Misconceptions in the Sinhala Buddhist-Muslim Conflict in Sri Lanka: A New Perspective on ethnic conflict in post-colonial era

Sri Lanka's vibrant diversity, encompassing a wealth of ethnicities and religions, is tragically fractured by the ongoing conflict between the dominant Sinhala Buddhist majority and the marginalized Muslim minority. This study traces the origins of the conflict between Sri Lanka's dominant Sinhala Buddhist majority and the marginalized Muslim minority back to the colonial legacy that imposed a dichotomous societal structure. Employing a qualitative approach with the Self and the Other framework, this research utilizes the iceberg model to delve deeper into the underlying causes of conflict. The research reveals that the conflict between Sinhalese Buddhists and the Muslim community arises from an ambiguous sense of self-identity, which is defined by contrasting with the Other. Sinhala Buddhists perceive the growing Muslim community as a threat to the indigenous culture and religion, as reflected in Sinhala culture. This perception is shaped by mental models constructed since the colonial period, during which ethnic and religious classifications were implanted by colonizers as the basis for political rights. The resulting classification fostered a sense of nationalism among the Sinhala Buddhists, fueling resistance against colonial rule. However, this classification also perpetuated a pattern of oppression towards minority groups, viewing them through the same lens as the colonizers viewed the indigenous population, thus perpetuating cycles of conflict and marginalization.

Keywords: Ethnic conflict, Buddhist-Muslim, Sinhalese

Author:
S. Rifa Mahroof [1]
Ahamed Sarjoon Razick [2]

Affiliation:
[1,2] South Eastern University of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka

Corresponding author:
sarjoonra@seu.ac.lk

Realitas konflik yang berlangsung di Sri Langka yang melibatkan komunitas Budha Sinhala yang mayoritas dengan komunitas Muslim yang minoritas mencederai keragaman etnis dan agama yang telah berlangsung lama. Keadaan konflik ini muncul pasca era kolonial. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menelusuri dampak kolonialisme terhadap realitas konflik yang berlangsung. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan menggunakan konsep *self and the other* sebagai pendekatannya. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa akar konflik yang melibatkan umat Buddha Sinhala dan komunitas Muslim disebabkan oleh ambiguitas pembentukan identitas diri dari masing-masing kelompok yang menilai kelompok lain sebagai ancaman. Umat Buddha Sinhala memandang komunitas Muslim yang sedang berkembang sebagai ancaman bagi budaya dan agama asli Sri Lanka yang terepresentasi dalam budaya Sinhala. Persepsi ini dibentuk oleh model mental yang dibangun sejak masa penjajahan, di mana klasifikasi etnis dan agama ditanamkan oleh penjajah sebagai dasar untuk mendapatkan hak-hak politik. Klasifikasi yang dihasilkan menumbuhkan rasa nasionalisme di antara umat Buddha Sinhala, yang memicu perlawanan terhadap kekuasaan kolonial. Akan tetapi, klasifikasi ini juga melanggengkan pola penindasan terhadap kelompok minoritas yang dipandang sebagai yang lain. Pandangan terhadap kelompok di luar komunitasnya sebagai entitas asing berdampak pada normalisasi siklus konflik dan marginalisasi.

Kata Kunci: Konflik etnis, Budha-Muslim, Sinhala

Introduction

Sri Lanka's colonial legacy has led to the emergence of ethnic and religious factions vying for power, resulting in post-colonial social conflicts.[1] Following the civil war, tensions arose between Sinhalese Buddhists and the minority Muslim community. Sinhala Buddhists, perceiving themselves as the epitome of Sri Lankan national identity,[2] perceive the growing influence of Muslim groups as a threat. The economic prowess and rapid growth rates of Muslim communities are seen as jeopardizing the dominance of Sinhalese religion and ethnicity. This conflict is compounded by the ascendancy of nationalist political forces grounded in ethnic and cultural identity. Political agendas drive mass mobilization, allowing Sinhala Buddhists to portray Muslim groups as extremists seeking external support to annex their territory. The ongoing identity conflict reflects enduring remnants of colonial-era mental constructs.

Two primary lenses guide researchers in understanding the conflict between Sinhala Buddhists and Muslim communities: religious fervor and political policies. Subedi [3] and Imtiyaz[4] argued that the resurgence of Buddhism and Islam, interpreted through extremist lenses, interpreted through extremist lenses, contributes to conflict by overshadowing fundamental values for interfaith interactions.[5] Another crucial factor is political policy, particularly post-civil war policies which have often promoted monolithic approaches, exacerbating ethnic divisions.[6] These policies foster intolerance and undermine multiculturalism,[7] leading to a rise in nationalist sentiments among Sinhalese Buddhists aimed at suppressing the Muslim minority.[8] Imtiyaz supported this perspective, attributing the conflict to the state's failure to accommodate diversity effectively.[9]

This study aims to analyze additional factors not explored in prior research to understand how colonialism has shaped the thought processes of Sri Lankan society, particularly within the

[1] Nira Wickramasinghe, *Sri Lanka in The Modern Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 51.

[2] Neil DeVotta, "From Ethnic Outbidding to Ethnic Conflict: The Institutional Bases for Sri Lanka's Separatist War," *Nations and Nationalism* 11, no. 1 (January 2005): 141–59, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1354-5078.2005.00196.x.

[3] DB Subedi, "Religion, Extremism and Buddhist–Muslim Relations in Sri Lanka," in *Religion, Extremism and Violence in South Asia. Politics of South Asia*, ed. Howard Brasted et al. (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 45–70, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-6847-0_3.

[4] A.R.M. Imtiyaz and Amjad Mohamed Saleem, "Some Critical Notes on Sri Lankan Muslim Religious Identity Formation, Conservatism, and Violent Extremism," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 58, no. 3 (May 7, 2023): 438–51, https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096211069651.

[5] A.R.M. Imtiyaz, "The Easter Sunday Bombings and the Crisis Facing Sri Lanka's Muslims," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 55, no. 1 (2020): 3–16, https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909619868244.

[6] Chas Morrison, "Buddhist Extremism, Anti-Muslim Violence and Civil War Legacies in Sri Lanka," *Asian Ethnicity* 21, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 137–59, https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2019.1610937; Ahamed Sarjoon Razick, Iqbal Saujan, and Seyyath Mohammed Hakeema Beevi, "Buddhist and Muslim Interaction in the Post-War of Sri Lanka," *International Journal of Islamic Thought* 20, no. December 2017 (2021): 13–24, https://doi.org/10.24035/ijit.20.2021.206.

[7] Mohamed Anifa Mohamed Fowsar, Mohamed Abdulla Mohamed Rameez, and Aboobacker Rameez, "Muslim Minority in Post-War Sri Lanka: A Case Study of Aluthgama and Digana Violences," *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 9, no. 6 (November 19, 2020): 56, https://doi.org/10.36941/ajis-2020-0111; Rajni Gamage, "Buddhist Nationalism, Authoritarian Populism, and The Muslim Other in Sri Lanka," *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 6, no. 2 (2021), https://doi.org/10.13169/islastudj.6.2.0130.

[8] Neil DeVotta, "Religious Intolerance in Post-Civil War Sri Lanka," in *Ghosts from the Past?: Assessing Recent Developments in Religious Freedom in South Asia*, ed. Neeti Nair, Michael Kugelman, and Bijan Omrani (London: Routledge, 2021); Mohamed Zacky Mohamed Fouz and M. Moniruzzaman, "The Muslim Minority-Phobia in Context: A Critical Study on Majoritarian Ideology and the Structural Roots of Anti-Muslim Phenomenon in the Post-War Sri Lanka," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 41, no. 4 (October 2, 2021): 719–29, https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2022.2028462.

[9] A.R.M. Imtiyaz, "Fragile State Policy and the Rise of Muslim Extremism in Sri Lanka," in *Dynamics of Violent Extremism in South Asia*, ed. Shafi Md Mostofa (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2023), 127–46, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-7405-2_6.

Sinhala Buddhist and Muslim communities. By examining this dynamic, the study addresses two primary issues. Firstly, it delves into the ongoing conflict's reality, serving as a lens to understand the underlying tensions between Sinhalese Buddhists and the Muslim minority. Secondly, it investigates the role of identity factors in perpetuating the conflict. Within this context, the study comprehensively explores individuals' perceptions of the structural forces shaping conflict dynamics, aiming to unveil the cognitive models underlying its causation in greater depth.

This study challenges the simplistic view that conflicts arise solely from visible clashes like identity differences. Instead, it argues that these conflicts stem from underlying patterns ingrained within societal ideologies, habits, and norms, which manifest in various actions. These patterns, indicative of deeper structural influences rooted in culture, policies, and systems, are constructed through the formation of mental models. [10] These mental models, comprising a set of perspectives and beliefs, are embedded within communities and evolve over time through historical processes and societal development. The construction of these models involves distinguishing between self and others, potentially leading to aggressive behavior towards external groups. As Franz Fanon articulated, colonial powers might have implanted such models to control their territories. [11] In Sri Lanka, this colonial legacy likely shaped the mental models of both Sinhalese Buddhists and Muslims, shaping their perceptions and interactions.

This study delves into the Sri Lankan conflict through a qualitative approach focused on 'the self' and 'the other' concept. Utilizing a systematic literature review (SLR) of existing research on the conflict between Sinhala Buddhists and the Muslim minority, it gathers and analyzes relevant data to answer the research question. [12] The research follows a three-stage model encompassing data reduction, analysis, and conclusion drawing. [13] The iceberg analysis model is employed to delve into the underlying structure of the data, revealing hidden aspects of the phenomenon that lie beneath the surface. [14]

The Impact of Colonialism on the Formation of Sri Lankan Identity

Sri Lanka, historically recognized for its rich diversity and coexistence, [15] was fractured by a colonial classification system initially designed for census purposes. [16] This system, however, morphed into entrenched factional divisions based on ethnicity, religion, and culture, fueled by privileges granted by British colonizers. Individuals within these factions, defined by colonial perceptions rather than demographic realities, began to identify primarily with their assigned groups, solidifying "us vs. them" narratives. This colonial legacy positioned indigenous peoples as "the Other" in stark contrast to the dominant white, English colonial

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[10] Jamie P. Monat and Thomas F. Gannon, "What Is Systems Thinking? A Review of Selected Literature Plus Recommendations," *American Journal of Systems Science* 4, no. 1 (2015): 11–26, https://doi.org/10.5923/j.ajss.20150401.02.

[11] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin Books, 1961), 31.

[12] Barbara Kitchenham et al., "Systematic Literature Reviews in Software Engineering – A Systematic Literature Review," *Information and Software Technology* 51, no. 1 (January 2009): 7–15, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.infsof.2008.09.009.

[13] Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis (a Source Book of New Methods)* (Beverly Hills: SAGE Publications, 1984).

[14] Philip Arkinson, *The Iceberg Agenda: Mastering Corporate Potential* (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd, 1998).

[15] Robert Percival, *An Account of The Island of Ceylon, Containing Its History, Geography, Natural History, with the Manners and Customs of Its Various Inhabitants* (London: C. and R. Baldwin, 1803), 114–15.

[16] Richard S. Smith, "Rule-by-Records and Rule-by-Reports: Complementary Aspects of the British Imperial Rule of Law," in *The Word and the World: Fantasy, Symbol and Record*, ed. Veena Das (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1986), 153–54.

class as "the self," creating lasting divisions that continue to impact Sri Lankan society today.[17]

British rule in Sri Lanka reshaped its societal structure through the imposition of a "Self-Other" framework. The 1871 and 1881 censuses introduced racial categorization, intertwining "race" with nationality. [18] This led to the identification of the Sinhalese and Tamil races, serving as markers for ethnicity and nationality, thereby making race the primary societal classification. A lasting impact of colonial rule was solidifying the view of identity as immutable and fixed, inhibiting movement between identities. While preexisting tribal identities existed, colonial influence also reinforced religious divisions, though less prominently than racial ones.[19]

Colonial governance in Sri Lanka used racial categories to assign rights. By the early 20th century, as colonialism began to face internal challenges, the British encouraged ethnic groups to form political associations, potentially fostering competition for power. Sir William Manning further exacerbated power struggles by implementing policies that solidified minority political identities for Kandyan Sinhalese and Ceylon Tamils, [20] aiming to perpetuate lasting divisions within Sri Lanka's elite. Access to power was perceived to be contingent on geographical location rather than linguistic or religious affiliation. The elite's embrace of colonial culture exacerbated ethnic tensions, prompting a resurgence of pride in indigenous culture among the Sinhalese, which played a pivotal role in their resistance against colonial influence.[21]

A Portrait of Conflict in Sinhala Buddhist-Muslim Sri Lanka: Searching for the impact of colonialism

Colonialism, characterized by the exertion of control, oppression, and exploitation over populations, plays a significant role in shaping politically and economically marginalized groups.[22] Sanderson argued that historians often neglect the colonial influence in perpetuating a dichotomous societal structure deeply ingrained in the fabric of society.[23] Consequently, the socio-economic and religious evolution of society is influenced by mechanisms implanted by colonizers, resulting in a pervasive homogenized consciousness. [24] This embedded consciousness, built on colonial constructs, sets standards that continue to influence the formation of new realities in post-colonial societies.

Sri Lanka's post-colonial history has been marred by ethnic conflict, with the Muslim minority often caught in tensions involving the government military and the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam). This conflict primarily stems from the complex dynamics between the Muslim community and Sinhalese Buddhist communities, which are seen as representative of the state's culture and ethnicity. [25] Propaganda portraying Islam as a threat to Buddhism exacerbated tensions, leading to dangerous actions by both sides. Central to the intensifying conflict is the concern over Muslim attempts to gain control over the region, potentially impacting the economy and culture of the ethnic Sinhalese population, who view themselves as embodying Sri Lankan identity.

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[17] Wickramasinghe, *Sri Lanka in The Modern Age*, 51.

[18] Wickramasinghe, 51–52.

[19] Wickramasinghe, 53.

[20] Denis K. Greenstreet, *Ethnic and Elective Problems of Sri Lanka (Ceylon) 1796-1931* (London: Sasor Publisher, 1982), 190.

[21] Wickramasinghe, *Sri Lanka in The Modern Age*, 59.

[22] Ronald J. Horvath, "A Definition of Colonialism," *Current Anthropology* 13, no. 1 (February 1972): 45–57, https://doi.org/10.1086/201248.

[23] Stephen K. Sanderson, "World-Systems Analysis after Thirty Years: Should It Rest in Peace?," *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 46, no. 3 (June 26, 2005): 179–213, https://doi.org/10.1177/0020715205058606.

[24] David Theo Goldberg, "Heterogeneity and Hybridity: Colonial Legacy, Postcolonial Heresy," in *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, ed. Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray (Oxford: Wiley, 2005), 72–86, https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470997024.ch4.

[25] Imtiyaz, "The Easter Sunday Bombings and the Crisis Facing Sri Lanka's Muslims."

The justification of violence in Sri Lanka sometimes draws on notions of cultural and linguistic pride. Sri Lankan Muslims, who predominantly use English and Tamil in their daily lives, are sometimes perceived as lacking in nationalistic fervor. Conversely, for Sinhala Buddhists, the use of Sinhala language is seen as a crucial element in preserving Sri Lanka's cultural identity. Cultural disparities are further exacerbated by the tendency of Muslims to intertwine religious aspects into various cultural expressions.[26] For instance, the transition of attire among Muslim women from *shalwar* (traditional sari) to *mokkadu* (headscarf) has been interpreted as establishing a distinct cultural identity, thus fostering a sense of exclusivity within the Sri Lankan social fabric. Similarly, the adoption of the *abaya* (a black robe covering the entire body) by certain Muslim communities has led to various interpretations, including some perceiving it as conservative attire.

The defense of cultural and religious expressions in Sri Lanka, often associated with Sinhalese Buddhist traditions, has sometimes manifested in aggressive physical and psychological acts towards Muslim communities. Within Sinhalese communities, the introduction of the abaya, for example, has been perceived by certain segments of the Sinhalese community as a challenge to the indigenous Sri Lankan culture, especially among women accustomed to wearing *sarees*. Similarly, economic activities and educational institutions established by some Muslim communities have been viewed as attempts to exert control over the region, especially given the comparatively limited presence of Islamic educational institutions within the Sinhalese community.[27] As societal structures undergo transformations, some individuals within the Sinhalese community have resorted to repressive measures, such as damaging places of worship, limiting religious practices, and targeting Muslim-owned businesses.[28] Tragically, these actions have been met with violent attacks, such as suicide bombings targeting places of worship by some individuals within the Muslim community.[29]

The conflict dynamics between some Sinhalese Buddhists and some Muslim communities reflect the delineation between indigenous and the other groups in territorial entitlement. The notion of authenticity, rooted in land ownership, settlements, religion, and ethnicity, underpins efforts to assert control and dominance over others. The colonial legacy established a binary distinction between the indigenous as colonized and the other as colonizers, allowing them to manipulate and dominate the perceived inferior indigenous groups.[30] This consciousness, deeply ingrained in Sri Lankan society, traces back to the British colonial era, marked by the imposition of unequal political rights. The struggle for independence from colonial rule, led by Sinhalese nationalists,[31] was fueled by a sense of pride in Sri Lankan culture and a desire to resist colonial oppression,[32] thus elevating the indigenous population to a position of superiority with territorial entitlements. The narrative of majority versus minority and the assertion of authenticity have played pivotal roles in anti-colonial sentiments during the early 20th century, shaping interactions with other communities.

[26] A.R.M. Imtiyaz, "Islamic Identity Formation , Madrasas, and Muslims in Sri Lanka," *Journal of Security, Governance and Development* 1, no. 2 (2021): 1–18.

[27] Imtiyaz.

[28] The New Humanitarian, "The New Humanitarian | Rising Muslim-Buddhist Tensions in Sri Lanka," www.thenewhumanitarian.org, June 12, 2013, https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/feature/2013/06/12/rising-muslim-buddhist-tensions-sri-lanka.

[29] Khairiah A. Rahman, "News Media and the Muslim Identity after the Christchurch Mosque Massacres," *Kōtuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online* 15, no. 2 (July 2, 2020): 360–84, https://doi.org/10.1080/1177083X.2020.1747503.

[30] Jane Hiddleston, *Understanding Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 2014), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315711669.

[31] Wickramasinghe, *Sri Lanka in The Modern Age*, 52.

[32] Wickramasinghe, 62.

Colonizers, asserting their dominance due to the notion of self-superiority rooted in ethnic, cultural, and religious identities, portrayed themselves as embodying universal human traits," according to Albert Memmi, "thus deeming the colonized as inferior, mirroring the classifications imposed upon them. [33] This framework perpetuates a "self-other" dichotomy, positioning groups like Sinhala Buddhists as the norm and judging others based on their ethnic, religious, and linguistic distinctions. [34] This classification became ingrained in Sri Lankan society, sparked by colonial resistance and establishing a standard for perceiving others as threats. [35] The ethnic and religious tensions evident in the conflict in Sri Lanka exemplify this dichotomy, with Sinhala Buddhists claiming land ownership as the self while regarding the Muslim community as the other.

Conflict structure in the perspective of Sinhalese Buddhists and Muslims in Sri Lanka: The Ambiguity of Referential Identity

The aftermath of the Sri Lankan civil war, marked by social and religious strife, highlights the challenges of achieving socio-cultural harmony in the post-war populace. Genuine reconciliation necessitates collective community engagement to foster transformative change and peace, anchored in equitable treatment for all. However, the imposition of an unjust peace has resulted in the dominance of one group, monopolizing all available resources.[36] The rise of specific political factions in Sri Lanka undermines the notion of national unity, as communities anchoring their identity on ethnicity, language, and culture often view others as intruders lacking rightful claim to the land they inhabit. [37] This tendency towards conflict, fueled by the uncertain delineation of self-identity *vis-à-vis* perceived threats from others, is palpable in multi-ethnic's conflict Sri Lanka.

The conflict involving Sinhalese Buddhist and Muslim groups in Sri Lanka reveals a process wherein self-identity is shaped through perceptions of threat from others. Three key factors contribute to the complex challenges to achieving unified self-identification in Sri Lanka. The first factor is demographic factors that illuminate ethnic, cultural, and religious disparities as prominent identifiers of conflict causation. The ethnic, religious, and cultural roots of Sinhalese Buddhist groups, symbolizing Sri Lanka's national identity, drive assertive claims to territorial ownership within Chauvinisms frameworks. [38] Conversely, the ethnical, cultural, and religious stereotypes against Muslims, as "the stranger " has promoted dogmatic religious values and Muslim's economic influence, bolstering their growing significance. The economic role played by the Muslim community underscores their substantial contribution to the economy. Sri Lanka's Muslim population has been able to counter the widely held allegations of Islamization, economic domination, and extremist associations [39] by employing similar patterns of violence in response.

The second factor is religious and state extremism that exacerbates the complexity of the

[33] Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, trans. Howard Greenfeld (London: Earthscan Publications Ltd, 1991), 134.

[34] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles L. Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 18.

[35] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), xi.

[36] Kristine Hoglund and Mimmi S. Kovacs, "Beyond the Absence of War: The Diversity of Peace in Post-Settlement Societies," *Review of International Studies* 36, no. 2 (2010): 367–90, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510000069.

[37] Afaf Ahmed Hasan Al-Saidi, "Post-Colonialism Literature the Concept of Self and the Other in Coetzee's Waiting for the Barbarians: An Analytical Approach," *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* 5, no. 1 (2014): 95–105, https://doi.org/10.4304/jltr.5.1.95-105.

[38] DeVotta, "From Ethnic Outbidding to Ethnic Conflict: The Institutional Bases for Sri Lanka's Separatist War."

[39] Farah Mihlar, "Religious Change in a Minority Context: Transforming Islam in Sri Lanka," *Third World Quarterly* 40, no. 12 (December 2, 2019): 2153–69, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1632186.

conflict. Assertions of statehood justified by religious grounds create a tangled web of contention. The chauvinistic portrayal evident in Sinhala Buddhist narratives embodies religious interests cloaked in the mythos of the sacred land, *dhammadipa*.[40] This notion fuels the concept of *Sinhalatva*, where Sinhala nationalism thrives at the expense of minority groups. Similarly, Muslims employ a similar narrative in pursuit of religious interests, retaliating under the guise of advocating for an independent state. The fervor stemming from an extreme interpretation of religion reinforces national identity, leading to actions that bolster dominance. The fusion of fundamentalist beliefs with nationalist rhetoric further entangles the ethnic strife.

The third factor is the construction of stigma attributed to social media platforms and religious leaders' speeches which are instrumental in crafting negative stereotypes and in constructing stigma. Both Sinhalese Buddhists and Sri Lankan Muslims have employed similar tactics to perpetuate each other's negative stigmas, thus exacerbating the conflict. Media portrayal of these negative images further solidifies misconceptions, fostering shifts in public attitudes driven by personal agendas. This condition has consequently cultivated anti-Muslim sentiments which are constantly disseminated by Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist factions.

Divergent frames of reference in how Sinhalese Buddhists and Muslims are perceived in Sri Lanka perpetuate the ongoing conflict. The profound disparity in identity between these two groups triggers actions aimed at reinforcing dominance. The presence of opposing entities with robust identities is viewed as a challenge prompting groups to assert their own strength, often leading to claims of superiority (perceived as the epitome of malevolence).[41] There has been a perceived belief that the rapid growth of the Muslim population and their advancements in economics and education has distorted the attachment of the indigenous community to Sri Lanka's land ownership. Such self-validation frequently stems from the existence of the other, resulting in a wholesale rejection of those who are deemed as culturally, linguistically, or religiously different.[42] The perceived disparities within the Muslim community manifest in violence, further entrenching existing divisions.

Another contributing factor to the conflict lies in the deliberate differentiation based on demographic factors such as ethnicity and religion, with the ultimate aim of exerting control over a particular region. The conflict between Buddhists and Muslims in Sri Lanka has been politicized, framed as an ethnically and religiously driven strife.[43] While ethnic and cultural pride is a natural aspect of group identity, it alone does not spur violent actions. However, when this pride evolves into a sense of mastery and entitlement, it becomes a catalyst for oppressive measures.[44] Similarly, misinterpretation occurs among Muslims who perceive the actions of Sinhalese Buddhist groups as rooted in religious and ethnic biases. This erroneous understanding perpetuates a cycle of conflict by exacerbating ethnic and religious divides, thus prolonging the discord.[45]

Many studies fail to thoroughly investigate the underlying causes of conflict by delving into the mental frameworks of the conflicting groups

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[40] Mahinda Deegalle, "Introduction- Buddhism, Conflict and Violence," in *Buddhism, Conflict and Violence in Modern Sri Lanka*, ed. Mahinda Deegalle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 11.

[41] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 32.

[42] Al-Saidi, "Post-Colonialism Literature the Concept of Self and the Other in Coetzee's Waiting for the Barbarians: An Analytical Approach."

[43] Subedi, "Religion, Extremism and Buddhist–Muslim Relations in Sri Lanka"; Imtiyaz and Mohamed Saleem,

"Some Critical Notes on Sri Lankan Muslim Religious Identity Formation, Conservatism, and Violent Extremism."

[44] Bernd Simon, "A New Perspective on Intergroup Conflict: The Social Psychology of Politicized Struggles for Recognition," *Theory & Psychology* 30, no. 2 (April 20, 2020): 147–63, https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354319887227.

[45] Morrison, "Buddhist Extremism, Anti-Muslim Violence and Civil War Legacies in Sri Lanka."

and examining the perceptions they harbor towards each other. Instead, research often focuses on conflicts involving two religious' factions, resulting in an oversimplified understanding influenced by the ideologies of specific religious groups that permeate Sri Lanka's religious communities. [46] Conversely, more comprehensive research that delves deeper uncovers the recurring patterns that underpin the conflict's structure. This failure to thoroughly examine people's perceptions of the societal fabric woven amidst ethnic and religious diversity within the state's governance context represents a significant gap. [47] Neglecting this aspect impedes the understanding of the structural framework essential for fostering tolerance among diverse groups and ethnicities.

The perceptions held by a particular community based on the distinction of ethnicity, culture, and religion contribute to the cultivation of a self-pride that often disregards the existence of others. Mental models, existing cognitive frameworks utilized for problem-solving, play a significant role in shaping actions aligned with one's worldview, cultural background, and religious beliefs.[48] Constructs formed with a bias towards pride in a specific identity, rooted in a perception of superiority over others, often manifest in acts of suppression.[49] To comprehend the recurring patterns of violence tied to religion and ethnicity in Sri Lanka, it is essential to trace the development of mental constructs that evolved within the historical trajectory of Sri Lankan society.

Conclusion

The complex and multifaceted conflict in Sri Lanka, traditionally viewed through the lens of post-civil war governance challenges between Sinhalese Buddhists and the Muslim minority, undergoes a critical reexamination in this study. The research delves into the enduring impact of the colonial legacy, which cemented ethnic and cultural divisions, while acknowledging the involvement of various groups beyond the immediate binary. Examining the "self" and "other" dichotomy, the study highlights how perceptions of threat are shaped through historical narratives, where self-definition often occurs in opposition to the perceived other. This dichotomy influences the perspective of the Sinhalese Buddhists towards the Muslim community, viewing their larger population, economic influence, and language differences as reasons for aggression. In response, Muslims have invoked religious narratives to defend themselves, further exacerbating the conflict.

This research utilizes the iceberg model to explore the underlying structure of the conflict, highlighting the hidden influence of historical structures and mental models beyond the visible surface of religious and ethnic tensions. While focusing on the impact of colonialism on mental model construction offers valuable insights, it is crucial to acknowledge the potential interplay of other historical, political, and economic factors. Furthermore, neglecting the potential influence of religious doctrines on societal mental models creates an incomplete picture. This limitation highlights the need for further research to compare and expand our understanding of the complex interplay between colonialism, religious doctrine, and societal mental models.

[46] Imtiyaz and Mohamed Saleem, "Some Critical Notes on Sri Lankan Muslim Religious Identity Formation, Conservatism, and Violent Extremism"; Subedi, "Religion, Extremism and Buddhist–Muslim Relations in Sri Lanka."

[47] Fowsar, Rameez, and Rameez, "Muslim Minority in Post-War Sri Lanka: A Case Study of Aluthgama and Digana Violences"; Gamage, "Buddhist Nationalism, Authoritarian Populism, and The Muslim Other in Sri

Lanka"; Morrison, "Buddhist Extremism, Anti-Muslim Violence and Civil War Legacies in Sri Lanka."

[48] Katherine R Clifford, Amanda E Cravens, and Corrine N Knapp, "Responding to Ecological Transformation: Mental Models, External Constraints, and Manager Decision-Making," *BioScience* 72, no. 1 (January 6, 2022): 57–70, https://doi.org/10.1093/biosci/biab086.

[49] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 31.

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The corresponding author is also responsible for having ensured collective agreement between co-authors in all matters regarding manuscript publication. Therefore, the corresponding author needs to submit a statement of competing interests on behalf of all authors of the paper.

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