

Blurred Boundaries of Ethnicity: The Case of Muslims in Sri Lanka

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In Sri Lanka, both popular and academic understanding of ethnicity and ethnic identity is in confusion. Having no consensus among scholars, politicians and even among the general public, ethnic identity of Muslims of Sri Lanka is still a controversy. Whether they are an ethnic community or a religious group is still arguable. One group of scholars are arguing that Muslims in Sri Lanka are no more interested in constructing a specific ethnic identity, instead they have replaced their ethnic identity with their religious identity. Others argue the opposite that the religious identity of Sri Lankan Muslims itself is the most remarkable ethnic marker that makes them an ethnic community, on which group membership have been essentially determined. Beyond the academic realm, politicians in Sri Lanka have also claimed that Muslims are ethnological Tamils, indirectly indicating that there is no separate Muslim ethnicity in Sri Lanka. Thus, there is no particular harmony of understanding of Muslim ethnicity in Sri Lanka. Therefore, this paper reconsiders the whole discourse on how ‘ethnicity’ and ‘ethnic identity formation’ have been understood in Sri Lanka and draw an ameliorative revision on the traditional, orthodox understanding of Sri Lankan Muslim ethnicity.

History of Muslim identity in Sri Lanka

When considering the historical accounts of Sri Lanka, Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims are immigrants arrived from different part of the world. Yet, in contrast to both Sinhalese and Tamils, Muslims entered into the country for commercial purposes whereas the former two communities were basically conquerors or invaders in their original entry purpose. In other words, although all the three groups were immigrants at the very starting point, their purpose of arrival is different. While both Sinhalese and Tamils were developing a sense of ownership of Sri Lankan land along with an elitist mindset, we cannot exactly claim that Muslims had the same intention of possessing and ruling the country. Instead, less or no ethnocentric character can be seen from the early inhabitants of Muslims in Sri Lanka. They did not develop their own language, instead started using either Tamil or Sinhala languages as their mother tongue. They never tried to arrogate political power on themselves even during the colonial period (Dewaraja 1994, 63). As Lorna Dewaraja records, Sri Lankanization (Ibid., 83) of Muslims

takes place during the Kandyan kingdom¹ through a process of structural assimilation (but without cultural assimilation), where they participate fully in the socio and economic life of the country through gaining access to informal or primary groups such as families, clubs and cliques but without acquiring the values, beliefs, language and behavior of the numerically dominant group.

Puzzle that leads to write this paper can be positioned on this historical foundation. Did Muslims in Sri Lanka develop a unique ethnic identity, or do they still consider themselves as a confessional group without any consciousness of developing an ethnic character? The following section brings out the current puzzling discourse on ethnic versus religious character of Sri Lankan Muslims.

Puzzling reality

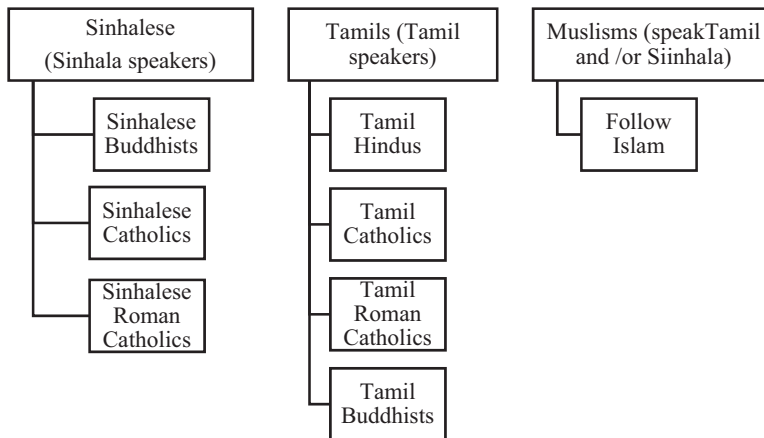


Figure 1 Ethnicity and language (author drawn)

One major confusion in Sri Lanka is the widespread public opinion that ethnicity is caused by language. This is basically due to the fact that Sinhalese and Tamil ethnicities have exclusive languages and members of those groups believe that language is their common ethnic marker (as figure 1 illustrates).

Two contradictory approaches exist in Sri Lanka regarding the issue of Muslim ethnicity. First group considers that Muslims in Sri Lanka has replaced their ethnic identity with religious identity, therefore, rather than an ethnic group they can be identified as a religious group. This approach is directly related to the confounded opinion that ethnicity is essentially linked with language. Advocates of this notion considers, “without a common language religion alone is insufficient to hold the unity of a community” (Ali 2001, 13). Same argument continues as Muslims’ bitter political interactions with Sinhalese and Tamils finally have forced them to replace their ethnic identity with religious identity (Ibid., 11). Key element underlying the

above assumption is that ethnicity is invariably constructed upon ‘common language factor.’

The second approach recognizes Muslims in Sri Lanka as a separate ethnicity considering common religiosity as their primary ethnic marker. “They [Muslims] reject linguistic identity and choose religion as their primary ethnic marker...Ethnicity and religion are inseparable as far as Sri Lankan Muslims are concerned” (Nuhman 2004, 10). However, the debate continues and existing complexity and controversy of Muslim identity requires to be dissected comprehensively in order to reach a consensus. Following section proposes an alternative analysis of Muslim ethnicity in Sri Lanka by drawing conceptual assistance from the available academic discourse on ethnicity and identity.

Analysis: Theory and evidence

Theory

Aforementioned arguments on Muslim identity need to be addressed within a sound conceptual framework. Although outwardly, the arguments seem diverting toward two directions, interestingly both have been based upon one common element— group attributes. In other words, both arguments consider either common language or religiosity qualifies ethnic identity. Considering common cultural traits as the key foundational factors is the most commonsensical and popular understanding of ethnic identity formation. Conversely, many scholars reject the above commonsensical understanding of ethnicity and propose alternatives. For instance, according to Everett Hughes (1994, 91), “an ethnic group is not one because of the degree of measurable or observable difference from other groups: it is an ethnic group, on the contrary, because the people in it and the people out of it know that it is one; because both the *ins* and the *outs* talk, feel, and act as if it were a separate group.”

Fredrik Barth’s understanding of ethnic identity formation is compatible and further compliments Hughes’s notion above. According to Barth, identity of an ethnic group is defined not by the cultural contents that it encloses, but by the social boundaries that it maintains when it interacts with the others (Barth 1969, 15). Ethnicity is not a matter of cultural commonalities but rather of practices of classification, including both self-classification and classification of (and by) others (Brubaker et al. 2004, 32). His emphasis is on social processes or the contacts between ‘us and ‘them,’ which produce, reproduce and organize boundaries of identification and differentiation between ethnic collectivities. Ethnic identity is generated, confirmed or transformed not by the attribute/s or cultural contents the members of that group share in common but by the course of interaction and transaction between decision making, strategizing individuals. In other words, as implied in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, ethnicity is a matter of politics, decision-making and goal orientation (Jenkins 1997, 12).

Resembling some aspects of Barth’s analysis mentioned above, Tilly also focuses on how ‘boundaries’ are maintained through ‘relationships’ between different groups. According to

Tilly, social boundaries separate ‘us’ from ‘them’ and also help maintaining ‘ours’ and ‘others’ identity. Thus, every ‘identity’ has a boundary, maintained by a set of relations that occur inside and across the boundary (Tilly 2003, 608; Tilly 2004, 222).

Evidence

This paper analyses the manner Muslims in Sri Lanka maintain their ethnic identity by taking the second approach (social boundaries and interactions) into account. Historical evidence of different types of interactions occurred between Muslims, Sinhalese and Tamils, provide ample opportunity to understand how Muslims have maintained their own ethnic identity. Following are some of the available evidence.

As history records, in 1915 Sinhala – Muslim riots², where Muslims were attacked by the Sinhalese people; Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan’s (a leading Tamil politician in the pre-independent Sri Lanka) statement in the 19th century that the Moors of Ceylon were Tamils in ‘ethnicity’ and ‘Mohammedans’ in religion (de Silva 1986, 115-117) or as ‘ethnologically Tamils’ (Dewaraja 1994, 45); similar claims made by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1987 that the Sri Lankan Muslims are Islamic Tamils (Nuhman 2007, 13); and also the massacre and mass expulsion of Muslims in 1990 by the LTTE, are some of the major evidences of assimilationist attempts or rather attempts of “erasing the boundary between one group and another” (Horowitz 1975, 114). However, these assimilationist attempts were rejected by Muslims and sometimes reacted angrily.

Here, one important question ascends why Muslims in Sri Lanka really rejected Ramanathan’s or later the LTTE’s claims that Muslims are ethnological Tamils? And also what does that indicate? While rejection itself becomes an evidence of Muslim’s self-awareness and self-classification as one separate group, there are several other politically and strategically important implications. One major reasons of refusing to be ‘ethnic Tamils’ is the fear of Tamil domination of political, social and economic spheres of Muslims. They widely believe the fact that Ramanathan’s claim was aiming at electoral advantages, whereas the LTTE’s claim later is also quite similar in purpose, to seek more advantages in their guerrilla warfare by increasing the number of supporters. In both cases, Muslims are confronted with a critical choice – either to be ethnic Tamils or reject it and assure their independence. Supporting the LTTE militants’ claim is a threat to Muslims’ survival in two fronts. On one hand, if a section of Muslim community were to take side with Tamils, physical existence of several scattered Muslims in Sinhalese provinces would have been threatened (Ali 2001, 11). On the other hand, rejection causes wrath of militants against Muslims living in Tamil majority areas, as it happened in the mass expulsion and massacre of Muslims by the LTTE in 1990. Muslims’ decision ultimately, not to recognize themselves as Tamils, is also supported by the comparison of themselves with Muslims in Tamil Nadu, India, where “... discrimination against the Muslims in public sector

employment, education and other state facilities is common knowledge. Knowledge of the Indian situation filters through to the Sri Lankan community....” (Ibid., 11).

Following Barth’s, Tilly’s and Hughes’ conceptualization, above occurrences are typical examples of how relationships across groups define and substantiate group boundaries further. In other words, Muslims’ decision to be independent from Tamil ethnicity is simply not based upon dissimilar cultural traits. Instead, it is a strategically assessed political decision which ultimately facilitates political boundary maintenance. Muslim ethnic identity in Sri Lanka is generated, confirmed or transformed by the course of interactions and transactions between decision making and strategizing individuals. In other words, ethnicity is a matter of politics and decision-making as Barth once recognized. The LTTE massacred and expelled Muslims from the North in 1990, not necessarily based upon the dissimilar religious or cultural attributes but because of the latter’s unwillingness to be identified as ethnic Tamils. Thus what matters most is the decision or the type of relationship, circumstantial factors (or the nature of the context) and time, but not the similarity/dissimilarity of cultural traits. While those interactions and decisions influenced Muslims to reshape their own identity, simultaneously the same process reformed outsiders’ definition of Muslim identity. Accordingly, identity is a social construction through an interactive process.

Several recent evidences can also be mentioned to validate the above argument. In recent history, Muslims have appeared with ‘ethnonationalist’ characteristics exemplifying their self-awareness of ethnic boundary. Ethnonationalists, by definition, have political leaders who claim that they are entitled to their own nation-state and should not be ruled by others. These groups, short of having a nation-state, may be said to have more substantial characteristics in common with nations...they are ‘nations without a state (Eriksen 1993, 13-14). Parallel to Sri Lankan Tamils, Muslims have also demanded self-autonomy, as recorded in Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact in 1957 (Aliff 2010, 203) and the Oluvil Declaration in 2003 (Bandarage 2009, 185). Also, they have leaders who believe in self-determination and governance. Their political party, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) has from the late 1980s supported a Muslim autonomous region in the eastern Sri Lanka (International Crisis Group 2008, 7). Claims for autonomy by Muslims and recognition given to those claims by Sinhalese and Tamils in their documents (as in Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact or in several election manifestos) is a strong sign of collective awareness of each other’s ethnic boundaries or ‘us’ and ‘them’ consciousness.

Conclusion

Summing up all the evidence considered above, Muslims in Sri Lanka have repeatedly refused to be a part of Tamils. All the evidence provided above restricts us from categorizing Muslims as a mere confessional group (just like Christians or Roman Catholics in Sri Lanka) because, if

they simply constitute a religious category, there should be a possibility of simultaneous ethnic categorization of Muslims as Islamic Tamils or Islamic Sinhalese, similar to Roman Catholic/ Christian Tamils and Roman Catholic/ Christian Sinhalese. Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims share many cultural practices, symbols and most prominently the same language in common as a result of sharing the same territory for centuries. Yet, when Muslims are confronted with making critical decisions in their social interactions with the other two ethnicities, they have always maintained a clear social boundary, specifically by not showing any willingness to cross the boundary and be identified either as Tamil or Sinhalese. Thus, the simplest rational implication here is the inability of categorization of Muslims as a mere religious group. Visible and clear social boundary they continuously maintain in their interactions with other two ethnicities automatically marks their ethnic identity rather than qualifying them as a mere religious group.

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Notes

1. Kandyan kingdom was an independent monarchy in Sri Lanka (roughly) lasted from 1600 till 1815.
2. This incident is known as the 'first major outbreak of communal violence in Sri Lanka' which occurred as a collective result of stirred Islamic revivalism, certain economic grievances against Muslims and fears and resentments aroused against Buddhists.