which is said to have been planted at Anuradhapura around the 3rd century BC, was, according to legend, brought by a Buddhist nun called Sangamitta who was the daughter of emperor Ashoka. In addition, there has been space for female worship in Buddhism that arguably surpasses those of other religions. For instance even in the time of Lord Buddha women were permitted to become nuns if they followed certain rules. Lord Buddha's advice and designations for nuns and monks are examples of the manner in which both monks and nuns were treated in a similar manner and are testaments to the fact that there was no discrimination based on gender in Buddhism during the Lord Buddha's' time.

The visibility that women had during the Lord Buddha's time has disappeared. Fortunately these times are past—at least for now. However, it is important that there is some recognition of this failure on the part of civil society and some thinking be done as to how to address such problems if they are to reemerge.

Buddhism opened up spaces for women, and women were considered to be of higher rank in society during the time of Lord Buddha. For instance women received equal and unfettered opportunities to develop their spirituality. Lord Buddha announced that women also can purify their minds and attend "Nibbana" which is the end of life cycles without rebirth. Giving women the opportunity to become nuns opened up new avenue in the social and cultural lives of the women and recognized women's significant role in society.

There are many important women in the tales from the time of Lord Buddha— Prajapathi, Uppalawanna, and Baddha Kacchayana are only some of them. In addition according to the widely accepted legends, the bringing of the "Siri Maha Bodhiya" and the bringing of the Buddha's tooth relic to Sri Lanka were done by women. The tooth relic it was brought by Prince Dantha and Princess Hemamala. Legend says that the tooth was hidden in Princess Hemamala's hair. In these tales women are seen to be taking leadership while protecting religion and further, women's bodies were not distanced from sacred religious objects.

Then the question arises as to why today women are not allowed to enter into the sacred Buddhist religious places such as the "Siri Maha Bodhiya" at Anuradhapura. Historically this type of value judgments and discrimination has been presented to Buddhists as a so called 'Buddhist values'. It is important that these rules are revisited today and exposed as discriminatory practices that have no substantial basis in Buddhism.





Can We be **Religious** and **Tolerant** at the Same Time?

My family believed in peaceful religious cohabitation. As I was an only child for a long time, my parents—one a Buddhist and the other a Roman Catholic—decided that I would be taught both religions. I was told that when I was mature enough I could choose between them. They were both religious people. This was their way of circumventing what would have surely been a matter of contention. So, I observed *pansil* with my father on most evenings and accompanied him to the village temple whenever we visited his ancestral home. And occasionally we visited the Kataragama *Dçvâlç*. I also went to church every Sunday with my mother.

Asha Abeyasekera-Van Dort

In this way I learnt what it meant to be religious: devotion to God—whatever form he or she took—and leading a moral life. More significantly, as a young child I learned to disregard religious differences and recognise the universal in all religious teaching. According to my parents' philosophy, all religions ultimately teach us how to be a good person. That is what mattered.

In some ways my parents' philosophy is no different from those of religious historians and scholars of comparative religion who use their scholarship to teach us that emphasising religious difference ultimately makes little sense. Former Catholic nun and religious historian Karen Armstrong (2008), for example, urges us to consider how compassion is at the heart of every major religion in the world. She points out that the 'Golden Rule' is the fundamental teaching of all religions: 'always treat others as you would like to be treated

“ Ethnicity *and* religion were both critical identity markers in school. However, defining oneself not only involved asserting how one’s religion was *different* from other religions, but it also involved making the case that it was *superior* to other religions. ”

yourself’ or as Jesus commanded: ‘love thy neighbour as thy self’ (*My Wish: the Charter for Compassion*, TED Talk).

Comparative religions scholar Joseph Campbell reveals religious ‘sameness’ through his extensive research into the world’s mythologies. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) Campbell demonstrates how mythic narratives, regardless of their historical and cultural origins, are variations of a single story and draw from archetypes. For example, Campbell illustrates the universality of the hero’s journey—from great suffering to spiritual transcendence to returning to the world with gifts (or teachings) to save humankind—by analysing myths from various cultures across the world, including the narratives of the world’s great religions, i.e., the stories about Krishna, Buddha, and Jesus.

The similar narrative elements of the hero’s journey attests to what Carl Jung, amongst others, terms the ‘religious impulse’ in all human beings—a yearning to overcome the materiality of the self through spiritual transcendence. Indeed, losing or surrendering the ‘self’ is at the heart of many religious practices—whether it is yoga, meditation, ecstatic dancing, devotional prayer, and I would argue, even charity. Placing another before yourself—the ‘Golden Rule’—dethrones the ego and it brings you into the presence of God, Nirvana, Tao and so on.

Transcending the self, however, co-exists with an equally if not more powerful imperative—*defining* the self. What makes me different from others? What is it, if anything, that I share with others? Feminist scholar Henrietta Moore (1994) tells us that “difference exerts an uncanny fascination for all of us [and] deciding on differences is one way of delineating identities” (p.1). I experienced this first-hand in school where I was confronted with the impossibility of being both a Buddhist and a Christian. There was, of course, the logistical difficulty of being in two places during the religion lesson. And, my parents had already made the strategic choice of classifying me as ‘Christian’ when enrolling me in a Christian school. But it was more than about practicalities. Being religious meant I had to decide what I believed. Do I believe in the four noble truths and the eightfold path to enlightenment? Or do I believe in the doctrine of salvation through Jesus Christ? Being a good person was not enough.

Ethnicity *and* religion were both critical identity markers in school. However, defining oneself not only involved asserting how one’s religion was *different* from other religions, but it also involved making the case that it was *superior* to other religions. Playground politics sometimes manifested in religious taunting: ‘*your Jesus was a lowly carpenter whereas our Lord Buddha was a prince!*’ counteracted by—‘*Buddhists worship a dead person whereas we*

Christians worship the living God! Religious debates of the adult variety are sometimes no different. Being religious often means asserting that one's belief system is closer to the 'truth' than all the others.

Equating religious faith with believing things, however, is a relatively new phenomenon. It is mainly a legacy of Christianity. According to the Episcopal priest and Christian scholar Cynthia Bourgeault (2003), by about the 4th century Christianity began to lose the immediacy of the encounter with the historical Jesus and instead had to rely on memory and tradition. At this time, Christianity became increasingly dependent on doctrine: knowing and saying the right things about Jesus and his teachings. The Nicene Creed, which precisely lays out what exactly Christian belief is about, is a result of this transition. Moreover, what is Christian and what is not became part of how religions and cultures were classified during European colonisation. The word 'belief', Armstrong argues, originally meant "to love, to prize, to hold dear [...] 'I believe' did not mean 'I accept certain creedal articles of faith.' It meant: 'I commit myself. I engage myself'" (TED talk 2008). Even in the Quran, Armstrong argues, religious opinion is dismissed as 'zanna'—guesswork.

All these arguments makes intellectual sense: leading a moral life and transcending the 'self' are at the heart of all religious teachings, and religious difference—the emphasis on creeds and doctrine—is at least partly a result of European history.

Cultural studies scholar Lawrence Grossberg (1996), commenting on the construction of modern identities, asserts that the logic of the modern identity is that it is "always constituted out of difference" (p.93). So the question is: in a milieu where both individual and group identity is predicated on difference, can we

be 'religious' and 'tolerant' at the same time? Even if we believe in the fundamental principle of being a good person, religious difference underlies not only *what* we believe, but *how* we practice our religious beliefs.

The French sociologist Émile Durkheim emphasised that religion is never only a matter of belief. All religious ceremonies and rituals require groups of believers to meet together, and sharing in collective ceremonies promotes and heightens group solidarity. Therefore, spiritual transcendence—overcoming the self—is not only superseded by self definition and identity work, transcendence bolsters group identity. Group-based rituals caused what Durkheim termed 'collective effervescence'—the heightened sense of energy that is generated in collective gatherings and events.

Psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2012) argues that religion is not the only pathway to spiritual transcendence (*Religion, Evolution, and the Ecstasy of Self transcendence*, TED Talk). Many find it in their encounters with nature. And many more, he argues, find self-transcendence in war where the "I" is subsumed by the collective. Haidt draws on Durkheim to argue that religious fervour and the experience of self transcendence generated through collective religious ritual is duplicated in times of war. War draws people together and opens a space in which people are willing to sacrifice their individual 'self' for the sake of the group's survival.

Many religious scholars find invoking religion to justify war against 'others' preposterous. What constitutes 'religion', however, makes the idea of religious tolerance sometimes sound like an oxymoron.





PHOTO ESSAY | women and religion

NAYANAHARI ABEYNAYAKE

“පරණගම ගිනිකියා අලුත්ගමක් සෑදීම”

PHOTO ESSAY | women and religion

NAYANAHARI ABEYNAYAKE





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NAYANAHARI ABEYNAYAKE





PHOTO ESSAY | **women and religion**
NAYANAHARI ABEYNAYAKE

Information on Aluthgama : Fact Finding by a Women's Collective

On the 15th of June 2014 ethnic riots took place in Aluthgama following a rally organized by the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), a Buddhist fundamentalist organization. Even though the police and state officials had been informed of the potential of the rally to turn violent, no steps were taken to stop the same, instead a large number of police and Special Task Forces (STF) personnel were deployed in the area. In the aftermath of the violence that shocked the country, a women's team visited Aluthgama and met with several survivors with the objective of documenting the events that took place. Below is their report. Considering the safety of the survivors their names, location and other identities are not recorded.

"Around 12 midnight on 15/06/2014 the Welipitiya Mosque administration made an announcement that a large group of thugs were coming to destroy the Mosque. Upon the announcement the men from the village brought their families, left the women inside the mosque for their safety, and stood outside the mosque to protect the mosque. Around

2000 persons arrived in a procession at that time chanting slogans saying 'we will destroy the Dharga Town mosque', 'we will change Dharga Town into a Sinhala village' and started pelting stones from all sides," said a mother whose son was attacked in this incident. She stated that she has four sons, she has been separated from her husband since the birth of her youngest son, and has brought them up single handedly amidst various challenges. "My two unmarried sons aged 20 and 17 heard the announcement from the mosque and left to guard the mosque. A few minutes after they left home I heard gun shots and ran outside to look for my sons but I could not locate them. I ran back home and prayed for their safety. I could hear the firing of gun shots for about 2 hours.

"Around 3 a.m. on 16th June, I was informed that my son was shot in the leg and was taken to the hospital. When I heard this I felt helpless and asked my second son to take me to see my injured son. However, he informed me that the Kalutara Nagoda general hospital refused to admit my son and therefore he had been taken to the Colombo hospital and that it would be difficult to take me to Colombo right now." A couple of days later her son called and informed her that her second son's leg needs to be cut off and that she needed to sign agreeing to the same. She said when her elder son was on his way to visit his injured brother he was also attacked by mobsters and

Women's Action Network

the money he had was taken from him. He was stripped of his clothing. Narrating this she cried and said 'I have brought up my children through such hardship and I cannot believe my 20 year old son has no leg. I don't want to see him like this'.

A 36 year old man was killed in Welipitiya during the riot. His wife has three daughters aged 12, 4 and 2 months. The widow could not speak much other than repeating "our house was situated within the Sinhala village and I will not be able to return there." She is currently living with her brother and has no financial support. She and her children are severely traumatized.

The team also met many whose houses and properties had been set on fire in this village. In one village the survivors had this to say: "We have been living in this village for the last 22 years. There are two Muslim households and both were burnt. As we heard about the riots, we decided to leave but were prevented by the mobs. Our Sinhala neighbors helped us escape. We subsequently heard that our house had been set on fire. When I went to see the house it had been burned to the ground and there was nothing we could recover. Amidst the 17 Sinhala houses in this village we could see that the only two houses had been burned were the Muslim houses. This proves someone in our neighborhood had given information or identified the Muslim houses to the mobsters."

The team then went on to meet a woman whose husband was killed in the riots. However the woman was unable to speak due to shock and grief. Another woman who was with her and had also lost her husband stated that both their husbands were daily wage laborers and that now they no longer had any financial support. They both lived in rented houses. They refused to speak to anyone due to fear. "If we talk about these issues the CID arrives and

takes people away in white vans. I explained the incidents to the police and they took my phone number. After they left my phone has been disconnected. I called the telephone company and asked them what happened. They said they would reconnect it but to date the phone line has not been fixed."

When the riot started calls were made to 119 and 118 to the Aluthgama and Beruwela police. But their lines remained disconnected. They also said that it was only after rioting subsided and two lives were lost did the police and the military arrive. Many Muslim women also said that at the initial stages of the riot when the mobs tried to enter their house, they fought back throwing stones, boiling water and chilly powder at them.

The team then visited Adhikarigoda and saw 17 houses that had been burned and a mosque that was damaged. The team spoke to an 80 year old woman whose house had been burned there. She said "when the mob arrived they told me to come outside. I was home alone and scared, so I ran out through the back door into the forest area. I called my daughter from my mobile phone from there and she told me to stay where I was. I waited for two hours. I was scared and there were many insects in the forest. I didn't think I would make it back alive. I stood there for two hours listening to them destroy my house. I heard explosions as well."

Thereafter the team met with an affected woman from Seenawatta. Narrating the incidents she said "when the announcement was made by the mosque I was at a neighbor's house and I went to my house to collect my documents and valuables. However when I went there my house was already on fire. There were military personnel standing nearby and I asked for their help to recover my documents. They told me 'these are problems you all sought after and you all had better sort them

out.' My son and I put out the fire and went to the mosque. I have helped my Sinhala neighbors often but they too participated in this attack on us. I saw it with my own eyes and it is painful.

"A day before the riots, many cardboard boxes were unloaded from several lorries in the garden of the adjoining the Buddhist temple. When I asked a Sinhala neighbor as to what was in the boxes she said it was for following day's *Pirith* ceremony. However now we know that they were all full of weapons. There had been sharp knives, petrol bombs, clubs and axes used to attack us. Sinhala houses had been told a week before the meeting to hoist Buddhist flags on their houses when the procession was taking place. This has been done to identify the Muslim houses. Many of the Muslim children from our villages study in Sinhala schools, however they are now afraid to return to their schools and their future is uncertain."

Another woman stated that her husband had just returned from abroad and all her valuables such a watches, jewelry, lap-top computer and money had been taken away and bottles of arrack and cigarettes were found in the house after the riot.

A two months pregnant woman from the same village said "after hearing the announcement I left through my front entrance to get to the mosque. Then I saw attackers coming from every direction and when they saw me they started coming towards my house. I didn't know what to do and began crying loudly. The Sinhala woman next door quickly got me into her house and called the mosque asking for help. A few men from the nearby mosque came and took me to safety. I had just got married in that house and now I am pregnant without a place to live."

On 15th June 2014 the attacks by the BBS backed thugs against the Muslims of

Aluthgama and Dharga Town also impacted Karunasenapura and Ambepitiya areas where many houses of the Muslims were burnt to ashes around 8.30 p.m. A woman from one of these villages recounting the incident and said "There were about 4 families in this village and in our house we had 16 people that day. Around 7.30 p.m. my brother got a call saying that there was tension in Dharga Town and they warned us to be careful. My brother was very worried and we decided that we should try and save our lives. So we left the CCTV camera on in our house and went to our relatives. My brother dropped us all off at our relative's place and took my father and another brother. I called our neighbors and friends and told them about the warning we received. Around 8.30 p.m. I called my brother but couldn't get through. Then I called a friend of my brother and he told me 'your house is burning sister, you had better pray' I heard this and fainted. My brother's wife is pregnant. I called a relative to ask what was happening. He said that they called the fire brigade and they have said that they would only come around 9.30 p.m. I called 119 and there was no answer. Everything has happened according to their plan. The next day my mother and I went to see our house. It was completely burned and there were people standing around and looking at it. The police came and chased us all away."

The father of this woman said earlier on the 15/06/2014 there was a meeting held by the BBS in Aluthgama where the phrase 'Abasarana' was spoken in relation to China Fort and Dharga Town. That means 'this is the last day for these two towns.' "When I heard this I got worried and I warned a few friends as well. I was prepared to go away. Then we got the news from Dharga Town. In a few minutes we saw about 200 armed men coming our way. Our youth had no weapons but still they resisted. I took everyone from my relative's house and sent them to the Jamiya Nalimiya

and left them there. Then I went to where the houses had been destroyed and I saw the STF standing there. I begged them to help stop this. They said troops were coming from Jaffna, Vavuniya and Anuradhapura and once they arrived they would put a stop to this. They said they have no authority to stop this. I called 119 and 999 but no response. I was distressed. We have video evidence of the attack and the attackers are people from this village and from the next village. We have informed the police but to date no arrests have taken place and I see them walking freely right in front of my eyes.

This father went on, 'Before they began the attack they brought a Buddhist monk and kept him inside a house. I think they were planning to send him out if we retaliated. That way if the Buddhist monk was attacked, they would use that as a reason to escalate the violence. I have a gem cutting business and had 10 people working under me. I had gem cutting machines, computers and other machinery. I have lost assets worth of 80 lakhs.' While he was narrating this he began crying saying "who will compensate me for my losses?"

We met a young man (age 27) who had severe injuries to his arm. He has two daughters and was injured during the riot. His hand was cut below the wrist. "On 15/06/2014 I had just finished prayers at the Masjid and was standing outside with about 20 people. Around 300 people came to attack us and they had knives, axes and sticks. We shouted out 'Allahu Akbar' and attacked back. But we didn't think we would get attacked like this. One of them tried to cut my head with a knife and I lifted my hand to prevent it and that's how my hand was cut. If we hadn't fought back they would have killed us and made through to the mosque, destroyed the mosque and then the China Fort. Once my hand was cut we went to the hospital but the doctor there said he cannot help us and told us to go elsewhere.

So we went to Colombo. I can't work for the next 6 months. My family has no protection. I am unable to take care of my children and my wife. I feel so helpless."

A villager who came and met the team stated that a few days before the riots a monk had come in a vehicle and a Muslim auto driver was also in the same traffic block. There was an argument that turned into a fight. The monk then had torn his own cloths and gone to the police stating that a 'sonavan' had attacked him and injured him. The next day at the BBS meeting they have said "It is our country, Sinhala government, Sinhala army and everything is ours!" and it is only after that they went on procession, destroyed the mosque and burnt the Quran.

The fact finding team was able to find out the following during its mission:

Even though Muslims have been living in this area for over centuries they are unsure whether they can continue to live there. Some women that the team interviewed stated that even Sinhala women had attacked them. And that even though there are a few Sinhalese who did not participate in the attack that they were afraid to provide any support for the Muslims. The team was also made aware of earlier attacks on them especially in 1991. The team noted that most of the survivors got emotional switched from speaking in Tamil to Sinhala, which shows how much they are intertwined with the Sinhala community.

Observations

- A private dispute between a monk and a three wheeler driver seems to have been used to create the initial spark for these riots.
- Survivors' narratives imply that the BBS was planning a procession and preparing for the riot days ahead specially stocking up knives, petrol bombs, clubs and axes

in Temples and bringing in bus loads of attackers.

- Initially the announcement was made that a walking procession would be undertaken from Aluthgama to Dharga town after the meeting in Aluthgama for which the Muslims were prepared. However there were many eyewitness accounts that the mobsters also came in vehicles from neighboring villages.
- State institutions such as the police, STF and government hospitals seem to be complicit in this attack: 119 numbers were disconnected, responses of fire extinguish service were slow, hospitals refused to treat patients, the police/STF refused to take action during the riot.
- Although the government denies involvement, people on the ground feel otherwise. The conduct of the police, STF and government hospital doctors during the initial stages of the riots have yet not been explained by the government.
- No one has been brought before court for shooting, physical and arson attacks, leave alone provoking the riot.
- There is a heavy military presence such as is seen in the north and, many Muslim men are afraid to go out for fear that they may get attacked again. Women and children are mainly restricted to their places of refuge and don't want to go back.
- Businesses have reopened but there is apprehension with regard to what may happen next.
- Most children studied in Sinhala schools and are afraid to return to these schools.
- During and after the riot no measures were taken to help the community that was trapped in the mosque due to the curfew. Many survivors stated that there

was no food even for pregnant women, children and breast feeding mothers. No basic necessities were provided for by the government.

Recommendations:

- **Psychosocial Support:** Several people from the community suffer from severe trauma, especially women and children. Several survivors told the team that they could still hear the gun shots. So far no psychosocial and mental health support has been provided.
- **Legal Support:** The community requested for additional legal support and stated that to date only Muslim lawyers had come forward; no support had been provided by lawyers from other communities. Many stated that they have evidence including video evidence that can be used if legal action is taken.
- **Accountability:** Law enforcement authorities should arrest and charge those who instigated and perpetrated violence with no further delay and ensure fair trial through which justice could be meted out. A comprehensive and open inquiry by an independent commission that will look into reparation and justice. It should also identify and address the causes that led to the breakdown of law and order and the lapses in not being able to prevent violence and escalation to ensure non repetition.
- **Reconciliation:** Sinhalese and Muslims have been living together in this area for over a century; however many Muslims now feel that they can no longer continue to live there. The Muslims are mostly Sinhala speakers in these areas. There is a breakdown of trust within the community and there is an urgent need to take active steps toward reconciliation in a hope to restore the community's faith in each other.



Annunciation¹

(Inspired by Henry Ossawa Tanner's painting)

Unsure of whether it was
of blessedness or damnation
if it was light or just a
column of her imagination
the frightened girl sat upright
and pondered her plight

time neither to grab the black blanket on the chair
nor to run a comb through her tangled hair
as fear turned, in spite of
herself, into fascination
and when told of impending motherhood,
resignation.

Vivimarie VanderPoorten

(Footnotes)

¹ the Christian celebration of the announcement by the angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary that she would conceive and become the mother of Jesus

Sinhala Buddhist Nationalist Discourse and Women in Post War Sri Lanka

Since the end of war in May 2009, the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government has sought to forge a new Sri Lanka identity inclusive of all ethnic and religious communities. Central to this redefinition of national identity is the celebration of a glorious past as well as restating of gender roles based on the conception of the ideal woman in Sinhala-Buddhist ideology. Typical of ethno-religious nationalisms around the world, ideas regarding the nature of the family are a key pillar of this discourse. Elements of these ideas can be traced back to the 2005 election manifesto of Mahinda Rajapakse. In a chapter titled 'An Affectionate Family', Mahinda Chinthana I, referred to the family in the following terms:

Our society's foundation is the family in which the Mother takes the prime place. It is only through the improvement of the close and intimate family bonds that we can ensure a pleasant society. It is my belief that economic hardship and pressures erode such intimate bonds between family members.

Chulani Kodikara

Following Rajapakse's re-election as President in 2010, many of these provisions on women and the family, also found in Mahinda Chinthana II, have been adopted as official government policy. The thinking has also permeated judicial consciousness with far reaching implications for women's rights and gender equality in post-war Sri Lanka.

'Women's work'

Reducing the number of women, especially married women, migrating abroad for work has become a key policy goal of this government. While stopping short of a *de jure* prohibition on women with children under the age of five from migrating abroad for work, the government has taken a number of steps to render it *de facto* difficult. A new circular issued by the Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare in 2013 requires prospective women migrant workers to satisfy two conditions before they can leave the country. Firstly, they have to provide information on their family background and evidence of adequate childcare arrangements as a condition for leaving for employment overseas. Secondly, they have to secure a no-objection certificate from their husbands. A migrant worker who filed a Fundamental Rights petition in the Supreme Court on the ground that the circular violated her fundamental right to equality was not even granted 'leave to proceed'.¹

Although often couched in terms of protecting the rights of women migrant workers, this policy shift is in fact driven by ideas regarding the “negative consequences” of a mother’s prolonged absence from the home.² In such thinking there is no appreciation of the fact that women who take the decision to migrate for work, do so because of dire poverty, lack of maintenance provided by their husbands and, in some cases, even due to domestic violence. The husband’s responsibility to their families is also absent in the discussion.³ To the contrary, the government has adopted various measures to increase recruitment of males for foreign jobs.⁴

Where women’s economic activity, productivity and leadership is promoted by the government, it tends to be in traditional and stereotypical roles. For instance, training in hairdressing and beauty culture has been a key pillar of the government’s vocational training programmes for female ex-combatants of the LTTE. In the case of female ex-combatants, the government is also claiming that it is restoring their ‘femininity’, denied to them by the LTTE.⁵ Apart from the explicitly sexist gaze that such a view represents, it also signals the obsession to ‘rescue’ women who have strayed away from patriarchal constructions of femininity.

Violence Against Women

The Prevention of Domestic Violence Act (PDVA) was enacted in 2005 following intense campaigning by women’s organisations. Even while the Act was being debated in Parliament, members from almost all parties across the spectrum had termed it anti-family.⁶ Now, seven years later, President Rajapakse himself is leading the political backlash against this Act, terming it as a western threat to Sri Lanka’s ‘ancient culture’, that is allegedly undermining the family.⁷

The presidential discourse on domestic violence not only seeks to trivialize and normalize it, but also claims that the PDVA is contributing to increasing numbers of divorce in Sri Lanka, a claim which has no basis in fact. A perusal of police statistics show that of the thousands of domestic violence complaints received by them every year, less than 1% of end up under the PDVA.⁸ Given this resurgence in “family values,” if the PDVA were to come before parliament today, it would most likely not be passed.

Women as Biological Reproducers of the Nation and its ‘Others’

As in other cases of ethno-religious nationalism, women are also being cast as the biological reproducers of the nation, with explicitly adverse consequences for women’s bodily integrity and reproductive rights. Alarmist discourses concerning the cultural and demographic extinction of the Sinhala nation have been gaining in currency in the last few years, and appear to now have the sanction of the government. A popular slogan of post independent Sri Lanka—*Punchi pavula raththaran* (small families are golden) has therefore come under increasing attack. The Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) has charged that government policy on family planning has rendered over 890,000 Sinhalese women infertile!⁹

In March 2013, following protests against family planning organized by extremist Buddhist factions, the Ministry of Health sent a circular to all government hospitals and private institutions, banning all irreversible family planning methods that control birth, while also banning non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from the provision of sterilization services. Given that Sri Lanka’s family planning policy can be traced to the

1950s,¹⁰ and has been a model for other developing countries, this represents a major policy shift that would have the effect of reversing the gains from Sri Lanka's population policy with adverse implications for other socio-economic rights of women and girls such as education and health.

Recent reports also raise questions whether this government policy is being selectively applied and whether women from minority communities are being coerced to use family planning. A report from Kilinochchi alleges that some Tamil women were administered injectable contraceptives without their informed consent, leading to the death of at least one woman.¹¹

Despite the Hela Udava Jathika Vyaparaya stating that they want all communities in Sri Lanka to have more children, fertility of women from minority communities, especially Muslims, have become a focus of fear-mongering. The BBS in particular has been asserting that the Muslim minority in Sri Lanka is soon going to outnumber the Sinhalese and overrun the country, while also spreading rumours about Muslim retailers who are allegedly selling products that make Sinhalese women infertile and rewarding male Muslim employees who marry Sinhalese employees. These rumours have created a context where boycotts of Muslim owned businesses and even violent attacks on such businesses have become permissive. The government, unsurprisingly, has done nothing to address such hate speech or quell the activities of the BBS and its ilk. All these measures have to be read together with incentives given by the state and non-state actors for larger Sinhala families.

Sri Lanka's development indicators for women, generally considered a model for

developing countries were the result firstly of equal access to education and health under the post independence welfare state and secondly, laws and policies which guaranteed to women equal status in the public sphere. The legal and policy developments catalogued in this essay therefore represents a serious rolling back of and back lash against women's rights in Sri Lanka.

(Footnotes)

- ¹ Lankan women's groups dismayed by restrictive rule for female migrant workers, Sunday Times, September 29, 2013, <http://www.sundaytimes.lk/130929/business-times/lankan-womens-groups-dismayed-by-restrictive-rule-for-female-migrant-workers-63592.html>
- ² Abeysekera, Asha and Harini Amarasuriya. 2010. Why aren't we empowered yet? Assumptions and silences surrounding women, gender and development in Sri Lanka. In *Charting Pathways to Gender Equality: Reflections and Challenges*, 107-138. Colombo: CENWOR.
- ³ Lankan women's groups dismayed by restrictive rule for female migrant workers, Sunday Times, September 29, 2013, <http://www.sundaytimes.lk/130929/business-times/lankan-womens-groups-dismayed-by-restrictive-rule-for-female-migrant-workers-63592.html>
- ⁴ Berenger, Leon. 2012. Lankan men overtake women in foreign jobs, The Sunday Times, December 9, 2012. *Lankadeepa*, 10th March 2010: 5.
- ⁵ Speech made at the National Conference on "The Role of the Business Community in Reconciliation" organized by the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute for International Relations, 24 January 2012. http://www.kadirgamarinstitute.lk/events/event_24012012/doc/rohan.htm
- ⁶ Kodikara, Chulani. 2012. Only Until the Rice is Cooked? The Prevention of Domestic Violence Act, familial ideology and cultural narratives in Sri Lanka, Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies.
- ⁷ *Lankadeepa*, 10th March 2010: 5.
- ⁸ Kodikara 2012.
- ⁹ <https://srilankamirror.com/news/14693-890-000-sinhalese-women-made-infertile-bbs>
- ¹⁰ A government policy document in 1959 noted that rapid population growth was a barrier to economic development and asked the question whether "the course of the birth rate could be influenced by a deliberate effort on the part of social policy, which excludes at the same time all forms of compulsion?" and answered it in the affirmative" (National Planning Council 1959, p. 16). Since then the government has actively promoted and provided access to family planning. As a result fertility rates in Sri Lanka fell from 5.32% in 1953 to 3.45% in 1981 and to 1.96 between 1995-2000.
- ¹¹ Above the Law: Violations of Women's Reproductive Rights in Northern Sri Lanka, by The Social Architects - on 10/11/2013. <http://groundviews.org/2013/10/11/above-the-law-violations-of-womens-reproductive-rights-in-northern-sri-lanka/>



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Devotee at the Door Opening ceremony of the annual Kannaki Amman festival, Manchanthudawai, Eastern Province

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The Goddess Kannaki-Pattini

Devotion to the goddess Kannaki-Pattini is an inspiring example of Hindu-Buddhist syncretism in Sri Lanka. Tamil Hindus know her as Kannaki and Sinhala Buddhists as Pattini.

Kannaki is the protagonist of the *Silappatikaram*, a Tamil epic from South India, is believed to have been composed around the 5th century CE. It is perhaps the greatest epic that India has produced in a language other than Sanskrit.

Kannaki, whose husband is wrongfully accused of theft and put to death by the king, represents a divine instrument of justice. The scene is set in the prologue to the epic itself:

*"We shall compose a poem, with songs,
To explain these truths: even as kings, if they break
The law, have their necks wrung by dharma;
Great men everywhere commend
Pattini of renowned fame; and karma ever
Manifests itself and is fulfilled. We shall call the poem
The Silappatikaram, the epic of the anklet,
Since the anklet brings these truths to light."
Silappatikaram, The Tale of the Anklet, translated by R. Parthasarathy*

Kannaki's apotheosis into a goddess invests her with the power to intercede on behalf of her followers. She is also someone who seeks enlightenment – and Buddhahood.



Image of the goddess, Kannaki Amman kovil, Manchanthudawai, Eastern Province

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Pattini devotee, Panama

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HISTORY

Pattini, which means 'faithful and chaste wife' in Sanskrit, is worshipped in her original form of Kannaki/Kannakai Amman or Mother, the fearless protagonist of the South Indian epic Silappadikaram (The Tale of an Anklet), by Sri Lankan Hindus, particularly in the island's eastern and northern regions. Devotees in these regions believe that Kannaki, after destroying the city of Madurai in retribution for the execution of her husband falsely accused of stealing the Queen's anklet, crossed over to Lanka in order to cool down and visited two places in the north and seven places in the east of the island, all of which now have important kovils (temples) to Kannaki Amman (see also <http://www.dailynews.lk/2001/pix/PrintPage.asp?REF=/2010/10/12/fea09.asp>).

Not surprisingly, there are many claims and counter-claims regarding the specific sites in the North and East that were visited by Kannaki. Some devotees in the North claim that Kannaki first stepped onto



Devotee, Vatarappalai Kannaki Amman Kovil,
Mullaitivu, Northern Province

SHANI JAYAWARDENE

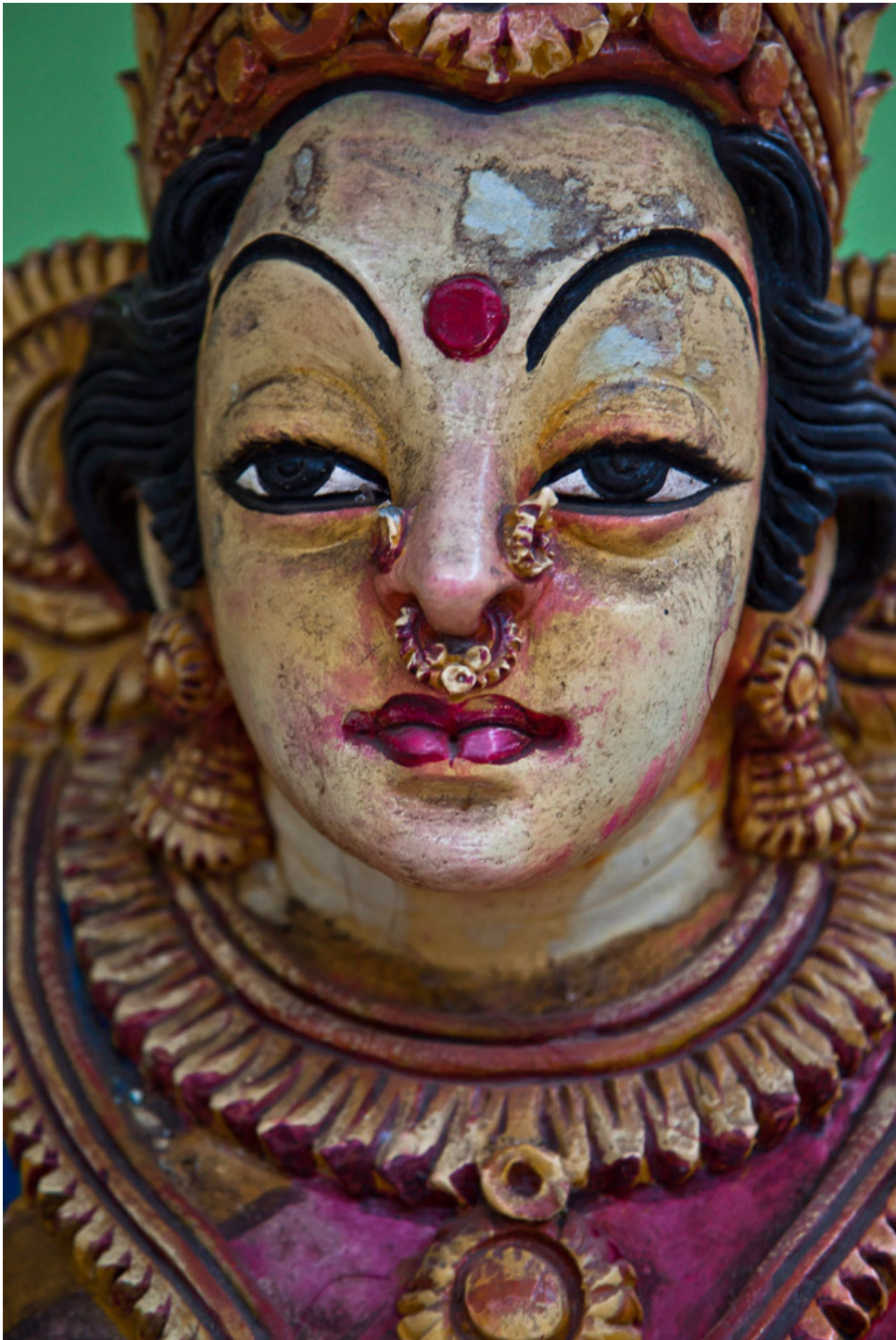
Lankan soil at Jambukola Pattinam (now Sambuturai) and rested at Sudumalai (the Kannaki kovil here has been re-named Bhuvaneshwari Amman Kovil) and Mattuvil (site of the renowned Panrithalachi Kannaki Amman Kovil) before heading East. Other devotees believe that Kannaki, broken hearted at Kovalan's second betrayal (after she pieced together his body parts, sewed them up and brought him back to life, he arose uttering Madhavi's name), assumed the form of a five-headed Naga (cobra) and sought sanctuary in Lanka. She first stopped at Nainateevu and then proceeded to Seerani, Anganam Kadawai, Alavetti and Suruvil (interestingly, this route incorporates sites where shrines to Naga deities currently exist). Another group of devotees, while agreeing that Kannaki first arrived in Nainativu in the form of a cobra, insist that she then proceeded to Kopay, Mattuvil, Velambirai, Kachchai, Nagar Koil, Puliampokkanai and finally, Vattrappalai.

curtsey - <http://invokingthegoddess.lk/history/>



Kannaki devotee, Omanthai

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Kannaki Amman statue, Karativu

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Kalaiyadal, Kannaki Amman festival, Koraveli





'May the blessings of the anklet be with you!' Ruwanwella

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Devotion to Kannaki-Pattini is an inspiring example of Hindu-Buddhist syncretism in Sri Lanka. The goddess is revered by many Tamil Hindu and Sinhala Buddhist Sri Lankans, though rituals and practices of veneration vary between the two religions, and regionally. Ironically, a significant number of Sri Lankans are unaware that she is a shared deity – an indication perhaps of the extent of the alienation between the two main ethnic communities in this small island nation. Tamil Hindus know her as Kannaki and Sinhala Buddhists as Pattini.

Pattini-Kannaki is also a fascinating and complex example of womanhood. On the one hand, she remains the chaste and loyal wife of Kovalan, despite his unfaithfulness and betrayal. But on the other hand, she is the outraged and vengeful widow who tears out her left breast and sets alight an entire city in her determination to redress injustice.

In a context where Sri Lanka is slowly emerging from three decades of civil war, and attempting to stitch together a social fabric tragically bifurcated into triumphant Sinhalese and defeated Tamils, it is timely to reflect on the shared history and traditions of Sinhalese and Tamils, Buddhists and Hindus.

As a sorrowing yet resilient woman who punishes but also offers succour to multitudes, Kannaki-Pattini is a symbol of hope to the many war widows and women-headed households now constituting a large percentage of the population. This hope is most poignantly articulated in Marilyn Krysl's short story about Rajeswary from Batticaloa who weathered unimaginable suffering until the tsunami bore her away: http://www.guernicamag.com/features/fire_inside/

curtsey - <http://invokingthegoddess.lk/intro/>



Kadadora Pattini Devale Diya Kabulumulla

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Li Keli dance practice, Panama

