

# ICOA1522: HERITAGE AS RESILIENCE: THE ROLE OF MINORITY COMMUNITIES IN POST-WAR SRI LANKA

## Subtheme 02: The Role of Cultural Heritage in Building Peace and Reconciliation

**Session 1:** Heritage as Peace Builder, Tying and Benefitting Community

**Location:** Silver Oak Hall 1, India Habitat Centre

**Time:** December 13, 2017, 12:00 – 12:15

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**Abstract:** The surge in conflicts on a global scale has resulted in protection and reconstruction of heritage emerging as an important but highly challenging concept in the 21st century. Post-war nations such as Sri Lanka, therefore, are at a critical juncture both in terms of post-conflict recovery and reconciliation. As a country emerging from civil war, heritage constitutes a vital aspect of the island's national identity as well as its emotional, political, and economic landscape.

Sri Lanka's post-war period however, has witnessed an escalation in violence against other ethno-religious minorities, particularly the island's Muslim community, with heritage-centred contestations questioning their legitimacy, belonging and citizenship. These developments are particularly significant as the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC)<sup>2</sup> identified heritage contestation between different ethnic groups as an obstacle to the path of reconciliation.

To date, much of the popular and scholarly debates on the politics of Sri Lankan heritage have dealt with the socio-political entanglements of heritage pertaining to the majority ethnic group the Sinhalese and its largest minority, the Tamils, rendering the heritage of other ethno-religious minorities less visible within mainstream heritage narratives. Much of these scholarly debates also focus on these issues through lenses of dissonance, destruction, and disputes. A framework of heritage/ cultural resilience opens up productive avenues from which to explore these complex entanglements. Within wider arguments of democratizing heritage in a post-war context, this paper aims to explore the significance heritage or cultural resilience of minority ethno-religious communities, paying close attention to how an ethnically diverse religious minority such as the Sri Lankan Muslims utilise heritage as a means for building resilience and communal wellbeing within the process of post-war reconciliation.

**Key words:** *post-war heritage, heritage resilience, Sri Lankan Muslims, ethno-religious minorities*

<sup>2</sup> A Commission appointed by the Sri Lankan Government to support the drive towards national unity and reconciliation after nearly three decades of civil war.

## Introduction

In 2009, Sri Lanka's 26 year-long civil war, the result of tensions between the Sri Lankan Government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), came to an end. As with ethnic conflicts elsewhere Sri Lanka's armed struggle was also accompanied by <<retorical wars>> over archaeological sites and place names, as well as the political use of the national past (Spencer, 1990, p. 3). With the cessation of armed hostilities in May 2009, the Sri Lankan Government appointed *The Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission* (LLRC) to support the drive towards national unity and reconciliation after decades of division (Lessons Learnt & Reconciliation Commission Government of Sri Lanka, 2011). This commission identified heritage contestation between different ethnic groups as a subject of debate in the path to reconciliation (See sections 8.179, 8.282, 9.151 and 13 – LLRC report). Nearly a decade after the end of the armed conflict, the achievement of peace remains fraught, especially given the increase in violence towards other ethno-religious minorities, notably the island's minority Muslim community. Given this situation, this paper is interested in exploring how heritage resilience informs the ways through which Sri Lankan Muslims navigate and negotiate the complexities of post-war cultural politics, particularly given the increasing use of archaeological knowledge and practice to question their belonging and legitimacy.

## The erasure of hope

The politicisation of heritage and archaeology in complex nations such as Sri Lanka continues to adversely impact minority and other historically, economically or socially disadvantaged communities (Coningham & Lewer, 2000a, 2000b; Gathercole & Lowenthal, 2004; Kohl & Fawcett, 1995; Meskell, 1998). This is even more apparent with the re-escalation of heritage-centric ethnic tensions in the post-war period, further compounding issues along the lines of legitimacy, belonging and citizenship of non-Sinhalese minorities. The socio-political and economic entanglements of heritage frequently manifest as contestations, dissonance and conflict of heritage objects, monuments, sites or cultural expressions. Of course equally devastating to heritage are the numerous development projects taking place in the island - particularly in the post-war period (Jayawardana, 2015; Peebles, 2015; Wijesuriya, Weerasinghe, Karunaratne, & Tennegedara, 2013)<sup>1</sup>, the impact of which is often subsumed within the more popular discourses of ethno-religiously motivated heritage contestation or conflict.

The institutionalisation of colonial memory as well as a political legacy of ethnic outbidding (DeVotta, 2005; Imtiyaz, 2013) has also resulted in the foregrounding of ethno-religious contestation in heritage dissonances and conflict in Sri Lanka. Moreover, as anthropologist Rohan Bastin concedes, much of its postcolonial experiences, (including I might add, the sphere of heritage and archaeology) are <<over-determined>> by the civil war (Bastin, 2010, p. 444). Much of the dominant heritage discourse on Sri Lanka therefore are contoured along the lines of polarised ethno-religious identities, often pivoting on a perpetrator- victim dichotomy (For example see: Amarasuriya, Perera, Azeez, & Ibrahim, 2015; Dewasiri, 2013; Emmanuel, Wettasinghe, Perera, & Azeez, 2015; Holt, 2016; Peebles, 1990, 2006,

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<sup>1</sup>Case in point being the lease or sale of 'sacred' temple land of the Golden Temple of Dambulla (A UNESCO World Heritage Site), most notably for the construction of a luxury eco hotel and an International Cricket Stadium. Interestingly, other religious structures such as the Khairiya Jumma Mosque and the Badrakaali Amman Hindu Temple were demolished on the grounds that they were <<illegal constructions>> on sacred land (Peebles, 2015, p. 103).

Wickramasinghe, 2009, 2013, 2015)<sup>2</sup>. The complex shuffle between the status of ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’, largely foregrounds the victimisation of minority communities and their heritage by sections of the Sinhalese community, as well as the primarily Sinhalese dominated State. Whilst acknowledging that these debates bring greater visibility to the diverse social issues in which heritage plays a central part, the question arises as to what extent narratives based on victimhood or victimisation erase or obscure other equally valid narratives?

In the context of heritage, a victim-oriented framing has resulted in the portrayal of minorities (and other vulnerable groups) as homogenous, passive players within state or other hegemonic systems, further embedding notions of their exclusion, marginality and victimhood. This particular framing of the problem has also obscured or erased other equally important narratives centred on hope, discounting elements such as resilience, empowerment and agency of minority groups and communities. Narratives of victimisation and of victimhood in much of the academic as well as popular debates on heritage have resulted in sustaining what Professor Sudharshan Seneviratne (2010) refers to as an <<ideology of misery>><sup>3</sup>. Professor Seneviratne’s claim warrants a separate discussion altogether. Pertinent to my argument however, is his contention that certain sections of the media, skilled in the <<classic art of creating misery, thriving in that misery and then posing themselves as the redeemer of misery>>, largely discount the progress achieved in Sri Lanka’s post-war heritage sphere (Seneviratne, 2010). I would further suggest that it is not only sections of the media but also sections of the academic community who adopt this particular position and thus perpetuate the cyclical legacy of victimhood and victimisation within the dominant discourse (For example see: Amarasuriya et al., 2015; Emmanuel et al., 2015; Gravers, 2015; Haniffa, 2014; Holt, 2016; Thaheer, Peiris, & Pathiraja, 2013; Wickramasinghe, 2013).

The victim-oriented epistemological stance in much of the literature on the politicisation of heritage and archaeology has also been critiqued by other scholars, particularly those working in the indigenous heritage space. Scholars such as Sonya Atalay, Audra Simpson and others argue that much of the dominant heritage discourse to date establishes and constrains indigenous and minority communities into themes of marginality and victimhood, often overlooking their potential agency (Atalay, 2006; Byrne, 2011; Kuutma, 2012, p. 44; Simpson, 2007, 2014; Smith, 1999). This situation calls for the conceptualisation of a different metrics of heritage analysis, one which can help tease out those elements of the cultural heritage matrix that have garnered relatively little attention.

## **Resilience as an element of heritage analysis**

This bias in heritage analysis has led scholars such as Winter (2015, p. 2) to advocate for the importance of achieving a sense of analytical balance in understanding the complexities emerging from the politicisation of heritage. Core issues such as the politics of heritage and preservation, for instance continue to pivot on themes conflict, contestation and dissonance, subsuming other equally important political, economic, social and environmental dimensions of heritage. A framework of resilience can shed new light here and provide useful ways through which we may explore the dynamics of heritage in rapidly shifting local or global contexts. Although a resilience approach is still nascent in the discipline of

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<sup>2</sup> It is also important to note that this burgeoning body of literature has also been met with counter narratives from certain sections of the scholarly community (For example see -B. de Silva, 2012, 2015, Goonatilake, 2001, 2008, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Professor Sudharshan Seneviratne was Director-General of the Central Cultural Fund (2007-2010). His argument is largely based on what he believes to be the unjust criticism of Sri Lankan heritage institutions’ (particularly the Central Cultural Fund) attempts to pluralise the post-war heritage landscape. It is a response to the article *Archaeology sparks new conflict between Sri Lankan Tamils and Sinhalese* published in the UK Times by its South Asia Correspondent Jeremy Page (2010).

heritage studies (For example see- Daskon, 2010; Jigyasu et al., 2013; Lalonde, 2006; MacKee, Haugen Askland, & Askew, 2014), I would argue that it provides both a positive and productive framework through which to understand the socio-political and economic entanglements of heritage and help call to focus other equally valid narratives, such as those which focus on the agency of such communities as well as on themes resilience, hope and empowerment.

This study approaches the concept of resilience as a <<contextually and culturally embedded construct>>(Ungar, 2004, 2005, 2012a, p. 3), which is both <<lived and experienced>>(Brown, 2015, p. 115) by groups and communities. Indeed, as Michael Ungar contends;

<<Resilience is both the capacity of individuals [and communities] to *navigate* their way to the psychological, social, cultural and physical resources that build and sustain their wellbeing, and their individual and collective capacity to *negotiate* for these resources to be provided and experienced in culturally meaningful ways.>> (Ungar, 2012b, p. 17).

Within wider debates on resilience, themes of cultural resilience in particular, illustrate the centrality of culture and heritage to individuals and communities in response to diverse forms of adversity (Clauss-Ehlers, 2004, 2010; Hadler, 2008; Lalonde, 2006). Caroline Clauss-Ehlers for example, defines cultural resilience as a dynamic and interactive process of negotiating adversity through the amalgamation of <<cultural background, cultural values and facilitating factors in the socio-cultural environment>> (Clauss-Ehlers, 2004, p. 36). Using the concept of cultural resilience as a key point, this study adopts a working definition of heritage resilience as a constellation of heritage consciousness (embedded in either material forms of heritage or cultural expressions), shared sense of identity and community, contingent on a network or support system of individuals, groups, institutions, social movements and protective factors, which enable communities to navigate and negotiate adversities, enabling empowerment, cultural survival and identity affirmation.

Within this particular framing of resilience, the key question arises as to what meanings heritage resilience take on in nations such as Sri Lanka which have been in a state of flux owing to processes of colonisation, decolonisation, civil war and post-war recovery? How does resilience speak to themes of empowerment, cultural survival and identity affirmation of minority communities and in the mediation of minority- majority relations? What are the deeper social, political or economic histories of communities which demonstrate resilience? Moreover, what are the diverse social, cultural and structural forces which afford opportunities or resources to communities in times of adversity and how are these utilised?

### **Heritage resilience of Muslim minority communities**

The ethnically diverse Sri Lankan Muslims are the second largest minority in Sri Lanka following the Sri Lankan Tamil community and constitute 9.5% of the island's 20 million population (Department of Census and Statistics - Government of Sri Lanka, 2012). The Muslims have largely been recognised as a <<good minority>> within the backdrop of the civil war, owing to their support of the Sri Lankan government through the accommodative politics of Muslim political parties as well as their proxying for support of Muslim nations' on behalf of the State(K. M. de Silva, 1986; DeVotta, 2016, 2017; McGilvray, 1998). This position however, has been increasingly challenged in the post-war period, and Muslims have had to endure most of the escalating and often heritage-centric violence towards minority communities. Threats to the wellbeing of the Muslim community emerging from the contestation and conflict of heritage sites and landscapes have been explored by a number of scholars(For example see- Amarasuriya

et al., 2015; Emmanuel et al., 2015; Holt, 2016; McGilvray, 2011; McGilvray, 2008; Thaheer et al., 2013). However, less evident are the diverse ways the Muslim community exercise heritage resilience for empowerment, identity affirmation and cultural survival. Equally obscure are the ways they accrue personal or communal forms of capital (social, cultural, economic) in the face of adversity. The short-lived nature of public memory and the pervasiveness of the 'ideology of misery' appears to have rendered the body of literature which focuses on the historical resilience, empowerment and positive contribution of the Muslim community less visible within the current heritage discourse (K. M. de Silva, 1986, 1988, Dewaraja, 1986, 1994, 1995; Hussainmiya, 1990). Events of the recent past, as well as the strategic politics of victimhood have increasingly posited Muslims as 'victims' of the civil war and the continued ethnic tensions in its aftermath.

Focusing on the lived realities of these communities compels us to reconsider the diverse ways through which heritage consciousness and other everyday forms of community heritage help communities to navigate and negotiate the complex arena of post-war cultural politics, thus paving the way for a sustainable future for themselves and their heritage. For example, data from my field work in Sri Lanka indicate that religion/ faith constitute a core element in the cultural/ heritage resilience of communities. Religious belief and practice play a vital role in inter-cultural and inter-faith dialog between communities and have made notable inroads in promoting reconciliation and cross-cultural understanding. The inter-faith dialogue and other religiously themed activities of organisations such as the Walpola Rahula Institute (i.e. the New Sri Lanka - Modern Monk Initiative) (G. Dhammananda, pers. comm. July 27, 2017) and the Centre for Islamic Studies (Visit my Mosque/ Let's Understand Muslims initiative) (A. Hussein, pers. comm. August 1, 2017) are cases in point. Also significant to note is how the construction of heritage resilience in minority communities is dependent on a constellation of factors. Given the inconsistent and times minimal resources provided by State heritage institutions for the protection of minority heritage; their cultural survival, empowerment and identity affirmation are contingent on the social actions of grassroots organisations, NGOs, the diaspora, benefactors from overseas governments and organisations, advocates from within the majority community, as well as the tenacity of community leaders. Within this backdrop global heritage bodies such as UNESCO, ICOMOS and other international heritage organisations have a crucial role in ensuring the wellbeing and cultural survival of minorities and their heritage, within the broader goal of achieving a socially equitable and democratic heritage for all communities.

Indeed, the upholding of cultural diversity and the move towards reconciliation in complex nations such as Sri Lanka lies in the shift from narratives of victimhood and victimisation towards the recognition of the resilience and empowerment of minority communities. This is crucial given UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova's message on the World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialog and Development, wherein she states, <<just as natural diversity is vital to sustain ecosystems, cultural diversity is the lifeblood of vibrant societies. Cultural diversity provides fresh ideas and perspectives that enrich our lives in countless ways, allowing us all to grow and thrive together>> (Bokova, 2017).

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# ICOA1522: LE PATRIMOINE COMME RESILIENCE: LE ROLE DES COMMUNAUTES MINORITAIRES DANS LE SRI LANKA D'APRES-GUERRE

## Sous-thème 02: Le rôle du patrimoine culturel dans la construction de la paix et de la réconciliation

**Session 1:** Le Patrimoine En Tant Que Constructeur De Paix, Communautaire De Types Et De Bénéfices

**Lieu:** Silver Oak Hall 1, India Habitat Centre

**Date et heure:** 13 Décembre, 2017, 12:00 – 12:15

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**Résumé:** La montée des conflits à l'échelle mondiale a fait de la protection et de la reconstruction du patrimoine un concept important mais très complexe au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle. Les pays de l'après-guerre comme le Sri Lanka se trouvent donc à un tournant critique en termes de redressement et de réconciliation post-conflit. Pour un pays sortant d'une guerre civile, le patrimoine constitue un aspect essentiel de l'identité nationale, tout comme son paysage émotionnel, politique et économique.

La période d'après-guerre au Sri Lanka a connu une escalade de la violence contre d'autres minorités ethno-religieuses, en particulier la communauté musulmane de l'île, avec des contestations centrées sur le patrimoine mettant en cause leur légitimité, leur appartenance et leur citoyenneté. Ces développements sont particulièrement importants car la Commission des leçons apprises et de la réconciliation (LLRC) a identifié la contestation patrimoniale entre différents groupes ethniques comme étant un obstacle à la voie de la réconciliation.

À ce jour, une grande partie des débats populaires et savants sur la politique du patrimoine sri-lankais ont porté sur les enchevêtrements socio-politiques du patrimoine appartenant au groupe ethnique majoritaire, les Cinghalais et sa plus grande minorité, les Tamouls, rendant le patrimoine d'autres ethnies et minorités religieuses moins visibles dans les récits du patrimoine dominant. La plupart de ces débats savants se concentrent également sur ces questions vues au travers du prisme des désaccords, des destructions et des disputes. Un contexte de résilience patrimoniale/culturelle serait susceptible d'ouvrir des avenues productives, à partir desquelles démêler ces complexes enchevêtrements. Dans le cadre d'arguments plus larges de démocratisation du patrimoine dans un contexte d'après-guerre, cet article vise à explorer l'importance du patrimoine ou de la résilience culturelle des communautés ethno-religieuses minoritaires, en accordant une attention particulière à la façon dont une minorité religieuse ethniquement différente comme celle des Musulmans du Sri Lanka utilise le patrimoine comme moyen de renforcer la résilience et le bien-être collectif dans le processus de réconciliation d'après-guerre.

**Mots-clés:** *patrimoine d'après-guerre, résilience du patrimoine, musulmans sri-lankais, minorités ethno-religieuses*