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Contested Histories, Multi-Religious Space and Conflict: A Case Study of Kantarodai in Northern Sri Lanka

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Abstract: This article focuses on the archaeological site of Kantarodai (Tamil) or Kadurugoda (Sinhala) on the Jaffna peninsula at the northernmost tip of Sri Lanka to examine the power of spatially embodied, contested histories within postcolonial and post-war communities. The Sri Lankan military who control Kantarodai view it simply as a Sinhala Buddhist site. However, when it is viewed through the lens of international archaeological scholarship, its multi-ethnic and multi-religious history becomes clear. Its present situation speaks of a failure to affirm the narratives connected with this history. In examining this case study, I first evoke the changing political and religious landscapes of the peninsula in the recent past, drawing on my own visits to Jaffna during Sri Lanka's ethnic war. Second, I examine one dominant imaginary that is projected onto the peninsula, from the Sinhala Buddhist community, the most powerful community in the island. Thirdly, I move to Kantarodai, focussing on two recent representations of its history and the privileging of one of these in Sri Lanka's post-war polity. I then assess the consequences for Sri Lanka of the failure to affirm multiplicity at Kantarodai, drawing out its wider relevance for the study of post-colonial and post-war societies.

Keywords: multi-religious spaces; postcolonialism; interreligious relations; mythical space; Kantarodai; Sri Lanka; Buddhism Hinduism

1. Introduction: Jaffna's Changing Wartime Landscape

The Jaffna peninsula at the northern tip of Sri Lanka is poised between two worlds. To the north, across the Palk Strait, it points towards Tamil Nadu and the larger mass of India. To the south, across the thin neck of land, named Elephant Pass, it is linked to the mainland of Sri Lanka. It has received traders, migrants and settlers from both, and from a larger geo-political area. It has suffered three colonial powers—the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British—and a bitter armed conflict in the modern period. Home to places of Buddhist and Hindu pilgrimage, contested histories meet and become entangled in its flat, light-filled, lagoon-penetrated expanse. It is a microcosm for the study of colonialism, postcolonialism, ethnic conflict and interreligious relations.

This article focuses on one case study from the Jaffna peninsula, that of the archaeological site of Kantarodai (Tamil) or Kadurugoda (Sinhala) to illuminate the power of spatially embodied, contested histories within postcolonial and post-war communities. The Sri Lankan military who control Kantarodai view it simply as a Sinhala Buddhist site. However, when it is viewed from historical, socio-political and cultural perspectives, using international archaeological scholarship, its multi-ethnic and multi-religious history is clear. Its present situation speaks of a failure to affirm the narratives of this history, a failure to bring into existence what Jonathan Walters might term a 'multi-religious field' (Walters 1995), where people of more than one ethnicity and religion meet. In examining this case study, I first evoke the changing political and religious landscapes of the Jaffna peninsula in the recent

past, with reference to my own visits since 1989. Second, I examine one dominant imaginary that is projected onto the peninsula, from the Sinhala Buddhist community, the most powerful community on the island. Thirdly, I move to my case study, focussing on two recent representations of its history and the privileging of one of these in Sri Lanka's post-war polity. I then assess the consequences for Sri Lanka of the failure to affirm multiplicity at Kantarodai, drawing out its wider relevance for the study of post-colonial and post-war societies.

2. Sri Lanka's Changing Political and Religious Landscapes

My first visit to the predominantly Hindu and Tamil Jaffna peninsula was in October 1989.¹ I had been resident in Sri Lanka since 1986 studying Buddhism and went with two Sri Lankan friends, one of them a Burgher feminist activist, the other a Tamil woman living in the south. It was a solidarity visit with women in Jaffna and came 30 days after Rajani Rajasingham Thiranyagama, close friend of one of my companions, had been shot and killed, when she was cycling back from her tasks as a lecturer in anatomy at Jaffna University. Jaffna was still under the control of the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF), with the help of the EPRLF (Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front), a Tamil militant group that opposed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The IPKF had originally come to the island to oversee the implementation of the Indo-Lanka Accord, signed in June 1987 by the Presidents of Sri Lanka and India. At a point when the Sri Lankan Government had been about to wrest Jaffna from the control of the LTTE, through 'Operation Liberation', the Accord was to have brought a cessation of hostilities through, for example, the devolution of power through Provincial Councils, the repatriation of some refugees in India and 'foreign policy concessions to India' (Richardson 2005, p. 532). It had been controversial from the start in the north and the south. The LTTE had signed it 'under duress' (Richardson 2005, p. 533) and eventually pulled out, meaning that the IPKF found themselves fighting the force with which they had at first fraternized (e.g., De Silva 1998, pp. 231–40; Richardson 2005, pp. 531–34).

The three of us had a pass that entitled us to just ten days in the north. We travelled by coach on a road that was highly militarized after Anuradhapura, taking twelve hours. Jaffna had no electricity, except for houses near IPKF camps. Parents feared that their sons would be forcibly conscripted into the EPRLF or the LTTE, and the IPKF's aggressive military presence was feared. Many buildings were damaged, including religious centres—the result of government shelling and an IPKF offensive in October 1987. The Methodist Trimmer Hall, for instance, was a gutted shell. Few Sinhala Buddhists ventured into Jaffna at this point and the minimal Sinhala presence of previous decades—Sinhala bakeries, for instance, and a handful of resident Buddhist monks—had vanished. Delgalle Padumasiri Thera, at the Tissa Buddhist Vihāraya in Kankasanturai, established in 1973, had left several years before. The Nāga Vihāra in the centre of Jaffna, an older establishment, had been attacked and all but demolished in 1984, as part of a popular expression of anger after government forces had shelled Our Lady of Refuge Church.² The *vihāra* was then abandoned. The Jaffna of 1989 was, therefore, a Tamil and Indian space, an enclave that was separate from the rest of the island. News from the Sinhala majority south was almost impossible to gain. Few people living in the north, for instance, knew that the Government of Sri Lanka was fighting a militant Sinhala group, the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP—People's Liberation Front), which had been re-energized in opposition to the Indo-Lanka Accord, and that thousands of deaths had resulted (e.g., Gunaratne 1990; Chandraprema 1991). The majority of people we met, however, knew that the then President, Ranasinghe Premadasa, sought the removal of the IPKF and predicted, some with fear and others with hope, that the LTTE would eventually control the peninsula again. The departure of the IPKF would be complete in March 1990 (De Silva

¹ The accounts of my visits to Jaffna are taken from the unpublished diaries I wrote at the time, which recorded conversations with the people we met in Jaffna, unless otherwise indicated.

² Personal communication from a Tamil human rights worker during field visits in 2012 and 2015.

1998, p. 242). As for Christian and Hindu religious buildings and institutions, many had been used as refugee centres during the different phases of the war. Between October and December 1987, for instance, the Christa Seva Ashram in Jaffna had been filled with 2500 Tamils fleeing the IPKF offensive.

My second visit to Jaffna was in May 1991. I travelled with a Dutch Christian worker, who maintained contact between the north and the south on behalf of a Christian denomination, and a Christian Tamil couple. The five day visit, again needing army permission, was shot through with fear. The Jaffna peninsula was in the hands of the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government was at war with them, having used bombs and shells on Jaffna and the surrounding areas. I was still resident in Sri Lanka, completing a doctorate, and travelled to Jaffna in solidarity with those who were living there. We went by car until we reached Pooneryn, close to the Jaffna Lagoon, my Dutch colleague driving, at least until Anuradhapura, with what I called in my diary 'a tense vengeance', at an average of 100 km per hour. But he knew the ground we had to cover that day after Anuradhapura: the army checkpoints at Vavuniya, followed by no-man's-land, which had recently experienced skirmishes as the army had tried to gain more territory; the LTTE checkpoints as we reached LTTE-controlled areas; and then the long drive to Pooneryn through Mankulam, an urban town in ruins after the LTTE had laid siege to the army camp there in November 1990, and Kilinochchi, with a centre 'viciously shelled'. After entering the LTTE-controlled north, there were few vehicles on the road, only an occasional lorry or van moving towards a lengthy wait at Vavuniya and numerous bicycles. At Pooneryn, we took an LTTE-controlled boat across the lagoon and then trishaws into Jaffna, a ten mile journey costing an exorbitant 1000 rupees per trishaw. Only the LTTE and a few NGOs, for instance the International Committee of the Red Cross, had cars in Jaffna.

In 1991, the land north of Vavuniya and in Jaffna seemed even further from the south of Sri Lanka in terms of its atmosphere and physical appearance than in 1989. It was, in effect, another country. Evidence of violence was more visible. Economic development had halted. Jaffna was under economic blockade—even medical supplies were forbidden—and the people grew food rather than bought it, except for exorbitantly expensive bread, rice and sugar, although the local fish was cheaper than in Colombo. Firewood was used for cooking and water was drawn from wells to fill the concrete open tanks in most bathrooms. If families still had batteries—they were also banned—they could hear some radio news. Kerosene was brought up to Jaffna from Vavuniya on bicycles. And the roads of Jaffna were given over to bicycles, the flow regulated by traffic police at major junctions. Government shelling was part of life, with people rushing into poorly made bunkers when the sound of it was heard, although the LTTE themselves had strong underground protection. Whilst I was there, everyone in Jaffna, except the very poor, was forced to give the equivalent of two sovereigns to the LTTE 'for the cause', or, if they did not possess money, their last pieces of jewellery. Receipts were given for this 'poll tax' with the promise that the money would be returned. A tight rule of law was also present, forbidding theft, rape, drug trafficking and other crimes. Some of those I spoke to exhibited a fierce pride in Jaffna culture and the resistance that was being mounted to the threat of Sinhala dominance. Others voiced despair.

As in 1989, there was little Sinhala presence on the Jaffna peninsula, apart from the army in those areas that they controlled—the island of Kayts, for instance, had recently been re-taken by the military. We were told that one Roman Catholic nun had come from Colombo to spend a month in Jaffna but that there had been no others. Christian churches and Hindu temples were functioning, some giving shelter to refugees, and festivals were celebrated, albeit with economic prudence. One of these, a Hindu festival, greeted us as we rode in trishaws towards Jaffna, with coloured bunting stretched across the road and images of deities displayed. Sai Baba pictures were also numerous in the city: 'It could be said', I wrote in my diary, 'that there are two cult heroes in Jaffna, Sai Baba and Prabakaran', leader of the LTTE. It is significant that religious buildings had not escaped government bombs and shells as

my references above to Trimmer Hall and Our Lady of Refuge Church demonstrates.³ In 1991, Jaffna was a Tamil space but its communities existed with the threat of Sinhala Buddhist dominance, as the military came closer to the city.

The LTTE were defeated by government forces in May 2009, after eighteen more years of failed peace talks and war.⁴ Jaffna, itself, however, was re-taken by the military in 1996, five years after my visit. As the LTTE retreated, many inhabitants left with them. When the army promised safe return to those who had left, their offer proved shallow: disappearances and abductions occurred soon afterwards (Harris 2018, p. 172). When I returned to Jaffna in 1999, this time travelling from England, two mass grave sites were being excavated in the Jaffna area, with the possibility that they dated from 1996 (Harris 1999, pp. 2–3). In 2002, when An Agreement for a Ceasefire was signed, there was a brief period of peace, during which some Sinhala Buddhists came on pilgrimage to the North. Jaffna itself remained under army control until the ending of armed conflict, the LTTE moving its capital to Kilinochchi.

The army control of the Jaffna peninsula after 1996 saw changes to the religious landscapes of the area, primarily in relation to Buddhist symbolism. Buddha images were placed near or inside army camps and on roads controlled by the army, and Buddhist places of pilgrimage were renovated and ‘discovered’. In 2012, for instance, I was shown two Buddhist shrines near a Bodhi Tree on Victoria Road behind the Jaffna Central Hospital, placed there by the army after 1996. By 2017, they had been removed in recognition, I would suggest, of Tamil opposition to them. And in December 1997, the navy planted a sapling from the Bodhi tree at Anuradhapura at Dambakola Paṭuna or Mātakal on the coast of the peninsula, at the point where it was believed Venerable Saṅghamittā had landed in the third century BCE, carrying with her a sapling from the tree under which the Buddha had gained enlightenment (Perera 2016, p. 40; Harris 2018, p. 213). The rebuilding of the Nāga Vihāra also began. Buddhist symbols, therefore, returned to Jaffna after 1996, although ordinary Sinhala Buddhists from the south kept away, except during the ceasefire of 2002. When armed conflict ended in 2009, the religious landscape of the Jaffna peninsula changed further as traditional Buddhist pilgrimage sites, such as the one on the island of Nainativu (Tamil)/Nāgadīpa (Sinhala), started to receive pilgrims. As I argued in 2018, however, Christian and Hindu places of worship were also renovated and expanded during this period, in a form of interreligious competition (Harris 2018, pp. 215–18).⁵

3. Sinhala Buddhist Imaginaries

In 1977, human geographer, Yi-Fu Kuan, termed the spatial component of a world view ‘mythical space’. Kuan was pointing to the tendency for myths, narratives of origin and communal histories to be expressed in space. In some respects, he anticipated Lefebvre. If ‘space’ is socially constructed, as Lefebvre argued (Lefebvre [1974] 1991), then one conditioning factor within this ‘construction’ are the myths and histories that are projected onto and become embodied in space. As I wrote in 2018, ‘space’ bears ‘the weight and complexities of the human imaginary and the human gaze’ (Harris 2018, p. 3). When this is applied to religion, spatial expressions of a religious world view not only concern the metaphysical but also histories and narratives, which lead them to become ‘overlaid with issues of identity, power, inclusion and exclusion of the Other, and the negotiation of ethnic and community relations’ (Harris 2018, p. 3). Kantarodai, as currently experienced by visitors, is a spatial expression of a particular religious imaginary, held by a powerful section of the Sinhala Buddhist community in Sri

³ See (Neiminathan 1998) for one perspective on the destruction of Hindu temples in Sri Lanka during the war.

⁴ See (Keethaponcalan 2009) for the main documents connected with attempts to make peace as subsequent breakdowns and (Rajanayagam 2006) for an account of failed peace talks in 1994/1995.

⁵ The work of Daniel Kent is important in this context. From 2004 to 2007, he conducted doctoral fieldwork that focussed on Buddhist monks who preached to or conducted ceremonies with Sinhala Buddhist members of the Sri Lankan army. He concluded that these monks rarely justified war or praised ‘it as a moral good’. Yet, they did encourage Sinhala Buddhists to fight, citing the impossibility of adhering completely to Buddhist moral behaviour when the Dhamma was in decline and Buddhism needed to be defended. The military presence in Jaffna was guided by this form of teaching. See for example (Kent 2015).

Lanka. It has become a 'mythical space', which is excluding religious and cultural others who have had a stake in its history because of this religious imaginary.

The religious imaginary or world view that currently dominates Kantarodai envisions the whole island of Sri Lanka as holy to the Buddha, as almost the body of the Buddha. It is informed by narratives within the *vamsa* tradition, particularly the *Mahāvamsa*. The first chapter of the *Mahāvamsa*, for instance, describes three visits of the historical Buddha to the island, one of them to Nāgadīpa (Tamil Nainativu) in the north. This and other narratives surround Sri Lanka with Buddhist 'history', in effect claiming the island for Buddhism, and, by extension, for Sinhala Buddhists, since this imaginary does not countenance the idea that there could have been Tamil Buddhists in the north. During Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict, civil society organizations and liberal politicians, some of who were Buddhists, periodically used arguments taken from human rights discourse and contemporary political theory to appeal to those Buddhists who supported military defeat of the LTTE. Their aim was to gain support for a negotiated solution to the ethnic conflict based on one of the many global models for the devolution of power in multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies. Only a minority of Buddhists was convinced by their arguments and this imaginary was the reason. Inherent within it is that the island cannot be divided, either by the devolution of power or the creation of a separate state in the north and east. With its strong spatial component, this imaginary proved far stronger than contemporary liberal political theory.⁶ The failure of President Chandrika Kumaratunge in the 1990s to push devolution proposals through Parliament was also partly due to this imaginary, expressed in the opposition of some lay and ordained Buddhists to the mention of a 'Union of Regions', which, in their eyes, would fracture the cosmically-ordained unity of Sri Lanka under the Buddha and the Buddhist dispensation (Harris 2018, pp. 179–84). One Buddhist leader, Madduma Bandara, claimed that the proposals were 'high treachery', because the subversion of the 'territorial integrity' of the island would threaten the extinction of Buddhism (Bandara 2000, p. 12; quoted in Harris 2018, p. 184).

4. The Case Study of Kantarodai

To develop the case study of Kantarodai, which was mentioned in brief in my 2018 monograph (Harris 2018, pp. 177, 208–9), I draw on two field visits to the north of Sri Lanka in 2012 and 2015 and two principal publications, one written by a Tamil academic and one written from a Sinhala Buddhist nationalist perspective: *Kantarodai Civilization of Ancient Jaffna 500 BCE—800 CE* by Siva Thiagarajah and *The Sinhala Buddhist Heritage in The East and North of Shri Lanka* by Venerable Ellāwalla Mēdhānanda Thera. The two are not of the same calibre. The former draws on Asian and Western archaeological and historical scholarship. The latter draws on little other than the author's personal field visits to the north and east of Sri Lanka, undergirded by his Sinhala nationalist perspective. However, each gives voice to the convictions of a much larger group and can be seen as representative of that group, Thiagarajah representing Tamils and Sinhals who seek narratives that go beyond Sinhala nationalist perspectives, and Mēdhānanda, representing a substantial number of Sinhala Buddhists, who are convinced that the island was once totally Sinhala and Buddhist. The translator of my chosen book by Mēdhānanda, Cyril Chandrasekara Gunawardhana, for instance, wrote in his 'Translator's Note' that he had translated with a certain amount of fear because of the importance of his subject matter, calling the work 'a gigantic work of religious and national value' (Mēdhānanda 2005, p. 12). The asymmetry in the two works is underscored, however, by the fact that I found Thiagarajah's work in a well-regarded secular bookshop in the centre of Colombo, Vijitha Yapa, and Mēdhānanda's, only in the bookshop of a Buddhist centre, albeit one of the largest in Colombo.

The Kantarodai archeological site is about 3.2 square kilometres in extent (Thiagarajah 2016, p. 50). It is situated in the former war zone of the north in a majority Tamil and Hindu area, with a Christian minority. What can be seen today by the casual visitor or pilgrim is a complex of small Buddhist

⁶ I examined this imaginary in (Harris 2018, pp. 13–24, 145–59), drawing on (Kemper 1991; Roberts 2004; De Silva Wijeyeratne 2014).

stūpas restored in a style similar to the many larger stūpas or *dāgūbas* found in Buddhist monasteries (*vihāras*) in southern Sri Lanka. These, however, form only one part of a larger archaeological site, the findings within which have demonstrated that Kantarodai had once been a sizeable and influential urban settlement, with extensive trading links, even with Rome. Contemporary visitors to the site, however, do not have access to this larger context.

The ‘discovery’ of Kantarodai in modernity began in the second decade of the twentieth century with the work of a British civil servant, J.P. Lewis, and a Sinhala civil servant, Paul Pieris. Lewis was instrumental in the discovery of Buddha images in Vallipuram and Chunnakam (on the Jaffna peninsula) and argued on the basis of this that Jaffna was once a Sinhala and Buddhist district (Lewis 1916). Pieris claimed that his own ‘discovery’ of Kantarodai added weight to the same argument (Pieris 1917, p. 14, cited in Harris 2018, p. 107). This representation of Buddhist sites on the Jaffna peninsula fed into conversations contemporary to that time, which engaged both British administrators and English-educated Sri Lankans, for instance whether Tamils or Sinhalas were first to inhabit the island and whether the Sinhala Buddhist majority once controlled the whole of it. Well before the second decade of the twentieth century, a ‘Tamil as invader discourse’ had been present within the colonial sensibility of Sri Lanka, conditioned by readings of the *vaṃṣa* tradition, with its records of battles against South Indians and, in its later forms, by the assertion that the Sinhala people were ‘Aryan’ and the Tamils, Dravidian (Harris 2018, pp. 101–7). British administrators such as Lewis and their Sri Lankan colleagues were, therefore, predisposed to interpret Buddhist remains in the Hindu north of the country as proof that the Sinhalas once controlled and lived in the north of the country.

When the Department of Archaeology, within an independent Sri Lanka, began reconstruction work at Kantarodai in 1972 (Uduwara 1990, p. 175; Harris 2018, p. 177),⁷ the judgement of Lewis and Pieris was accepted as truth, namely that Kantarodai was culturally continuous with Buddhism in the Sinhala south of Sri Lanka, particularly the Buddhist culture of Anuradhapura, the first Buddhist capital in the country from which spread an extensive Buddhist dispensation. After all, it accorded with the Sinhala Buddhist imaginary that I have described. Several of the foundations of the stūpas, therefore, were restored according to a southern template—a smooth almost bell-like structure similar to ones found at Mihintale, a site close to Anuradhapura, where tradition locates the coming of Buddhism to Sri Lanka (Uduwara 1990, p. 175; Harris 2018, p. 177).

When I first visited the site in 2012, three years after the ending of armed conflict, I was alone, except for my trishaw driver, who stayed outside.⁸ The site was overseen by three members of the Sri Lankan military and I was the only visitor. A handful of other lay people were there but they seemed to be associates of the army. One of them came up to me and pointed me towards a corrugated iron structure, indicating that I should remove my shoes. I soon realized that the building was a makeshift Buddhist shrine and that I was first expected to offer devotion there. Only then was I taken to the reconstructed stūpas. There was also another shrine under a Bodhi Tree with a plaque, which gave the history of the site in Sinhala. This stated and I summarize parts of it:

The past history of the historical Kadurugoda ancient *vihāraya* goes back to the era of Lord Buddha. Recovered Buddha statues, pieces of painted tiles and coins belonging to the rulers of the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa periods were found. The site was recognized as the Kadurugoda Vihāraya in the list of *vihārayas* ... during the Kandyan Period. This Vihāraya was destroyed by the brutal acts of Tamil king Changili in the sixteenth century.

⁷ According to Thiagarajah, excavations by the Department of Archaeology were carried out in 1946, 1956 and 1964 previous to this (Thiagarajah 2016, p. 391).

⁸ These two visits are also described briefly in my 2018 monograph (Harris 2018, pp. 208–9). In this article, I draw more extensively on my fieldwork notes.

It is believed that Lord Buddha visited Kadurugoda to take rest after mediating a dispute between two kings, Chulodara and Mahodara. Buddha statues and other artefacts recovered from this site are being kept at the Archaeological Museum in Jaffna.

This ancient Kadurugoda Vihāraya, a symbol of the past history of Sinhala Buddhism, must be protected for future generations as a national heritage. (Donated by Sethumiya Communications, Matugama)

When I was allowed to walk closer to the site, my guide proudly showed me the date, 1972, carved into the base rings of one of the stūpas. What leapt out for me on this first visit was that, although the site, strictly speaking, was under the control of the Department of Archaeology, a secular government body, I, as visitor, had been expected to treat it as though it was a site of religious pilgrimage.

On my second visit in 2015, I travelled with a Sri Lankan friend. The atmosphere was completely different from 2012, although the site continued to be overseen by the army. First, there were several coach loads of Buddhist tourists from the south of the island there. Second, the makeshift, closed, corrugated iron shrine that I had been asked to visit in 2012 had been improved, probably by the army. It was open on one side as a visible shrine and there was less corrugated iron. The shrine under the Bodhi Tree was still there but this time it had Buddhist flags around it and was a more obvious focus of devotion. As for shoes, some but not all of the Sinhala 'tourists' removed theirs, the army guides wore boots and I was not asked to remove my sandals. I was also able to overhear what the coach parties were being told by their military guides, with the help of the Sri Lankan friend with me. It drew heavily on the views of Ellāwala Mēdhānanda, to which I will return. In summary, they were told that the site had once been part of a Sinhala Buddhist kingdom, with Sinhala inhabitants. This kingdom had been destroyed by Tamil invaders, who had brutally killed many Sinhala and eradicated Buddhism from the north of the country. Only now, after the ending of the war, was the site being reclaimed for Sinhala Buddhism.

On this visit, I was also told that the army had wanted to build a complete Buddhist *vihāra* or monastery at the site but that this had been refused by the Department of Archaeology and that the Department of Archaeology had wanted to gain more land for excavations but that this had been opposed by local Tamil landowners. On neither occasion did I see Hindu or Christian Tamil visitors, although the site firmly lay in the midst of Tamil communities. It was a mono-cultural and mono-religious site, a Sinhala site. In effect, the surrounding Tamil communities had been stripped of their ownership of it.

5. Divergent Histories of Kantarodai

In examining the narratives that drive the conflicting perspectives on Kantarodai, as voiced by Ellāwala Mēdhānanda and Siva Thiagarajah, my aim is to demonstrate the affective strength of these conflicting narratives and their conflict-fuelling potential in a postcolonial and post-armed-conflict society.

Ellāwala Mēdhānanda, a leader within the Jāthika Hāla Urumaya, a Sinhala nationalist political party that was formed in 2004 as a successor to the Sinhala Urumaya (Sinhala Heritage Party), defines himself as a teacher, an educationalist, an archaeologist and a committed scholar. Before his retirement, he was Director of Education in the southern Province of Sabaragamuwa. Before the ending of armed conflict, with the aid of the military, he travelled into the war zones of the predominantly Tamil Hindu north and east of the island to find Buddhist archaeological sites. His aim was to prove that they indicated an ancient, advanced Sinhala Buddhist civilization that had justly ruled a unitary state in the entire island, before Tamils from south India had invaded and destroyed this polity. The pillars of the argument he developed were, in summary:

- Sinhala Buddhists are Aryan, from North India, and were one-time rulers of the whole island of Sri Lanka;
- The Tamils in Sri Lanka mainly descend from invaders, although some arrived as traders;
- All Buddhist sites in Sri Lanka are Sinhala Buddhist sites;

- Kantarodai is, therefore, a Sinhala Buddhist site;
- Early Tamil inscriptions in the north and east, including at Kantarodai, were written by Sinhala to accommodate Tamil traders from South India and not by indigenous Tamil inhabitants (Mēdhānanda 2005, p. 26)

Mēdhānanda wrote prolifically about this. He claimed that, on the Jaffna peninsula alone, there were 45 Sinhala Buddhist sites in ruins, neglected and overgrown because of Tamil dominance and the separatist war, one of them being Kantarodai. As for the east, he argued that Hindu temples had been built over 100 Buddhist monasteries (Fernando 2016, p. 267; Mēdhānanda 2005, pp. 26, 42, 48; Harris 2018, p. 153). His overall count of Sinhala Buddhist sites in the north and east was at least 500, contesting the Department of Archaeology's figures of 276 (Mēdhānanda 2005, p. 10, cited in Fernando 2016, p. 268 and Harris 2018, p. 153). He accepted that Aryan Sinhala immigrants from north India intermingled and intermarried with indigenous people, moulding the 'Sinhala' race (Mēdhānanda 2005, p. 16) but did not add that these could have been Tamils from south India. In one of his books, translated into English, he painted a romanticized picture of flourishing trade and an 'unbroken system of administration', with the north and east of Sri Lanka being ruled from Anuradhapura, within a unitary Sinhala Buddhist state (Mēdhānanda 2005, pp. 19–25). Using texts within Sri Lanka's *vaṃsa* tradition such as the *Dīpavaṃsa* and the *Mahāvāṃsa*, he accepted that this unitary state suffered and overcame threats from invading South Indians, and had regional rulers. However, he insisted that the whole island was united in a common culture, proved by archaeological and inscriptional evidence, stating:

The fact that Buddhist activities in the North and East were carried out by Sinhala kings, proves that both these Provinces were always under the sole authority of the chief king of the country. Whether they fall into early or later periods the inscriptions in the North, East and the South represent a similar style in letters, language and culture. (Mēdhānanda 2005, p. 25)

He continued by citing a bowl excavated at Kantarodai, with an inscription that mentioned a person called 'Data', adding, 'A cave was donated to the Sangha by a "Data" in the same period in Rōhana', namely in the south of the island, implying, but not stating, that this could have been the same person or, at the very least, that the two areas were united in a common culture and that the bowl had been donated by Data to the monastic community.

Mēdhānanda also cites, without exact references, two European observers of Sri Lanka: the Portuguese chronicler de Queyroz (d. 1688) and the Dutch predikant, Philippus Baldaeus (1632–1671). According to Mēdhānanda, the former wrote that Jaffna was ruled by 'the brothers of the Kotte king', proving that it was once ruled from the south of Sri Lanka,⁹ and the latter listed divisions in the north of the country with words that had a Sinhala ring, proving, according to Mēdhānanda, that these were Sinhala settlements (Mēdhānanda 2005, p. 28)²⁰. Of the stūpas at Kantarodai, he wrote:

In appearance, these stupas shows the architectural and sculptural modes of the early Anuradhapura period. Moonstones without any sculptural presentations in the centre, bricks and Foot Print stones too bear witness to conclude that the site dates from the early ages. I am of the opinion that all of these stupas were around one central monument. (Mēdhānanda 2005, p. 271)

Mēdhānanda's writings express absolute conviction that his representation of history is true and have a strong emotive tone, marked not only by sadness at what he judged to be the vandalism of

⁹ De Queyroz was a Portuguese Jesuit, who lived in India for 53 years. In 1686, He completed a detailed history of the Portuguese In Sri Lanka. It was not published and was made available to Sri Lankans only in 1930, with a translation by the Sri Lankan Jesuit and historian, S. G. Perera (De Queyroz 1930).

²⁰ (Mēdhānanda 2005, p. 28) 'Valigama, Tenmarachchi, Vadamaracci and Pacciyarapalla'; (Baldaeus [1672] 1960, p. 318) —'Beligamme, Tenmarache, Waddemarache and Patchiarapalle'.

Sinhala Buddhist cultural remains but also outrage towards the perpetrators of this vandalism and of other threats to Sinhala Buddhism. In 2005, he cited Muslim fundamentalists (Mēdhānanda 2005, p. 30), the LTTE (e.g., Mēdhānanda 2005, p. 40), unnamed 'non-Sinhala people' (Mēdhānanda 2005, pp. 33–34) and unnamed 'foreigners' (Mēdhānanda 2005, p. 32), all of whom, in Mēdhānanda's eyes, were guilty of destroying Sinhala Buddhist space and the cultural inheritance it embodied. The level of emotion is implicit and cumulative in his works, through continuous references to ruins that have been ignored, lying on land owned by non-Sinhalas, although he was also willing to affirm that 'ordinary Tamils always like to extend their hands towards us in full earnestness for peace and coexistence' (Mēdhānanda 2005, p. 273). The affective appeal of this representation of Buddhist space has been extremely influential among many Sri Lankan Buddhists, evoking not only loss and sadness but also anger.

By profession, Siva Thiagarajah is a medical doctor with special interests in human genetics and archaeology. In his writing on Kantarodai, he drew on international archaeological studies, and the work of academic Tamil archaeologists such as S. Krishnarajah and S. K. Sitrapalam. The agenda behind his work emerges forcibly at the end of my chosen publication, when the author responded to the name given to the Kantarodai archaeological site by the Sri Lankan state, namely 'Kathurugoda Ancient Vihara'. Stating that no 'epigraphic or historical evidence' supported this title, he continued:

This action by the state claiming this as an early Sinhalese settlement and presenting it as a *Sinhala Buddhist Centre* is an example of intentionally robbing and depriving the Jaffna Tamils of their ancient history and heritage. This view is reinforced by the fact that the artefacts discovered at Kantarōdai by the Department of Archaeology are never kept at the Jaffna Museum, but always sent to either Colombo or Anuradhapura museums. (Thiagarajah 2016, p. 392)

The planks on which Thiagarajah's position rests include that:

- Kantarodai was initially a megalithic city in continuity with the megalithic culture of India long before the emergence of the Sinhala language and the Sinhalas as an ethnic group;
- Kantarodai was the capital of ancient Naganadu, which embraced a third of the island's space, including contemporary Trincomalee (on the East coast), the islands off the Jaffna peninsula and what is called the Vanni today (Thiagarajah 2016, p. 268);
- Kantarodai was a trading hub for South Asia, a centre for Hindu-Buddhist commercial activity;
- Buddhist remains at Kantarodai point to Tamil Mahāyāna Buddhism, which overlapped with megalithic culture and was similar to the Amarāvati Buddhist tradition in India (Amarāvati was a monastic site in Andhra Pradesh with links to the Mahāsaṃghika School);
- This Tamil Buddhism was prevalent in Jaffna until the end of the seventh century CE;
- Tamil Buddhism was ignored by the Theravāda Buddhists of Anuradhapura (Thiagarajah 2016, p. 256), as demonstrated by the fact that the *Mahāvamsa* fails to mention 'the association of Tamils with Buddhism' (Thiagarajah 2016, p. 368);
- Evidence pointing to an early Dravidian or Tamil culture at Kantarodai and other Buddhist sites in the North, for instance the presence of Dravidian red and black pottery ware and a Tamil Brahmi script, is ignored by Sinhala historians and politicians in the present (e.g., Thiagarajah 2016, p. 280).

To argue these points, he countered, for instance, the British colonial discourse mentioned earlier, which was predisposed to see the 'Aryan' Sinhalas as the early inhabitants of the island and the 'Dravidian' Tamils as invaders, by pointing out that contemporary population genetics 'has shown that the ancestors of more than 85% of the Sinhalas and Tamils of Sri Lanka are the linear descendants of the Mesolithic peoples who occupied South Asia 30,000 years ago during the Ice age when Sri Lanka was part of the Indian landmass' (Thiagarajah 2016, p. xi). His implication was that this 85% was continuous with south India rather than the so-called 'Aryan' world. He accused Sinhala academics who claimed that 'there were no permanent Tamil settlements in this island before the 13th century CE' (Thiagarajah 2016, p. xi) of ignoring that their own historical chronicles state that, in the early

Anuradhapura period, there were ‘no less than ten Tamil rulers’ and that the Sinhala warrior and island-uniter, Dutthagāmini, killed 32 ‘Tamil regional kings’ ruling in different parts of Sri Lanka (Thiagarajah 2016, pp. ix–xii). His point was: surely these regional rulers were permanent settlers and surely they must have had ‘Tamil subjects in their kingdom’ (Thiagarajah 2016, p. xii). A couple of pages later, he wrote:

Buddhist remains have been discovered in several parts of Jaffna, especially at Kantarodai and Vallipuram. Wide publicity is being given to the Buddhist character of these ruins at Kantarodai and other places, associating them with the Sinhalese culture for the mere reason they are Buddhistic; while the Black and Red Ware which is associated with Dravidian culture in South Asia, found all over these places among the Buddhist ruins and artefacts are never mentioned. Even while the learned Sinhalese academics are unable to comprehend the fact that Buddhism was one of the religions among the Dravidians during the early centuries before and after the Common Era, one cannot blame the ordinary people for their ignorance. (Thiagarajah 2016, p. xiv)

He backed up these points by referring to the work of an archaeological team that came to Sri Lanka from the United States in 1970 and demonstrated that ‘the Kantarodai settlements were an extension of the Megalithic culture of South India’ and that radiocarbon dating suggested a ‘commencement date of 1300 BCE for this culture at Kantarōdai’ (Thiagarajah 2016, p. xv), a full millennium before the coming of Buddhism to Sri Lanka. He then surveyed the way in which this research was built upon by Tamil archaeologists and historians, but suppressed in Sinhala accounts.

Central to his argument is that the foundations of the stūpas at Kantarodai should not have been restored according to a southern Buddhist template, since they could also have supported differently shaped structures. It is far more likely, Thiagarajah argues, that they were a burial complex, tombs rather than stūpas: ‘a Buddhicised version of Megalithic monuments’ (Thiagarajah 2016, p. 250). He pointed to similar Buddhist sites in Andhra Pradesh at Amarāvati and Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, where clusters of small stūpas were built over megalithic burial sites, and claimed that the site at Kantarodai was unique for having the same pattern. Therefore, his judgement on the restoration by the Department of Archaeology was:

This is an instance of the state wilfully creating a cultural monument and presenting it as a symbol of Sinhala-Buddhist culture, while ignoring the historic Black and Red Ware found among the Buddhist artefacts, rewriting history and deceiving the public and the international community who are unaware of the real past. (Thiagarajah 2016, p. 251)

As for Data’s bowl, which Mēdhānanda refers to as proof of continuity across different geographical sections of Sri Lanka, Thiagarajah states that there is no evidence that it was the alms-bowl of a monk. Data was a common name in Bengal and it was probably a bowl belonging to a merchant from that part of India (Thiagarajah 2016, p. 78).

Under Thiagarajah’s pen, therefore, Kantharodai emerges as a site that had variously embodied the megalithic culture of India, Hindu cultures, and the Buddhism of both Tamils and Sinhals. He argues that it could also have been a site of contest between Mahāyāna and Theravāda Buddhism in Sri Lanka. It was, to use Jonathan Walters’s terminology, a ‘multireligious field’ (Walters 1995).

Thiagarajah’s narrative, as Mēdhānanda’s, is infused with conviction, sadness and outrage—conviction about the veracity of the archaeological excavations at Kantarodai that he cites, sadness that there had been consistent attempts by some within the Sinhala majority to distort these findings, and outrage that so many people are taken in by a re-writing of history that strips the Tamils of Sri Lanka of their cultural heritage.

6. Bringing the Two Writers Together

Each of my writers cite archaeological evidence, Mēdhānanda from his own army-aided expeditions into the north and east of Sri Lanka, and Thiagarajah, from western archaeological

research and the work of professional Tamil archaeologists. Each gives voice to a different community, Mēdhānanda to a substantial section of Sinhala Buddhists and Thiagarajah, to those Sinhala and Tamils who seek to move beyond narratives conditioned by Sinhala nationalism. For each, the Jaffna peninsula expresses and embodies emotive aspects of their religious and cultural identity. Each, for instance, is convinced that important facets of their identity have been destroyed or distorted by the ethnic group represented by the other writer. In addition, each brings to their work preconceptions informed by the experience of suffering and perceived victimhood during the ethnic war.¹¹ Kantarodai becomes the bearer of their opposing narratives. In the present, however, the narrative that is embodied by the site is that of Mēdhānanda, reinforced through the history communicated to Sinhala Buddhist pilgrims by the site's army guides. A potentially multi-religious and multicultural field is prevented from coming into existence by the dominance of one imaginary, supported by military strength and a Sinhala-dominated state.

7. Concluding Thoughts

I began this paper by evoking the religious and political landscapes of the Jaffna peninsula during the ethnic war of the 1980s and 1990s when the peninsula was largely a Tamil enclave, existing either under Indian dominance or with the possibility of Sinhala Buddhist dominance. I then examined an influential imaginary found within sections of the Sinhala Buddhist community, the imaginary that has been projected onto the archaeological site of Kantarodai, reinforced by military strength. After this, I turned to Kantarodai itself and to two representations of its history, the first a product of the above imaginary, the second, an account that is open to international archaeological research. Sinhala Buddhist visitors to the site today are exposed only to the first and tend to see Kantarodai as their own possession, an expression of the perceived past greatness of Sinhala Buddhism in the north. I have presented this as a failure to bring into existence the rich multi-religious and multi-cultural narratives surrounding the site. It is failure that has been conditioned both by the postcolonial and post-war polity of Sri Lanka and a Sinhala Buddhist imaginary that pre-dates colonialism.

My case study demonstrates that, when there is a failure to recognize narrative multiplicity in post-war and post-colonial contexts, the potential for future conflict is increased. I have been amazed at the resistance I have found among Buddhists in the south of Sri Lanka to the thought that Buddhism could have been strong amongst Tamils or even that there was time when Buddhism was not linked with one ethnic group. If there was a time when the Mahāyāna Buddhism of Tamils in the north was in conflict with the Theravāda Buddhism of Sinhala in the north-western, central and southern parts of the country, the memory of this has been obliterated among most Sinhala Buddhists, since it undermines their conviction that the whole island was once Sinhala Buddhist. It would not be an exaggeration to say that any challenge to this representation of Sri Lanka is seen by some Buddhists as an existential threat to Sinhala Buddhist survival.

The Tamils of Sri Lanka, on the other hand, have little power to challenge this Sinhala Buddhist representation, except through scholarly works such as the one I have cited by Thiagarajah, which, on the Sinhala side, will only have been read by an English-educated liberal elite.

The case study of Kantarodai, therefore, makes visible some of the underlying tensions within Sri Lanka's post-war polity and the seeds that are present for future conflict. For the power relationships surrounding Kantarodai, which privilege monody rather than multiplicity, do not lead to stability. Rather, they fuel resentment, outrage and disempowerment. These are the reverse of the pride I noted in Jaffna in 1991, albeit alongside despair. The consequences of these emotions may prove costly to Sri Lanka. The case study, more generally, makes visible the dangers within postcolonial and post-war societies of the imposition of narrative hegemony on religious spaces that would flourish if narrative multiplicity was recognized and affirmed.

¹¹ See for instance (Hoole 2001) for an account of the suffering of all communities during the ethnic war.

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