

B U D D H I S T  
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M I N O R I T I E S

RELIGIOUS CONFLICT IN CONTEMPORARY  
SRI LANKA

EDITED BY  
JOHN CLIFFORD HOLT

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2016

## CHAPTER TWO

# RETHINKING MUSLIM IDENTITY IN SRI LANKA

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### INTRODUCTION

The campaign of anti-Muslim agitation led by the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) and other militant Sinhala Buddhist organizations starting in 2011 is only the latest manifestation of an underlying ethnic friction that has troubled Sri Lanka for over a century. Largely eclipsed by the Tamil versus Sinhala ethnic conflict in the postindependence period, an undercurrent of anti-Muslim sentiment has existed both in the Tamil and in the Sinhala communities of the island, posing a threat to Sri Lanka's most geographically dispersed and most widely visible minority community. In response to fluctuating political conditions and historical circumstances in the 20th century, the Tamil-speaking Sri Lankan Muslims (Moors) have embraced several different collective identities, each conferring cultural meaning and social prestige, but each entailing pragmatic political liabilities as well. The contemporary challenge posed by radicalized Buddhist monks and their Sinhala ethnonationalist supporters may require yet another readjustment of Sri Lankan Muslims' public image and sense of group identity.<sup>1</sup>

### MUSLIMS OF SRI LANKA: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Because the two main protagonists in Sri Lanka's contemporary ethnonationalist politics, the Sinhalas and the Tamils, justify their claims in terms of ancient settlements and control of territory, the Muslims—whose documented presence dates to “merely” a thousand years ago—are always at a historical disadvantage. Constituting 9.2% of the Sri Lankan population

(2012 Census), their origins are clearly connected to the maritime Indian Ocean trade between the Middle East and South and Southeast Asia that brought both Arab and Persian sailors as regular visitors to the island in the medieval period (Ali 1981a; Effendi 1965; Kiribamune 1986, Wink 1990).<sup>2</sup> Later, following Vasco da Gama's 1498 naval crusade against the "Moors" of Calicut, the Portuguese encountered Muslim traders in Sri Lanka who spoke Tamil, who had ongoing links with the Muslims of the Malabar and Coromandel Coasts of South India, and who had been given royal permission to collect customs duties and regulate shipping in the major southwestern port settlements under the suzerainty of the Sinhalese Kings of Kotte (Indrapala 1986; Abeyasinghe 1986). Commercial, cultural, and even migrational links between Muslim towns in southern India and Sri Lankan Moorish settlements are confirmed in the historical traditions of Beruwala, Kalpitiya, Jaffna, and other coastal settlements where Sri Lankan Muslims have lived for centuries (Casie Chitty 1834: 254–271; Denham 1912: 234). Like the coastal Muslims of South India and the Muslims of Southeast Asia, the Sri Lankan Moors are Sunni members of the Shafi'i legal school, a legacy of the south Arabian sea traders who first brought Islam to the region (Fanselow 1989). To varying degrees, the Sri Lankan Moors also preserve matrilineal and matrilineal family patterns, a legacy of the Coromandel and Malabar connection that has shaped Tamil social structure in Sri Lanka as well (Raghavan 1971: 199–217; McGilvray 1989, 2008).

Under Portuguese and Dutch colonial rule, the Moors were subjected to strict penalties and restrictions because of their Islamic faith and the threat they posed to the European monopoly of overseas trade. In the 17th century, many coastal Muslims migrated inland to the Kandyan Kingdom, where they engaged in *tavalam* bullock transport and a diverse range of other occupations (C. R. de Silva 1968; Dewaraja 1994, 1995). Ultimately, they settled throughout the Sinhala-speaking regions of the island, where two-thirds of them still reside today. The remainder, one-third of the total, are found in the Tamil-speaking northern and eastern regions of the island where they live as paddy farmers, fishermen, and merchants (see Figure 2.1 and 2.2). Taken as a whole, the Moors of Sri Lanka reflect a wide spectrum of socioeconomic levels and occupational

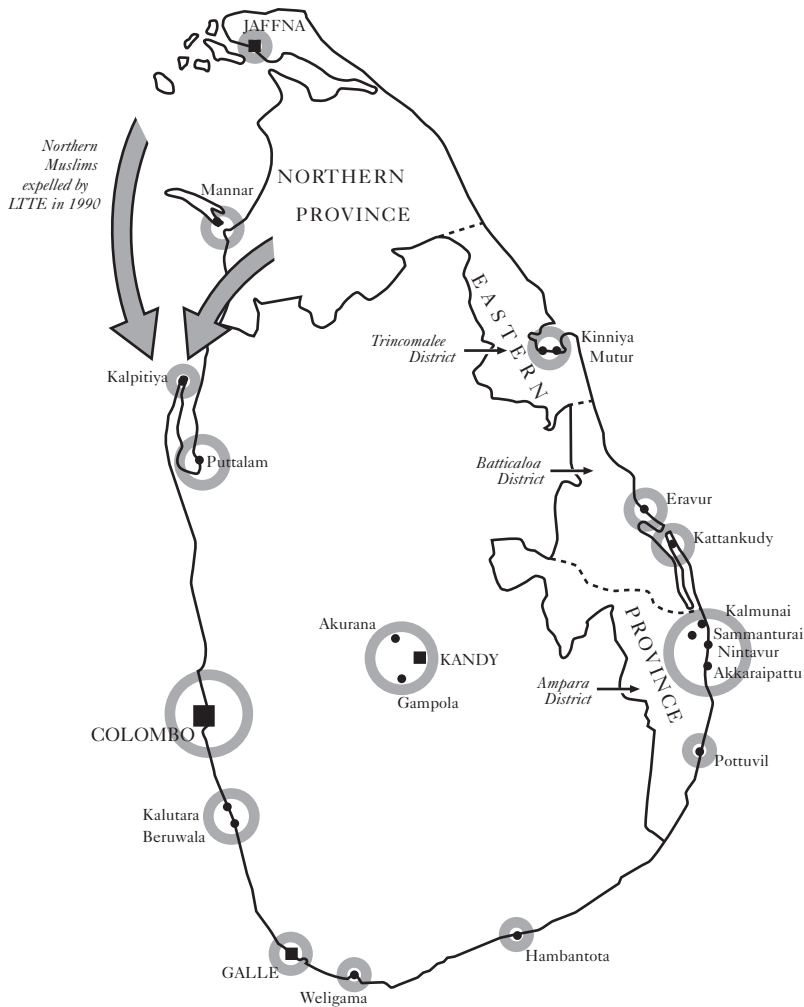


Figure 2.1 Important centers of Muslim population in Sri Lanka.

specialties, from wealthy urban business magnates and gem traders to rural farmers and fishermen; from textile and hardware merchants to restaurant owners and tea shop proprietors; from teachers and professionals to marginal smallholders and impoverished slum dwellers (Mauroof 1972). More recently, there are dispossessed “Northern Muslim” refugees who were forced from their homes and properties in Jaffna and Mannar in 1990 by the LTTE and who are still living in IDP (internally displaced person) camps in Kalpitiya (Hasbullah 2004; Thiranagama 2011).



**Figure 2.2** A Muslim merchant at his textile shop in Batticaloa.

Photo by Dennis McGilvray.

In addition to the predominant Tamil-speaking Moors—95% of all Sri Lankan Muslims—there is also a small Sunni Muslim community of Malays who are descended from Javanese soldiers and princes transported to the island by the Dutch in the 17th and 18th centuries (Hussainmiya 1986; Mahroof 1994; Ricci 2014) and who were historically concentrated in the Slave Island area of Colombo and in Hambantota. And finally, there are small numbers of Bombay and Gujarati Muslim traders—Bohras, Khojas, and Memons—who have prosperous business interests in Colombo. Recent anti-Muslim activism has not focused on these small Muslim subminorities but rather on the Tamil-speaking Muslims (or Moors, a term I will use interchangeably) who are the subject of the following discussion.

#### ANTI-MUSLIM SENTIMENT IN SRI LANKA

Muslims have often been the target of communal animosity and violence from the Tamil side, most harshly seen in the LTTE massacres

of eastern Muslims at prayer and the forced expulsion and expropriation of Muslims from Jaffna and Mannar in 1990. However, the most traumatic case of anti-Muslim violence occurred in 1915 throughout the southern and central regions of the island when Sinhala mobs burned Muslim shops and homes in an outbreak of civil unrest that required the deployment of British colonial troops to restore order (Roberts 1994; Ali 1981b). When a leading Tamil statesman of the day, Ponnambalam Ramanathan, defended the Sinhala rioters against colonial justice, it deepened a rift that had already opened between the Tamil and the Muslim communities over the question of ethnic/racial group representation on the Legislative Council, further eroding Muslim confidence in Tamil leadership and strengthening Muslim loyalty to the British crown.<sup>3</sup> This was also the period when the influential Buddhist religious crusader, Anagarika Dharmapala, was preaching against Muslims and foreigners who were alleged to be weakening the integrity of the Sinhalese nation (Guruge 1965: 540). Nevertheless, when it became clear that the Sinhala ethnic majority would firmly control the democratic politics of Ceylon as independence approached in 1948, the urban Muslim leadership chose to align itself with the Sinhalese bloc instead of with the Tamil nationalist and federalist parties.

In the first four decades of independence, the Muslim leadership pursued a pragmatic, self-interested, and largely successful strategy of flexible coalitions and alliances within the two main Sinhala majority parties, taking advantage of their position as kingmakers and as foils against Tamil federalist agendas. Throughout this period, local anti-Muslim outbreaks occurred in both Tamil and Sinhala areas but never escalated to the level of community-wide concern. After 1985, when the armed Tamil Eelam conflict broke out, the Sri Lankan government took care, through concessionary tactics as well as covert subversive operations, to prevent the Muslims in the northern and eastern regions from joining the “Tamil-speaking” nationalist project. Despite these gestures from the Sinhala majority leadership, however, in the 1980s, the Muslims created their first political parties in response to the dangers they faced from the LTTE in the

eastern region, signaling their intention to chart a more independent political course between the two ethnonationalist rivals, the Sinhala and the Tamils.

Since the tsunami in 2004 and the defeat of the LTTE in 2009, the middle-class Muslims in Colombo and in the southern Sinhala-majority region of the island, as well as the Muslims in the Eastern Province, have prospered. Various rival Muslim “big men” politicians in Parliament representing major population clusters in Ampara and Batticaloa Districts have mobilized patronage networks that have delivered significant infrastructural benefits to their constituents, whereas the recovery of local Tamil communities, affected much more severely by the war, has lagged. In the northern areas of Mannar, Jaffna, and the Vanni, the reconstruction has been far slower under continuing Sri Lankan military occupation.

Politically speaking, the defeat of the Tamil Tigers and the diasporic departure of many middle-class Tamils from the north and the east led the Sinhala nationalist leadership under former President Mahinda Rajapaksa to feel they had less need to cater so assiduously to the Muslims, and some observers say this created an opportunity for Sinhala Buddhist xenophobes to focus on a neglected target (Imtiyaz and Mohamed-Saleem 2015). The absence of a unified clerical hierarchy among the Buddhist *sangha* made it possible for schismatic monks to create new organizations such as the BBS and to fabricate charges against Muslims and Christians that no one had heard before. Since 2011, an increasing number of anti-Muslim and anti-Christian incidents in Sinhala areas have taken place, starting with the demolition of a Muslim holy man’s tomb in Anuradhapura and culminating with the dangerous Aluthgama riots of June 2014 (Centre for Policy Alternatives 2013; Sri Lanka Muslim Congress 2014; Haniffa et al. 2015; Secretariat for Muslims 2015).

The BBS (“Buddhist Strength Force”) and its allies Sinhala Ravaya (“Sinhala Outcry”) and Ravana Balaya (“Ravana Power”) accuse the Muslim community of spreading a religion of jihadist terror, economic exploitation, black-veiled misogyny, and cruelty to animals. They argue that Islam is a foreign, neocolonialist religion

like Christianity with no authentic roots in South Asian Indic civilization and one that allegedly, like Christianity, pursues “unethical conversions.” They claim that Muslims are waging a secret contraceptive campaign (through tainted powdered milk and contaminated women’s underwear) to keep the Sinhala birth rate low, while maintaining a relentless reproductive rate of their own that will demographically transform Sri Lanka into an Islamic nation within a generation or two.<sup>4</sup> They seek to demolish Muslim mosques and saintly tombs that have been built within the “sacred zones” of Buddhist temples and archaeological sites and object to the expansion or construction of new mosques in other areas (Amarasuriya et al. 2015, McGilvray 2016). They mock Muslim women’s Arab-style *hijāb* (black outer *abaya* garment, plus head-covering scarf or wimple) and *niqāb* (full facial veil) as resembling a scary “gunny-sack monster” (*goni billa*), and they allege that hidden jihadi terror squads are poised to attack from within the Muslim community (Figure 2.3). They object to the success of Muslim-owned retail chains such as Fashion Bug and No Limit, which they claim are morally corrupt and exploitative. They decry the Muslim slaughter of cattle, despite the fact that beef is a widely consumed part of the Sinhala diet; and they claim, astonishingly, that the kitchen staff in Muslim restaurants are required by their religion to spit three times into the food before it is served to non-Muslim customers. The most successful achievement of the BBS campaign has been to remove the visible halal certification logo from supermarket food and toiletries sold to the general public, arguing that non-Muslims should not have to pay the extra cost for halal meat and merchandise (Haniffa 2016).

A number of theories have been proposed to explain why the BBS arose to prominence so suddenly starting in 2011 and why the Sri Lankan government of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa (2005–2015) did very little to silence its anti-Muslim slander campaign, even though it was humiliating to the Muslim members of his ruling United People’s Freedom Alliance and risked alienating Muslim governments abroad with which Sri Lanka had vital trade





Figure 2.3 The *niqāb* veil portrayed as a female terrorist costume on the cover of a BBS publication in Sinhala entitled *Encountering the Demise of a Race: An Inquiry into Population Trends in Sri Lanka*. Image from Jones (2015: 148).

and diplomatic ties. The most plausible idea is that Rajapaksa, realizing he was unlikely to garner much Tamil or Muslim support for re-election to a fourth term, allowed the demonization of Muslims to increase the turnout of his rural Sinhala Buddhist voter base in the 2015 election. A less plausible theory is that Rajapaksa, desperate to block a United Nations human rights investigation into alleged military atrocities in the final stages of the Eelam War, hoped to provoke a violent reaction from Sri Lankan Muslims as proof of jihadi terrorism in the island, thus winning international sympathy and forgiveness for the brutal actions he took against the LTTE and Tamil civilians in 2009 (Harrison 2014). Predictably enough, international conspiracy theories also circulated: either the BBS was

funded by the Pakistani intelligence agency (ISI or Inter-Services Intelligence) as a way to panic Sri Lankan Muslims into assisting their secret operations in South India, or the BBS was a tool of the Israeli Mossad and was funded by Norway as part of a global Zionist campaign against Islam.

Observers have been quick to notice that the BBS and its allies bear a resemblance to right-wing Hindutva organizations in India, such as the VHP (Vishva Hindu Parishad) and the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), who target Muslims and Christians and who espouse a narrow Brahmanical definition of the Hindu religious heritage. Recent developments indicate that the BBS aspires to emulate these militant Indian Hindutva groups by organizing a Sinhala Buddhist counterpart organization (Janardhanan 2015; Jones 2015: 60). They have already established linkages with the anti-Muslim “969” movement in Burma headed by the Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu, who was invited to address a BBS convention in Colombo in September 2014. Especially worrying to many observers was that 2015 marked the 100th anniversary of the Sinhala-Muslim riots of 1915, suggesting that the Aluthgama riots might prove a precursor to even worse anti-Muslim violence. The democratic change of government in January 2015 from the leadership of Mahinda Rajapaksa to that of Maithripala Sirisena offers some hope that the danger of a widespread anti-Muslim outbreak can be reduced at this historic juncture.

#### ALTERNATIVE MUSLIM IDENTITIES

Instead of focusing solely on the immediate causes of the crisis and the motives of the principal actors, it is important to consider the public image of the Muslim community as a whole vis-à-vis other groups in Sri Lanka’s multicultural society, a collective identity that has shifted over time in response to British colonial rule, postindependence politics, and evolving global influences (Ismail 1995). Broadly speaking, there have been four major ways in which the identity of the Sri Lankan Muslims – that is, the Tamil-speaking Moors – has been conceived over the past 300 years, each offering advantages and disadvantages suited to a particular historical moment.

I. ENDOGAMY AND OCCUPATION:  
SRI LANKAN MUSLIMS AS A “CASTE”

Although it seems outlandish today, the precolonial identity of the Sri Lankan Moors would have placed them within a prevailing South Asian Hindu–Buddhist universe of hereditary castes: locally situated, endogamous, ritually ranked, occupationally specialized groups regulated by royal or chiefly authority. In 21st-century Sri Lanka, the idea of a Muslim caste identity is totally archaic and outmoded, yet one has only to look across the water to South India to see examples of Muslim subgroups today that have been deemed “caste-like” in their composition and behavior despite wide differences in Muslim versus Hindu perceptions (Fanselow 1996). Along the Tamilnadu coastline, one finds culturally distinct, semi-endogamous Maraikkayar Muslim settlements that proudly claim Arab descent and a seafaring tradition that connects them to Colombo, Penang, and Singapore (McGilvray 1998; More 1991; Raja Mohamad 2004; Vadlamudi 2016). In the North Malabar region of Kerala, the Malayalam-speaking Mappila Muslims recognize distinct caste-like social strata and local hereditary elites such as the Koyas of Calicut and the Keyis of Tellicherry (D’Souza 1973; Sebastian 2013). The Urdu-speaking Deccani Muslims of Chennai are an endogamous aristocracy unto themselves (Vatuk 2014). Recent scholarship strongly points to the influence of caste-oriented British ethnography on the 19th- and 20th-century creation and reification of these social strata among South Indian Muslims themselves, but they are nonetheless widely (if unevenly) recognized today (Tschacher 2014).

The early colonial history of Sri Lanka shows that Muslim traders and merchantmen were granted an occupational monopoly of trade at the island’s seaports, and that later, in the Kandyan Kingdom, the caste-based service department for bullock transport (*madige badda*) was allocated jointly to the Sinhala Karava caste and to the Muslims (Rogers 1994, 1995; Dewaraja 1994, 1995). Dewaraja celebrates the integration of Muslims into the fabric of the 17th and 18th century Kandyan kingdom, but they were allocated their roles within a hierarchical caste-based Sinhala social order. In Tamil-speaking regions such

as Batticaloa, ethnohistorical evidence indicates that local Moorish settlements were subject to high-caste Tamil chiefly authority and that Moors were allocated certain ritual duties in major Hindu temples in the same manner as Tamil castes (McGilvray 1982b, 2008). However, despite the existence of hereditary Muslim barber-circumcisers (*ostā*) and the saintly lineages of *maulana seyyids*, a differentiated set of Muslim “castes” did not emerge in Sri Lanka as they did in India. One factor influencing this outcome may have been the British colonial policy of enumerating Ceylon’s population by native “races” rather than by a caste census as was done in India (Rogers 2004, Dirks 2001). Another factor is the diversity of livelihoods and economic adaptations in Moorish settlements across the island—from farming and fishing to trading and professions—that would have made a singular hereditary caste occupation and ritual rank impossible to define.

#### ANALYSIS

The universal equality of all Muslims before Allah is an obvious impediment to the creation of caste or hereditary barriers between members of the *ummah*, the community of all Muslims. Still, Sri Lankan Muslims have at times displayed group rivalries and prestige rankings that are not egalitarian, such as the early 20th-century disputes between Moors and Malays over administration of the Maradana mosque in Colombo (Asad 1993: 90; Nuhman 2007: 40–42). In the Ampara District, local mosques were traditionally administered by a committee of male trustees (*maraikkar*), each representing a different local matrilineal clan (*kuṭi*), and each clan ranked in terms of local status and prestige (McGilvray 2008). All such hereditary Muslim status differentials are gradually fading from memory now. However, the comparison with contemporary South Indian Muslim social divisions should not be ignored because a similar pattern could have arisen in Sri Lanka under different historical circumstances. Also, links between Sri Lankan and South

Indian Muslim communities are still quite strong today, especially in the commercial sector.

## 2. LANGUAGE AND CIVILIZATION:

### SRI LANKAN MUSLIMS AS “ISLAMIC TAMILS”

In cosmopolitan areas such as Colombo, many younger generation Muslims attend school in the Sinhala medium, and they often study English for personal and professional advancement. There are a few mosques where the Friday sermon is nowadays delivered in Sinhala, and there are certainly some urban Muslim youth who can barely speak, let alone read, a word of Tamil (Nuhman 2007: chap. 3). However, the mother tongue, the spoken language of the home, for the overwhelming majority of Sri Lankan Moors remains Tamil. This is especially so in the North and the East, where Hindu and Christian Tamils live side by side with Tamil-speaking Muslims, but it is generally true as well in the Sinhala-majority areas of the South. Beyond the widespread popularity of Tamil cinema and pop music, there is a deep and continuing heritage of Muslim literature in Tamil, as well as an older corpus in Arabic-Tamil, which uses the Arabic alphabet to write Tamil phonetically (Uwise 1986, 1990; Nuhman 2007). Indeed, the strength and vitality of the Sri Lankan Muslim contribution to Tamil letters further underscores the paradox that the Moors in 20th century Sri Lanka have publicly rejected any identification as “Tamils,” a group designation that is fundamentally linguistic in nature.

The question of whether the Sri Lankan Muslims are, like Hindu Tamils and Christian Tamils, simply “Islamic Tamils” (*islāmiya tamilar*) has been at the root of tensions between the Sri Lankan Tamil and Moorish leadership for over a century. High caste Jaffna Tamil leaders (some of them Christian) unsuccessfully tried to assert leadership over the Moorish community in the colonial period, utilizing colonial ethnography to support their argument that the Moors were actually Tamils in a linguistic and cultural sense (Ramanathan 1888). This occurred at a time when some conservative high-caste Tamils were loath

to consider the untouchable Hindu castes as “Tamils” at all. In the early postindependence period, the Federal Party sometimes appealed to Muslims to unite under the banner of Sri Lanka’s “Tamil-speaking peoples,” but their political support was always contingent and temporary. The problem has festered ever since, resurfacing during the Eelam Wars in brutal LTTE vengeance against the Moors whom they regarded as traitors to the pan-Dravidian linguistic movement.

#### ANALYSIS

While working on a fieldwork project with me in Tamilnadu in 2015, my Moorish research associate from Colombo was surprised to find himself being introduced to Muslim friends in Chennai as a Tamil. A recent documentary film celebrates the strong Tamil ethnicity of Muslims in Tamilnadu (Anwar 2013). Although there has been some political polarization, including the creation of new Tamil Islamist political parties in Tamilnadu in the wake of the Babri Masjid incident, the majority of Tamilnadu Muslims still vote for the DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam), the Dravidian nationalist party founded by C. N. Annadurai in 1949 and led today by octogenarian M. Karunanidhi. When talking with scholars and intellectuals in Tamilnadu, both Hindu and Muslim, I found it difficult to convince them that Sri Lanka’s Tamil-speaking Muslims should not be regarded as Tamils. The historic stone mosques in Kilakkarai and Kayalpattanam, carved in pure Dravidian style, seem to make the same argument architecturally (Shokoohy 2003).

This, of course, reflects the difference in linguistic demography between Tamilnadu, where the entire state is either monolingual or bilingual in Tamil, versus Sri Lanka, where 70% of the population speaks Sinhala. Muslims in Tamilnadu have had nothing to lose, and everything to gain, by embracing the Dravidian nationalist movement, which in turn welcomed them wholeheartedly as “non-Brahmins” (More 1993; Fakhri 2008). For the two-thirds of Sri Lankan Moors living in the central and southwestern Sinhala-majority regions of the island, on the other hand, asserting their identity as “Muslim Tamils” would be a severe liability, both at the ballot box and in terms of personal safety and economic

well-being (O'Sullivan 1997). The situation would be different among the Moors of the North-East, where Tamil linguistic loyalties are shared with Hindus and Christians, but this could lead to a regional split within the Muslim community, something that Muslim politicians have tried to prevent out of fear of losing influence at the center. It remains an open question whether Moors in the postwar North-Eastern region will regain a feeling of shared linguistic nationalism with the Tamils, despite Muslim majority vulnerability in Colombo and the Sinhala-speaking South.

### 3. RACE AND ANCESTRY: SRI LANKAN MUSLIMS AS "MOORS"

As a counternarrative to the Tamil claim that the Moors are their benighted "Islamic Tamil" brethren, and as a way to earn a secure place on the official roster of "native races" in British colonial Ceylon, the Muslim elite at the beginning of the 20th century actively cultivated a racial identity as the descendants of Arab sea traders and pilgrims to Adam's Peak. The visits of Arabs and Persians to the island is well-attested in the historical record, but additional inspiration was provided by the arrival in 1883 of an exiled Egyptian revolutionary, Orabi Pasha, and his fez-capped entourage of followers. Orabi Pasha became a staunch colonial loyalist after arriving in Colombo, and his neo-Ottoman sophistication inspired new Sri Lankan Muslim fashion styles and projects of community self-improvement, including western-style schools for Muslim children.<sup>5</sup>

The colonial idea of native races, a concept long discredited by modern anthropology, is still alive and well in contemporary Sri Lanka. At the turn of the 20th century, it was the basis for indigenous representation on the Legislative Council in colonial Ceylon; and Muslim leaders hoped that the "Arab" Moorish race could stand on an equal footing with the "Aryan" Sinhalese, the "Dravidian" Tamils, the "Javanese" Malays, and the "European" Burghers. The term Moor is of Portuguese origin (from *mouro*, North African), a label the Portuguese applied to every Muslim they encountered between Lisbon



**Figure 2.4** The library of the Moors’ Islamic Cultural Home featuring portraits of past presidents and community leaders, most of whom are wearing a red Ottoman fez cap.

Photo by Dennis McGilvray.

and Mindanao. However, the closest term in Tamil and Malayalam is Sonahar (*cōṇakar*), meaning a person of West Asian or Arab origin, from Tamil *cōṇakam*, Arabia (Tamil Lexicon vol.3, p. 1679). This traditional ethnonym continues to be used in conversational Tamil by Sri Lankan Moors today.<sup>6</sup> For Sri Lankan Moors, Orabi Pasha and his supporters came to embody an ideal of Middle Eastern civilization and pan-Islamic solidarity, as later represented in the Khilafat Movement of the 1920s. His Ottoman sartorial taste inspired a legal “fight for the fez” in colonial courtroom etiquette while remaining a conspicuously loyal subject of the Queen (Thawfeeq 1972; Samaraweera 1977). The Moors’ Islamic Cultural Home, founded in Colombo in 1944, remains today as the major cultural institution of the Sonahar community (Figure 2.4), comparable to the Dutch Burgher Union for Sri Lanka’s Eurasian community (McGilvray 1982a).



## ANALYSIS

The concept of an Arab Moorish “race” provides a simple and appealing origin story. However, at an ethnographic level, Moorish identity fails to reflect Middle Eastern Arab cultural norms in any way, apart from Islam. Moorish families are not strongly patrilineal or patrilocal; indeed, many are matrilineal and matrilocal. They forbid marriage with patrilineal parallel cousins (i.e., father’s brother’s son or daughter), which is standard practice in the Middle East. Instead, they endorse marriage with cross cousins, and they reckon family relationships according to a Dravidian-type classification that is virtually identical to the Tamil and Sinhala kinship systems (Yalman 1967, McGilvray 2008). Like the Burghers, many of whom bear little “racial” resemblance to their Portuguese and Dutch forebears, the Sri Lankan Moors are often indistinguishable today from the Sinhalese or the Tamils, apart from cultural markers of dress, language, and religion. This awkward point was acknowledged early on by Moorish boosters who nonetheless contended, following European genealogical rules, that even a few drops of patrilineal Arab blood from the 12th century would qualify today’s Sri Lankan Moors as members of the Arab race (Azeez 1907). This obviously ignores generations and generations of intermarriage with Sri Lankan women, a cumulative maternal component that seems far more significant than any original Arab paternity (Ismail 1995). The only contemporary Moorish families who can specifically trace their ancestry to Arabia are the Maulanas (Seyyids), patrilineal descendants of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, many of whom migrated from the Hadramaut and other districts of Yemen in the 18th and 19th centuries (Ho 2006).

Most Moors today know Arabic only as a language of prayer and Quranic recitation. Although today one sees many urban Moorish women wearing the black Saudi-style *abaya* and *hijāb*, this Arab form of dress has largely been adopted in the last half century (Nuhman 2007: 203–208). When I first began anthropological fieldwork in 1969, every Muslim women in the agricultural town of Akkaraipattu (Ampara District) wore an incandescently colorful sari, pulling the

cloth across her face for modesty when necessary (*mukkādu*). Similarly, older Moorish men in Akkaraipattu wore a white or checked sarong, not a Gulf-style *thobe* or *jubba*. Moorish foodways are Sri Lankan, not Middle Eastern, with a preponderance of coconut-milk based curries and sweets.

Whereas the claim of Arab ancestry might have a grain of historical truth, the Sri Lankan proponents of Moorish identity have been silent about another, even more plausible, ethnic genealogy: migration and intermarriage from the Coromandel and Malabar Coasts of South India. This would also explain why the Muslim community speaks Tamil rather than Sinhala, the language that Moorish descendants would presumably have spoken if their Arab forefathers had wed Sinhala women they met when they landed along the southwestern coast of the island. When I spoke with Muslim Tamils in coastal towns of Tamilnadu such as Karaikkal, Kilakkarai, and Kayalpattinam in 2015, they considered Sri Lankan Muslim culture and history to be continuous with their own, citing a long history of family migrations and business dealings with Colombo and other Sri Lankan towns. Similar commercial and family connections with Mappila Muslims from Cochin and Calicut are well known in the British colonial period. Indeed, it has been argued that it was the sharp business practices and religious zealotry of so-called “Coast Moor” (i.e., South Indian Muslim) traders and shopkeepers in Sri Lanka that especially angered the Sinhalese rioters in 1915 (Ali 1981b).

Either way, whether “Arabs” or “South Indians,” the Sri Lankan Moorish construction of a foreign racial or ethnic identity that was once useful under the British colonial regime eventually became a liability in the xenophobic postindependence era, just as it did for the Burgers. In the eyes of some, it could suggest that Sri Lankan Moors are self-proclaimed aliens, colonizers, and carpetbaggers rather than primordial inhabitants of Lanka whose ancestor descended on Adam’s Peak.<sup>7</sup> The current influx of wealthy Arab tourists (and gamblers) from the oil-rich Emirates and Saudi Arabia further underscores the disadvantages of an Arab identity for the Sri Lankan Moors today.

#### 4. RELIGION: SRI LANKAN MUSLIMS AS "MUSLIMS"

To escape the disadvantages and encumbrances of the prevailing language-based and racially based identities in Sri Lanka's ethnnonationalist cauldron, some mid-20th-century Muslim leaders decided to opt for "none of the above." Although attachment to Tamil language and culture remains strong, and racial pride as Arab descendants still resonates widely, the primary identification of the Moorish community today has become simply "Muslim." By choosing to identify themselves solely by religion, the Muslims have done something no other Sri Lankan community has tried, or has been capable of trying. There are significant Christian minorities within both the Sinhala and Tamil communities, so their ethnicity cannot be reduced to Buddhism or Hinduism. On closer examination, even the "Muslim" label is complicated by the presence of ethnically distinct Malay Muslims and smaller Gujarati-speaking Sunni Muslim communities of Khojas and Memons. There are also wealthy Gujarati-speaking Bohras, a Shi'ite sect that maintains an elegant mosque in Bambalapitiya from which Sunni Muslims are excluded. In effect, the generic religious term "Muslim" has become an unmarked ethnic label specifically denoting "Tamil-speaking Sri Lankan Sunni Muslims": in other words, the Moors or Sonahars. To avoid ambiguity, all other Sri Lankan Muslim communities must be identified specifically by name.

#### ANALYSIS

When the idea of promulgating an island-wide "Muslim" identity was first proposed in the era leading up to independence in 1948, it may have been regarded as a more modern and universalistic label, possibly one that resonated with Muslim League politics in India, but it was not intended to mark out any Islamic sectarian agenda. Similarly, when the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress (SLMC) emerged in the 1980s in response to LTTE violence against Moors in the Eastern Province, it was not conceived as an Islamist party. In the decades since independence,

however, the Muslims of Sri Lanka, like Muslims throughout the world, have experienced the effects of pan-Islamic reform movements, leading to significant changes in popular Muslim society and culture. Some of the visible shifts include the widespread adoption of austere Middle-Eastern-inspired *purdah* and *hijāb* attire by Muslim women; the wearing of Arab-style *thobes* and *jubba* garments, and the concomitant display of henna-dyed beards and hair, by some Muslim men; the construction of many new well-funded mosques and madrasas; the stricter public enforcement of gender segregation rules; the marketing of meat and numerous other products with a halal-certified logo; and the growth of Islamic banks and financial institutions. In addition, some middle-class Muslim self-improvement organizations have urged a greater degree of social distance from non-Muslims in the interest of Islamic piety (Haniffa 2008). In some Muslim circles, participation in the Rotary or Lions Club is now frowned on because the non-Muslim members may consume alcohol.

Moreover, the very concept of Muslimness itself has been contested in recent decades by the polarization between traditionalist and reformist brands of Islam. I am sure that Muslim paddy farmers on the east coast of the island had no idea that their vow making and celebration of *kandoori* festivals at local saintly tombs was a “Sufi” practice when I first met them in the 1970s; but in recent years, fundamentalist opposition to such shrine-based Sufi devotion has become quite zealous, even violent (McGilvray 2011; Spencer et al. 2015: chap. 5).<sup>8</sup> A number of South Asian Islamic reform movements are now active in Sri Lanka, among them Jamaat-e-Islami, Tablighi Jamaat, and Towheed Jamaat (Nuhman 2007: 174–184; Osella and Osella 2013; Faslan and Nadine 2015). To distinguish themselves, adherents of the older and more customary forms of Muslim worship now actively identify as “Sunnattu Jamaat,” that is, as Muslim traditionalists.

Sadly, the very Muslim religious identity that Moorish leaders had hoped would shield their community from Sinhalese ethnonationalism and Tamil linguistic chauvinism has now served to bring them directly into focus as a target of the BBS and similar militant Buddhist groups. An Islamic religious identity now makes the Moors vulnerable to accusations of having exogenous origins and importing an alien

proselytizing religion into Dhamma Dīpa (“Island of the Dhamma”), the exclusive Sinhala Buddhist ethnonationalist vision of Sri Lanka.

#### REACTIONS AND CONCERNS IN THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY

Muslim reactions to the onslaught by the BBS have ranged from civil indignation and alarm to international conspiracy theories to collective community introspection. Although the most urgent issue was to find a compromise solution to the BBS campaign against halal certification (Haniffa 2016), there were soon broader community reflections about Muslim self-alienation from the rest of Sri Lankan society through unnecessary signs of religious piety. According to this view, the adoption of more stringent and visible markers of Islamic orthodoxy than were formerly the norm in Sri Lanka has alarmed and alienated the average Sinhala Buddhist citizen, thus drawing unnecessary attention to the Muslim community as a whole and generating sympathy for the BBS (Herath and Harshana 2015). Foremost among these changes is the Muslim women’s black *hijāb* or *parda* attire, and the occasional full face veil (*niqāb*), both of which are nowadays frequently seen on the streets of Colombo and in major Sri Lankan towns (Haniffa 2005; Nuhman 2007: 199–208). Some Muslim commentators have argued that reverting to the customary colored sari would allow ample female modesty while honoring a local and familiar Sri Lankan sartorial tradition. Even changing the new-style *hijāb* to an attractive color, some say, would alleviate the negative symbolic connotations of the color black in the Sinhala cultural worldview. It has been noted that whereas Muslim women’s *hijāb* may have helped to distinguish them from Tamils during the Eelam Wars, it now makes them highly visible targets of BBS fear campaigns.

Other concerns have been voiced from within the Muslim community, including a worry that rigid gender segregation, and the absence of women from mosques, could support fantasies about secret all-male business conspiracies and clandestine *jihādi* plots. In addition to the amplified call to prayer five times per day, a perennial source of non-Muslim complaint, there is the anachronistic uncertainty of Islamic holidays whose exact timing still relies on a human sighting of the new

moon rather than on modern astronomical science. Another source of controversy and chagrin has been the planting of Middle Eastern date palm trees along the main street in Kattankudy as an expression of hyper-Islamic civic space (Ali 2012; Kolor 2015: 82–125).

Some of the most difficult issues in this debate are economic and governmental, and they have not yet been carefully addressed. For example, there are strong indications that economic rivalries and resentments have played a role in the anti-Muslim agitation. This was suggested most clearly by the mob violence and arson attacks against leading Muslim-owned retail clothing chains such as Fashion Bug and No Limit in 2013–2014. The restaurant sector, also heavily Muslim owned, could be vulnerable in the future. On the legislative side, the existence of a separate body of Muslim personal law, including Islamic inheritance rules and the (rarely utilized) right of plural marriage, is considered by some non-Muslims to be an affront to their civil equality before the law. Perhaps the least-recognized problem, and one that may take generations to solve, is the separation of Muslim schoolchildren from their Sinhala and Tamil peers as a result of Sri Lanka's national system of government-run Muslim schools, which also follows a different academic calendar (Figure 2.5). Promoted after independence by UNP politician Razik Fareed, and further implemented in the late 1960s under the leadership of the SLFP education minister, Badiuddin Muhammad, these schools were intended to remedy the historic educational disadvantages facing the Muslim community (Ali 1986; O'Sullivan 1997; Knoerzer 1998; Nuhman 2007: 146–148). Muslim schools today continue to perform well academically, but they also tend to keep Muslim children within their own community, reducing the likelihood of spontaneous face-to-face interactions and friendships with students from other ethnic and religious backgrounds, a trend that is seen also in the growth of private Muslim “international schools” in Colombo. In contrast, one sees throngs of schoolchildren in Chennai heading home after classes, Hindu girls in regular school uniforms holding hands with Muslim girlfriends in full or partial *hijāb*. Today's generation of Muslim adults may be the last to cherish lifelong friendships and informal acquaintances with Sinhala and Tamil school classmates. Even more worrisome is



**Figure 2.5** A classroom at the A-Siraj Muslim School in Akkaraipattu, Ampara District.

Photo by Dennis McGilvray.

that the reverse is also true, and the implications for community “self-alienation” are profound.

## CONCLUSION

The most striking chromatic binary on the Sri Lankan street today is the saffron-robed *bhikkhu* and the black-shrouded Muslim woman in Saudi-style *hijāb*: a visual reminder of contemporary Sinhala–Muslim tensions. The emergence of the BBS and their allies poses once again the difficult question of group identity for the island’s Tamil-speaking Muslim minority, a predicament vastly aggravated by media coverage of atrocities committed by al Qaida, Boko Haram, Taliban, and the Islamic State, not to mention the rise of Towheedi fundamentalist groups in Sri Lanka itself (Faslan and Nadine 2015). Although Muslim caste-like identity based on endogamy, occupation, and historic settlement still exists among some communities in South India, it is not a possibility in 21st-century Sri Lanka. However, three other

familiar identities remain available, each with positive and negative implications: Muslims as “Arabs”—a community defined by ancestry; Muslims as “Islamic Tamils”—a community defined by language; and Muslims as “Muslims”—a community defined by faith. All three refer to what social scientists call an “ethnic group,” a community that typically shares a language, a religion, a biogenetic profile of some kind, a place of origin, and a historically constructed cultural heritage. By this definition, the Tamil-speaking Sri Lankan Moors are an ethnic group, as are the Sri Lankan Tamils and the Sinhalese. It is in relation to these ethnic neighbors—within Sri Lanka’s economic and political arena—that a viable Muslim identity must be constructed.

Research has shown that ethnicity evolves over time in response to the political and economic environment, so it seems possible that Sri Lankan Muslim identity may adapt to changing circumstances. In the current xenophobic situation, the priority would presumably be to assert a more distinctively Sri Lankan cultural identity with deeper ancestral roots in the island and in the South Asian region rather than emphasizing itinerant Arab seafarers or a connection with global Islam. The primordial connection with Adam’s Peak (Sri Pada)—sacred to Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims—might once again become a key symbol of Muslim attachment to the island. It seems possible that a realignment emphasizing maternal intermarriage and shared Sri Lankan descent, and acknowledging their indigenous attachment to Sri Lankan Tamil, could become a more secure basis for Moorish identity. A revised version of the earlier Sonahar identity might serve this purpose, shorn of its Arab racial pretensions and its colonial (“Moorish”) connotations, and celebrating its own Tamil literary heritage. Although these are only conjectures, it is clear that Sri Lanka’s Muslim community will need to rethink its identity in the years ahead, just as it has, several times, in the past.

#### NOTES

1. Funding for this research was provided by fellowship grants from the American Institute for Sri Lankan Studies and the American Institute



- for Indian Studies. Research assistance was provided by Mr. Nilam Hamead and numerous other friends in Sri Lanka and Tamilnadu.
2. The possible impact of repeated visits to Sri Lanka of the 15th century Chinese Muslim admiral Zheng He (Cheng Ho) should not be overlooked. It has been proposed that he played a role in bringing Islam to Java and other parts of Southeast Asia (Aqsha 2010).
  3. Support for the colonial power was first demonstrated when local Muslims aided the British in suppressing the Uva Rebellion of 1817.
  4. BBS leaders have accused Muslim men—especially the employees of leading Muslim clothing chains—of seducing and raping Sinhala women with the goal of Islamic conversion. This resonates with so-called “love jihad” accusations against Muslims in North India (Gupta 2009; Jones 2015: 65–76).
  5. Efforts to develop modern Muslim schools were already under way by then, led by M. C. Siddi Lebbe (Nuhman 2007: 104–107).
  6. A variant of this term appears in the official Sri Lankan census as “Lanka Yonaka.”
  7. Sri Lankan Muslims today show little interest in Adam’s Peak as a religious pilgrimage site. The bazaar town of Nallathanniya where the main trail begins does not even appear to have a mosque. Shifting religious identities of Adam’s Peak have been analyzed by Premakumara de Silva (2014).
  8. The religious violence is not entirely one-sided: in August 2009, the followers of a local Sufi shaykh in Beruwala attacked a neighboring Towheed mosque, killing two.