Sources of Meaning: The Development of Muslim Identity in Contemporary Sri Lanka

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My project extends my interests in Sri Lankan Muslims developed during my semester in Sri Lanka with the Intercollegiate Sri Lanka Education program (ISLE). During my time there, I noticed some would claim direct descent from Arab traders who arrived to the island in the 8th century CE, while others believed Islam arrived through localization via South Asia. I began my summer research interested in how Islam arrived to Sri Lanka, why Sri Lankan Muslims’ ancestral origin is contested, and how colonial British administrative policies (ca. 1815-1948) increased ethnic awareness.

My initial research confirmed the arrival of Islam to Sri Lanka first in the 8th century via Arab traders. The prevalence of the Shafi’i Madhab, the dominant school of Islamic jurisprudence during the Abbasid Caliphate (750-1517 CE), in primary documents dated to the 10th century in Sri Lanka suggested communication with the Middle East during this time. However, the fall of Baghdad in 1258 to the Mongol empire essentially ended this communication, catalyzing Muslim contact via the Coromandel Coast in South India instead.

While this line of research was fruitful, the deaths of three Muslims as a result of rioting by Buddhist extremists this June in Aluthgama suggested contemporary analysis to be more important. While intra-Muslim violence in Sri Lanka had recently grown common as followers of ultraconservative Wahhabism quarreled with localized Sufi practitioners, Aluthgama was the worst outbreak of sectarian violence in several years. Unsurprisingly, Muslims of all divisions unified and condemned the violence. This event suggested that the networks of identities and loyalties Muslims take depend on context and time. I then decided to study what influences these networks. Familial, communal, national, and international influences often overlap, determining how an individual may react to a particular situation. Among other influences, the idea of ummah, or a global Islamic community is regarded as important. Deterritorialisation of Islam as a result of globalization has led the Muslim community to question how to define itself, as it cannot point to a linguistic or cultural heritage. By redefining Muslims outside of specific geographical or cultural space, one must accept acculturated forms of Islam as authentic religious practice. However, many fundamentalists deny certain religious traditions as Islamic, leading to violence in Muslim communities throughout South Asia.

I also analyzed how Muslims in Sri Lanka qualify spaces as ‘Islamic,’ and how geographic lands can be categorized along religious lines. Sri Lankan Muslims often recognize Sri Lanka as “dar-al-aman” (Land of Peace, where Islam can be practiced freely) rather than “dar-al-Islam” (Land of Islam, which is inherently Islamic). I analyzed the rhetoric used when Sri Lankan Muslims described mosques (prayer centers), madrasas (Islamic schools), and khanaqahs (Sufi meditation centers). While these specific physical spaces are connoted as “Islamic,” I consider an Islamic space to be any space where Muslims can engage with their rituals, symbols, and sacred words, as previously suggested by Clifford Geertz. Neofundamentalist movements such as Tawhid Jamaat reject this definition and promote ‘purist’ Wahhabism from Saudi Arabia as true Islam, e.g. by emulating Middle Eastern architecture in mosques and by planting date trees, which alienate Sufi neighbors.

In the academic year I hope to further investigate sources of Muslim identity while also examining how ritual space, sound, and time create meaning for Muslims. Scholars understand
ritual to create a collective set of beliefs and bridge the gap between tradition and changing social dynamics.¹

I am grateful to have the opportunity to begin my independent study several weeks in advance under the guidance of Professor Holt and hope this work will lead to an honors thesis.

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¹ For more information, see Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice by Susan Bell