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Inscribing the victor's land: nationalistic authorship in Sri Lanka's post-war Northeast

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Abstract

This article examines the nationalistic authorship of space in Sri Lanka's post-conflict Northeast as part of the state's nation-building strategy and as a continuation of a post-colonial process of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalistic revival. Exploring issues of historiography, conflict resolution, physical vehicles of ideology and collective memory, the article demonstrates how land policies, development and the tourism industry in a post-conflict context can go hand-in-hand with dispossession, militarisation and the humiliation of a 'defeated' minority community.

Keywords

Sri Lanka; space; nationalism; post-conflict; anti-minority violence

Introduction

In May 2009, a long civil war came to an end in Sri Lanka. After nearly 30 years, the separatist militant group the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fell to the state forces. The state declared the victory as a ‘second Independence’ for the island: territorial control of the country’s Northeast—claimed by the Tamils as their traditional homeland—was restored to the Sri Lankan state. For the majority Sinhalese population, this victory represented both the defeat of ‘terrorism’ and the re-conquest of land previously withheld from the unitary state structure. Total territorial control is necessitated by Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist ideology, in which the collective imagination of nationhood is based on preserving and protecting the land for Buddhism and Buddhists. The post-war authorship of public space, this article argues, is a highly visible, symbolic and ideological effort to expand Sinhala-Buddhist hegemony into Tamil-dominated regions and to suppress and erase Tamil nationalist sentiment. This article demonstrates how land policies, development and the tourism industry in a post-war context can go hand-in-hand with dispossession, militarisation and the humiliation of a ‘defeated’ minority community.

This authorship of space is examined here as part of the state’s post-war nation-building strategy, a continuation of an historical process of Sinhala-Buddhist revival under colonialism and post Independence in 1948. As Jazeel and Brun argue, space is produced yet agentive.¹ Space is meaningful; a politics of identity and power, of ethnicity and culture, is enacted through space. It is permeated by politics and history; it is also produced and reproduced through everyday negotiations and social encounters. To examine spatial practices and politics is to examine ‘the very fabric through which nationhood, identity and violence are produced’.² The process of spatial authorship began with renewed vigour in Tamil areas post war, as the military victory of the Sri Lankan state forces and the persistence of a powerful anti-minority Sinhala-Buddhist rhetoric combined to legitimise and necessitate

the physical, social and cultural domination of the north-eastern provinces. A spatial analysis is not merely an ideological exercise. Space is part of a geometry of power and signification in which the material and ideological are co-constitutive.³ The end of the war has enabled the latest stage of a long-standing Sinhala-Buddhist settler-colonialism project that has oscillated between policies of subjugation, practices of terror and acts of extraordinary violence in order to produce a docile and pacified Tamil population.⁴

In the ‘national story’ of the nation state, architecture and public space have an ideological function. This article critically analyses the construction, renovation and destruction of physical sites in Sri Lanka’s post-war context in order to illustrate the role of space and ‘mnemonic practices’ in the nation-building project underway and to articulate the historical continuity of this project.⁵ Nation-building in Sri Lanka’s post-colonial period has been both an ideological and a concrete, physical construction.⁶ This article reflects on the expansion of structures of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist hegemony into Tamil-dominated areas as vehicles of ideology, material bases for neo-liberal economic projects in the region and purveyors of permanent, entrenched militarisation. The process serves to physically inscribe the triumph of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism on the landscape, while the physical remnants of the LTTE’s brand of Tamil nationalism are erased.

National memory—and consequently national sentiment—is open to construction, contestation, rupture and reordering. Until former President Mahinda Rajapaksa’s electoral defeat in January 2015, spatial authorship and its various profits were designed to consolidate his government’s power and to generate political capital by authoring the military victory as a continuation of Sinhala-Buddhist mythico-history: the stories and events ‘remembered’ as a shared basis of peoplehood.⁷ The position of minorities in this story is precarious. The Rajapaksa Government was democratically overthrown in January 2015. Amarasuriya argues that the preoccupation with examining violence and dissent in Sri Lanka through the lens of

ethnicity and nationalism has meant that certain ‘less spectacular’ forms of democratic dissent and resistance have been overlooked; and indeed it was an unlikely alliance of the less spectacular that defeated Rajapaksa in both presidential and general elections in 2015.⁸

However, violence in Sri Lanka has long taken ethnicised form and though the incoming president, Maithripala Sirisena, has indicated an intention to pursue reconciliation and address injustices faced by the Tamils (including the reversal of state-military land grabs⁹), concerns remain over his commitment to Sinhala-Buddhist power—the maintenance of a unitary and majoritarian Sinhala-Buddhist order—and the limitations this might place on the extension of his promises of ‘good governance’ to minorities.¹⁰ Sirisena’s ministerial cabinet is largely made up of defectors from Rajapaksa’s power structure, he has repeatedly committed to maintaining the military’s tight control of the Tamil speaking regions and he has rejected Tamil demands for autonomy.¹¹ Post-war dynamics demonstrate that the form of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism as espoused by Rajapaksa today finds expression in attacks on minority livelihoods, land and physical security. Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism has continually proven itself as a colonising force and the techniques of authorship observed in the post-war Northeast are neither new nor specifically targeted at the Tamil people. This article turns to recent attacks on Muslim space, property and bodies in the South to illustrate how contemporary Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism is defined by violence towards minorities.

The Tamil people have long conceptualised the struggle for self-determination as a response to Sinhalese colonisation and oppression.¹² The colonial ordering of Sri Lanka’s territory transformed the island from relatively autonomous spatio-political units to a territorial colonial island and, post Independence, to an independent nation state within which the Tamils were reduced to a minority.¹³ The British colonial government not only produced Sri Lanka’s national space, carving out a single unitary political structure, but also hegemonised the notion of its territoriality.¹⁴ The geostrategic usefulness of Sri Lanka (then

Ceylon) as a single political unit gave rise to this colonial practice: Ceylon was transformed into a unified political territory within the British Empire and became subject to the exploitative practices of colonial capitalism.¹⁵ In the process, the British eliminated and subordinated indigenous political power and cultural identity and spatial structures, which were seen as obstructions to the achievement of particular colonial objectives.¹⁶ Historically, the Lankan kingdoms had been organised as self-sufficient, self-contained entities. The British reoriented Ceylon's power and political authority to London, through the colonial port city of Colombo, and reorganised the island into a single administrative space.¹⁷

On Independence, instead of the political system of kingdoms extant prior to colonisation, their populations received a single state, which the post-colonial political elite maintained in its pre-established structure.¹⁸ Statist geopolitical paradigms have since bolstered the state's unitary structure, demonstrated by the support offered to the Sri Lankan state by major world powers in its battle against so-called 'separatist terrorists'.¹⁹ As Anghie argues in his examination of imperialism, colonialism and international law, the establishment of an international system of sovereign states meant that a specific set of cultural practices were included to the exclusion of others, a process of creating order amongst political entities that drew on ideas of the civilised European and uncivilised non-European world.²⁰ Despite the claims of the nation state to a concept of sovereignty that privileges a particular political relationship and concept of power, sovereignty is a dynamic concept. A post-colonial perspective, as Cunneen argues, sees sovereignty in terms of multiplicity and decentres state power.²¹ While Sinhalese nationalists have relied on the dominant colonial constitutional discourse to maintain a unitary nation state,²² Tamil nationalists have rejected the naturalisation of this political unit, declaring the right to a separate state on the basis of their pre-colonial autonomy and ethnic nationhood. We can, I argue, understand the post-Independence period in terms of the violence of colonial

pacification.²³ This violence took on extreme proportions in the devastating final months of the war in 2009.²⁴

The achievement of Sinhala-Buddhist hegemony

Sri Lanka's president from 2005 to 2015—Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) politician Mahinda Rajapaksa—recalled the 'unconquerable history' of Sinhalese kings as he delivered a victory speech to Parliament in 2009, confirming the defeat of the LTTE and reminding the population of his electoral promise not only to defeat 'terrorism' but also to prevent separatism.²⁵ His speech reflected what Fernando terms 'the imagination of "re-conquest"'.²⁶ The Sinhala kings of the past, Rajapaksa enthused, 'defeated enemy invasions and ensured our freedom'.²⁷ Despite overseeing the growth in popularity of a Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism that represents Tamils as invaders and pollutants of a sacred island, Rajapaksa portrayed the Tamil-speaking people as beneficiaries of this freedom, defined by development of the region, and promised that a 'northern spring' would soon come.²⁸

The Sinhala nationalist project is reliant on the integrity of the territory as a unitary state. Since Independence, political expediency has compelled Sinhalese leaders to perform their ideological commitment to Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, progressively contributing to exclusionary, anti-minority positioning and discursive and violent practices of nationalism that have continuously reproduced the social field. In response to the continuing Sinhala project of majoritarian nation-building, the Tamil people's reification of the 'homeland' generated militancy in its defence: 'Tamil resistance turned on the defence of this territorial space, and Sinhala domination on its denial and dismantling'.²⁹ The Tamil nation-building project under the LTTE brought its own homogenising violence, epitomised by the LTTE's forced exodus of the Muslim population from the Northern Province in 1990.³⁰ The end of the war against the LTTE represented the apex of a contemporary and virulent Sinhala-

Buddhist nationalism that Rajapaksa embodies and promotes.³¹ Rajapaksa's bellicose coalition-building upon his election in 2005 capitalised both on Sinhala-Buddhist aspirations and the intensifying hostility to, and eventual collapse of, the liberal peace project and its Western 'interference' in Sri Lanka, which was epitomised by the 2002 peace process, including Norway's involvement as facilitator and its group of international co-chairs (the US, the EU and Japan).³²

The liberal peace, as described by Richmond, is a model through which 'Western-led agency, epistemology, and institutions, have attempted to unite the world under a hegemonic system that replicates liberal institutions, norms, and political, social, and economic systems'.³³ As Nadarajah and Rampton argue, colonial and international (e.g. donor and international non-governmental organisation) efforts to bring about liberal social transformation through frameworks of development, economy, security and ethnic harmony have been always deeply interwoven with nationalist and racialised processes of state-building, demographic re-engineering, securitised development and counter-insurgency.³⁴ The liberal peace model was compatible with Sinhala-Buddhist majoritarianism and the 'international community' engaged enthusiastically with Sri Lanka as a fertile context for the 'liberal peace'—a promising, if yet incomplete, multi-ethnic liberal democracy with effective institutions and a neo-liberal economy.³⁵ Attempts to 'make peace and create order' through the liberal peace have been written through with efforts by hegemonic international actors and institutions 'to preserve their own value systems and to freeze the world's cartographies in their favour'.³⁶ The 'violent, coercive and militarised character of a cosmetically pacific liberal order model' has been laid bare in the 'war on terror' and interventionist action in Iraq and Afghanistan, for example.³⁷

While two forms of the liberal peace ran parallel in Sri Lanka's peace process—both a democratising, development-focused model of liberal peace and a more militarised,

conservative model which prioritised the maintenance of existing normative and political hierarchies—the primary discourse surrounding the liberal peace and its implosion bolstered the nationalist imaginary of Sri Lanka’s ‘territorial integrity’ as explicitly Sinhala-Buddhist, mapping it onto the entire island. The project’s inherent focus on territorial boundaries and sovereignty served to undermine the principle of parity between the government and the LTTE, and worked to undermine and discredit Tamil claims to self-determination. When the liberal peace burnt out in Sri Lanka, its advocates were labelled as ‘traitors’ and LTTE supporters. The militaristic logic of the securitisation of Sri Lankan territorial integrity survived and Rajapaksa was elected on a Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist platform promising a final, military solution.³⁸

The military victory—which came at the cost of mass killings of Tamil civilians and well-documented violations of international humanitarian law³⁹—brought the Sinhalese-Buddhist state into existence. The end of the war was a conclusive defeat of the LTTE’s challenge to the unitary make-up of Sri Lanka. Rajapaksa was presented with a special honour by the Buddhist *sangha* (order of monks) in recognition of his success in reclaiming the entirety of the island for Sinhala-Buddhists.⁴⁰ Post war, his vision merged nation and state and perpetuated the foundation myth of the Sinhala people: that ‘all other groups [...] are present merely as shadows, not as constitutive elements of a common political culture’.⁴¹

Memory and space

Memory is a significant site of struggle in Sri Lanka, one that is implicated in physical authorship of the land, displacement and dispossession, and is enforced through state violence and repression. The state-orchestrated consolidation of conflict memory is a feature of Sinhala-Buddhist nation-building that necessitates the (re)colonisation of Tamil land. The field of memory studies allows us to explore the ‘mechanisms of selection, narrativisation,

repression, displacement and denial' as institutions and regimes that enforce history from above.⁴² Olick distinguishes between collective memory as a field of inquiry and 'mnemonic practices', where rituals and narratives are publicly performed,⁴³ and Halbwachs describes collective memory as 'the active past that forms our identities', a shared memory that is collectively recalled, recognised, localised and reconstructed in a social process.⁴⁴ While the state is often the dominant memory-maker, with resources to support the initiation of the national story, community rituals and practices can proffer possible strategies of cohesion and struggle,⁴⁵ even—as for the Tamils—offering visions of nationhood against an overbearing state.⁴⁶

For the Sinhalese-dominated government and majority population, the end of the war was an 'epic' event⁴⁷ and a 'lieu de memoire'.⁴⁸ It was an event mythologised as it occurred and invested with huge symbolic significance for the project of nation-building that lay ahead. Historic accounts of Sinhalese kings triumphing over Tamil invading forces flooded the public sphere. The Rajapaksa Government is credited with providing the closing chapter of Sinhalese mythico-history in the contemporary defeat of the 'Tamils'—the LTTE. The term 'community of memory' befits a community that does not forget its past, one that retells its story as its 'constitutive narrative'.⁴⁹ Recognising that cultural symbolic tools are available to the state to enhance its power and authority,⁵⁰ Sri Lanka's Rajapaksa Government moved to establish permanent symbols on the conquered land, symbols that serve to embed and promote the constitutive narrative of Sinhala-Buddhist national identity. As Olick and Robbins argue, '[m]emory sites and memory practices are central loci for ongoing struggles over identity'.⁵¹ These memory projects are symbols of domination that give rise to practical grievances for the Tamil people.

The post-war Northeast

Post war, the territory that was formerly ruled by the LTTE as a de facto state is now heavily militarised by the Sri Lankan armed forces. Development and reconstruction programmes adhere to the logic of ‘Sinhalisation’ and tourist sites, the most obvious markers of memory-making, have been established at structures formerly used by the LTTE and are run by the military.⁵² Development is ‘securitised’ and the state-corporate-military nexus is both nebulous and established.⁵³ A range of authors have described the various means by which a ‘war by other means’ is being waged against the Tamils in the post-war period: a war in which the weapons are socio-economic disempowerment, spatial oppression and militarisation, surveillance, intimidation and cultural intrusion in the service of Sinhala-Buddhist homogenisation. These weapons are concealed in the rhetoric of transitional justice, national security and development.⁵⁴

The new features of this ‘war’ work in tandem with the continuation of colonial and post-colonial state practices of colonisation—the resettlement and ‘privileging’ of Sinhalese peasants that epitomises the potent nexus between Sinhala-Buddhism, the post-colonial state and development practices.⁵⁵ The government is perceived to have a long-standing plan to change the ethnic composition of those areas, thereby undermining Tamil separatist claims.⁵⁶ The post-war ‘Sinhalisation’ of the Northeast has included military and unofficial civilian settlements, neo-liberal development and the construction of Buddhist religious structures to cater to Sinhalese military personnel, Sinhalese tourists and Buddhist pilgrims.⁵⁷ The site of the final stage of the war—a site of mass atrocities perpetrated against the Tamil people—has been transformed into a place of triumphalism and religious conviction with the construction of a military monument and a Buddhist *stupa*.⁵⁸ Military renovations of neglected Buddhist monasteries have sometimes been followed by Sinhala settlements, showcasing the link between the military, Buddhism and colonisation.⁵⁹

‘Sinhalaisation’ encompasses occupation by the overwhelmingly Sinhalese army, demographic change by settling Sinhalese families in the North, renaming roads and areas in the Sinhalese language and building Buddhist *stupas* in traditionally Hindu or Christian areas—physical landmarks that support the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist project.⁶⁰ The naming of roads is also merged with Sinhala-Buddhist military triumphalism: in Kaṇakārayaṅkuḷam, for example, two roads have been named after soldiers who took part in the war, and another is named after a Buddhist monk.⁶¹ Sinhalaisation, in short, is the production of a post-Independence national identity marked ethnically as Sinhalese and religiously as Buddhist. The process naturalises the Sinhala-Buddhist character of space, and minoritises Tamil, Muslim and non-Sinhala difference. As elegantly asserted by Tariq Jazeel, the process simultaneously naturalises and ethnicises the fabric of the national in contemporary Sri Lanka.⁶² Examining these interconnected alterations to the landscape through the framework of memory studies allows for an understanding of how the state’s hegemonic authorship of space is pursued.

The post-war expansion of Sinhala-Buddhist state memory projects into the Tamil-dominated region is intrinsically interwoven with trade and commerce. As noted by Woost and Winslow, development can ‘open up new spaces for violence and political manipulation as new resources become the object of desire up and down the hierarchy of agency’.⁶³ The military, Sinhalese business people from the South, and international capital have appropriated post-war spaces of ‘development’ to attain control of the resources of the Northern Province.⁶⁴ The ‘post-war reconstruction’ propagated by the state has excluded thousands of displaced Tamil families from new housing and construction projects and deprived them of their land through a legally dubious process of land acquisition.⁶⁵ The creation of ‘High Security Zones’ (HSZ) and ‘Economic Development Zones’ that block access to land and sea, and the military’s involvement in economic life, undermine crucial

forms of livelihood and food security.⁶⁶ The economic system in the post-war Northeast displays ethnocentric inclinations: the system facilitates ethnic control of power and resources, for example by issuing fishing licences to Southern, Sinhalese fishermen and not local Tamils.⁶⁷ As a community profile report on the village of Passaiyoor East in Jaffna makes clear, foreign money, in the form of diaspora remittances, have kept local economies afloat in the absence of state assistance.⁶⁸ State professions of secular and equitable development are intended to veil the return of colonisation, as state land acquisition deliberately targets and dispossesses the Tamil and Muslim communities.⁶⁹ While these dynamics are not observed in all regions of the North, where many military and navy camps and HSZ have been dismantled,⁷⁰ as Fernando describes, key public and economic locations have been occupied. Under the ‘gloss and spin’ of the current development strategy, we are seeing a return to the militarised, highly nationalistic colonisation of old.⁷¹

Infrastructure itself is deployed in a rhetoric of development that reinforces and reproduces a powerful Sinhalese nationalism,⁷² a rhetoric that perpetuates the colonial and post-Independence logic of the unitary state in the contemporary context. Militarisation is also at the centre of development. The employment and deployment of soldiers is justified in the post-conflict phase by the forces’ involvement in development work. The state claims that the huge task of reconstructing the Northern Province can only be handled by the military: a disciplined, efficient and uncorrupted institution.⁷³ Since May 2009, the state forces have forcibly occupied more than 7,000 square kilometres (37 per cent) of the land owned by the Tamil people of the North.⁷⁴ Though the state’s post-war reconciliation mechanism, the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC),⁷⁵ identified the establishment and maintenance of ‘High Security Zones’ as detrimental to reconciliation and the achievement of justice for the Tamil population displaced from their local areas, the post-war trend has been to consolidate the militarisation of the Northeast. The military’s security function, according

to Tamil activists, is now engaged on behalf of Sinhalese settlers.⁷⁶ The militarisation of the area facilitates and securitises a process of development and reconstruction that is consistent with historical claims of ‘a rampant form of demographic engineering, through colonisation and administrative and electoral changes’.⁷⁷ This economic-military nexus operates to facilitate the ‘re-conquest’ of Tamil areas, a process that also operates in the service of a Sinhala-Buddhist reordering of the landscape.

At the centralised, administrative level, land alienation policies under the Land Acquisition Act contribute to political forms of ethnic and religious repression: minority communities are politically and materially marginalised. As an ex-civil servant of the Department of Tea and Plantations stated, ‘this new land alienation policy is simply granting legal status to a modern wave of land grabs, plundering of our resources and exploitation of cheap labour’.⁷⁸ The logic of national security, normalised militarisation and Sinhalese settlement is redesigning the local landscape and depriving many local people of their land. In a comprehensive report, the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) describes a ‘disturbing trend’ in the post-war administration of land: the dominant role of the central government and military actors.⁷⁹ The CPA concludes that the state regularly acts outside the parameters of the Land Acquisition Act and distorts the purpose of the Act, which requires that private land only be taken where it is for a ‘public purpose’. The centralised administration of land is a powerful tool in the hands of the colonising state.

The 13th Amendment to Sri Lanka’s Constitution established the Provincial Council system as a result of the Indo-Lanka Accord 1987: a mechanism of power decentralisation aiming to facilitate a political solution to the conflict. The devolution of land and police powers to the Northern Provincial Council, however, has never been implemented. The question of land administration has been hotly contested since the election of a Tamil National Alliance (TNA)-dominated Northern Provincial Council in September 2013, as this

local administrative mechanism has demanded greater autonomy in the face of the government's injurious land acquisition policies. The question of land powers under the 13th Amendment came before the Supreme Court in June 2013. The Court ruled that state land was vested in the central government and not the provincial councils, five days after citizens of the Northern Province polled overwhelmingly in favour of greater autonomy for the region.⁸⁰ Land policies are often weaponised as a tool of minority oppression in an ethnocratic state. Termed the 'hidden oppressor' by Oren Yiftachel, land policies carry the weight of legality and are discursively framed as legitimate and necessary.⁸¹

The geopolitical significance of the Northern Province is also a pertinent issue in considering the transfer of land and power to the ethnic majority.⁸² The unitary Sri Lankan state established under colonial rule, now as then, holds strategic military importance. Whereas under colonial rule, this state formation benefitted the British Empire and colonial capitalism, under the current geopolitical world system, Sri Lanka's strategic weight in the region is dependent on centralised control of the Northeast. 'High Security Zones' have long been established to secure strategic military bases and industries in the Northeast. This geostrategic/statist interest is intimately bound up with the oppression and dispossession of the Tamil people, just as the Sinhala-Buddhist character of the territory is confirmed by the wholeness of the state. For example, one HSZ established in 1990 dominates the Jaffna peninsula in Valikamam North, including Myliddy harbour, and 9,905 Tamil families were displaced from this area, including local fishermen.⁸³ In Mullikulam, an informal HSZ has seen the establishment of a naval base, rendering nearly 1,000 acres of land and five irrigation tanks inaccessible to farmers.⁸⁴ Demonstrating the interconnection between security, militarism and state-corporate development, some expanses of land in the Northeast were initially declared as HSZs only to be later re-gazetted as 'Special Economic Zones', such as Sampur in Trincomalee, where the construction of a coal power plant is imminent.⁸⁵

In order to understand the ideological genesis of this Sinhalisation and Buddhicisation of the Northeast, the following section offers an explanatory discussion of Sri Lankan historiography and Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism.

Sri Lanka: historiography and nationalism

In Sri Lanka, as Elizabeth Nissan asserts, ‘history is at once the stuff of culture and the stuff of conflict’.⁸⁶ From the nineteenth century, the Sinhalese past was re-examined by Sinhalese and Western scholars and filtered through colonial historicism: the British formal excavation and authorisation of knowledge in Sri Lanka shaped a ‘new kind of history’.⁸⁷ The radical reconstitution of the Sinhalese and Tamil groups in the course of this process transformed the social and political landscape in Sri Lanka. Until the nineteenth century, European accounts of documented history in Sri Lanka stated that no existing texts could be considered as history.⁸⁸ The island was, however, considered rich in myth and superstition.⁸⁹ In 1830, the Buddhist Chronicles, the Mahavamsa, and its commentaries were ‘excavated’ by colonial historians, read as a chronological narrative and held to reach the threshold of historiographical truth. The Mahavamsa ‘exercised the British imagination greatly’.⁹⁰ The text was distorted and subjected to ‘violent transformations’ in translation from Pāli to English.⁹¹ In the process of editing, the translator, George Turnour, was selective in suppressing and rejecting passages that he thought incoherent or ‘fantastical’; these passages were simply cut out in order to facilitate the chronological narrative sought.⁹² In this way, ‘history’ was constructed: a colonial narrativisation of the past.⁹³

Today’s Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism is based on the authenticity of the Mahavamsa and its territorial claims, which informs the Sinhalese imaginary of Sri Lanka the nation state belonging entirely to Sinhala-Buddhists.⁹⁴ It is a key text in nationalist readings of the island’s history, a history that conveniently supported the strategic colonial structuring of the

state as a single political unit. Yet when Turnour translated the text, he had ‘never yet met with a native who had critically read through, and compared their several historical works, or who had, til lately, seen a commentary on the Mahavamse [sic]’.⁹⁵ Elite Sinhalese revival activists, Nissan argues, relied on the colonial resurrection of the Sinhalese past⁹⁶ and naturalised the territorial entity of Sri Lanka just as they internalised the racialised language by which difference was constructed between the Tamils and the Sinhalese as they developed nationalist ideologies and construed resistance to colonialism. In the pursuit of national identity in the immediate post-colonial period, emphasis was placed on the exclusive Sinhala claim to history and ‘national’ territory, now reliant on the nation state framework. Tamils were represented as ‘Indian invaders’, a force threatening to erode Sinhala identity. Sri Lankan nation-building was founded on colonial knowledge production: a process of interpretation, selection and suppression of histories that set racialised collectives against one another within the one unitary state.

Under colonialism, the ‘imaginative ordering of the island’s collective identity’ was intimately associated with a reordering of the landscape: regions were amalgamated and roads were built to facilitate the administration of a centralised state and its plantation economy and to service Sinhalese settlements.⁹⁷ With the British Empire’s conquering of Sri Lanka, Fernando argues, another conquest by the Sinhala-Buddhists was being set in motion against Tamils and Muslims. This project involved Sinhala encroachment onto land traditionally occupied by the Tamil people in colonial and post-Independence colonisation projects that have relocated Sinhalese settlers to Sri Lanka’s Dry Zone, which includes the Tamil-dominated Northeast. This colonisation was discursively and proudly associated with ‘a return to the ancient irrigation civilisation of the Sinhalese’.⁹⁸ In the context of rising tensions and conflict between Tamil militants and the Sri Lankan Government in the 1990s, the ‘unstable borderlands’ and irrigation projects of the state were securitised through

militarised colonisation, often funded through foreign aid that supported state-directed colonisation in an ever more aggressive manner.⁹⁹ This security function, again, stabilised the statist framework within which Sri Lanka found its place in the international order.

Conflict memorials and the authorship of space

*Soldiers are building all sorts of monument hailing the victory of the government and the army over the Tamil Tigers. For locals, they are a symbol of their domination, also because no one is allowed to build anything to commemorate Tamil war dead.*¹⁰⁰

Commemoration through the medium of the memorial and the ritual was a well-established enterprise within nation-building projects over the course of the war, both for the LTTE and the Sinhalese-dominated state. Prior to their military defeat, the LTTE's commemorative activities centred on martyrs' cemeteries and memorials dedicated to the 'Great Heroes', rituals, Tiger iconography and nationalistic songs.¹⁰¹ The state set up the statutorily supported Rana Viru Seva Authority in 2000, a public body for the allocation of funds for 'war heroes' projects, including the construction of memorials and memorial parks and the organisation of activities commemorating War Heroes Day on 7 June each year.¹⁰² Neloufer de Mel's analysis of the Sri Lankan state's shifting commemorative priorities emphasises that memorials require financial support and political patronage.¹⁰³ State-sponsored 'mnemonic practices' are strategic and highly political; they are mechanisms by which national stories are produced that serve the political elite in nation-building processes.¹⁰⁴

Memorials for war heroes are prominent and public embodiments of Sinhala-Buddhist national identity and vehicles of collective memory based on that identity. Historically for the state, the purpose of war memorials has been to inculcate a sense of national unity and identity, to rally support for the centralised government.¹⁰⁵ In memorials for fallen Sinhalese

soldiers, the ‘ideas, passions and energies’ of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism are manifested ‘in an orchestrated fashion with performatic precision’.¹⁰⁶ Soldiers are portrayed as ‘guardians and protectors of the geo-physical and political integrity of the nation-state and Sinhala selfhood: a clear overlap between the identity of the state and the Sinhalese’.¹⁰⁷ Drawing on the ‘hazy vistas of the Sinhala collective past where history and myth intermingle’, the heroic acts and sacrifices of soldiers in the war against the LTTE became sacred Sinhala duties: Buddhist duties to preserve the island for Buddhism.¹⁰⁸ In the post-conflict memorials, the ‘heroism’ of the Sri Lankan state forces in the final battle against the LTTE is woven into a narrative of centuries of Sinhalese soldiers acting as guardians of a unitary Sri Lanka, defending the island from Tamil invasions.

The enormous and hyper-visible state memorials in the Northern Province are built with the purpose of broadcasting the formidable strength and success of the armed forces; they valorise martial values of sacrifice and courage rather than lament civilian or military losses. The Puthukkudiyiruppu victory monument, unveiled on 12 October 2009, is an apt example.¹⁰⁹ The memorial is located at an important strategic impasse where much of the heavy fighting took place at the end of the war. The torso of a jubilant soldier, waving a Sri Lankan flag in one hand and raising a rifle in the other, is surrounded by concrete lions on each corner—the symbol of the Sinhalese race, which also features as the centrepiece of the national flag. Interpreting the monument’s ideological function, we see the lions as protectors of the venerated soldier. The monument pays homage to the soldier who triumphed in his mission to defend the territorial integrity of Sri Lanka for the Sinhalese. Mnemonic practices are tightly bound up with establishing and naturalising the unitary structure of the state.

Circumstances following an event, disaster or ‘upheaval’ often require that resources and energies are devoted elsewhere; commemorative practices such as the construction of memorials occur when resources are available.¹¹⁰ In Sri Lanka, memorials were given

primary priority and constructed very quickly following the end of the war, despite the great need of the civilian population languishing in ‘welfare villages’ (more appropriately described as detention camps) in horrendous conditions.¹¹¹ The state was quick to author the landscape with symbols of Sinhala-Buddhist national sentiment and militaristic triumph. Crisis Group notes that the construction of these monuments interferes with the cultural rights of the Tamil population and inflicts further damage on state-Tamil and inter-community relations.¹¹² The memorials illustrate the inscription of Sri Lankan ‘oneness’ on the landscape, despite the resistant nationalism of the Tamil inhabitants of the Northeast. The war memorials are interpreted by the Tamil community and its diasporas as ‘Sinhalese monuments of victory and subjugation’ that have replaced Tamil historical monuments and graveyards and now form part of ‘a new topography of terror’.¹¹³ Fernando provides a near-exhaustive list of instances where the Sri Lankan military has destroyed, occupied or prevented the renovation of sites of religious importance for the Tamil people.¹¹⁴

Acts of memorialisation, Amarasingam and Hyndman observe, are often inseparable from reconstruction initiatives and broader political issues.¹¹⁵ Critical analysis of the ‘construction, selection, placement, and prominence’ of landmarks reveals much about ‘the victor’s nationalist project as well as the continuing struggle for power’.¹¹⁶ With the rise of the nation state, the necessity of a common past as well as a common future emerged as a key requirement in the process of ‘nation-building’.¹¹⁷ The authorship of physical space is central to consolidating a common past. It is symbolic that Sri Lankan soldiers in the post-war period are increasingly involved in memory work as well as ‘development’ work. State officials describe how the armed forces are literally building the new Sri Lanka, constructing memorials and Buddhist *stupas* and working on infrastructure and housing projects.¹¹⁸ The Sinhalese-dominated army that defended the nation from terrorist destruction is physically carving out the ‘reborn’ Sri Lankan nation. This authorship, of course, involves erasure of

what was there before. It is part of the government's strategy of reordering newly conquered land and people:

*to crush and dismantle any physical manifestations of a long history of [Tamil] dissent and resistance. By erasing the physical remains of our past, our present becomes destabilized and vulnerable to distortion, obfuscation and negation.*¹¹⁹

A particularly striking feature of the post-war authorship process is the 're-discovery' of ancient religious and historical sites of Sinhala-Buddhist import in Tamil-dominated areas, described by Adnan as 'a state sponsored rewriting of history, re-categorising, [...] re-territorialising'.¹²⁰ The influx of archaeological teams to the Northern Province since the end of the war has furthered the Sinhala-Buddhist state's project of undermining the concept of a traditional, historic homeland of Tamil Eelam. For example, a 2013 study carried out by the Department of Archaeology found 'recently discovered archaeological sites showing evidence of Buddhism in Mullaitivu district'.¹²¹ Out of 87 sites examined by the study—accessible only in the post-war period—42 sites revealed the evidence of Buddhism. Academics such as Peter Schalk have long drawn attention to the historical existence of Tamil Buddhists.¹²²

The existence of Buddhist artefacts in Tamil-dominated areas does not necessarily prove that Sinhala-Buddhists previously ruled the region, as nationalists declare. As one activist told Minority Rights Group, '[i]n Sri Lanka there has always been Tamil Buddhism [...] Now they are trying to Sinhalize all of this and they don't acknowledge Tamil Buddhism'.¹²³ Further, Tamil human rights activists are sceptical of the authenticity of these sites, publicising complaints by local people that 'Sinhala Buddhist archaeologists are engaged in nefarious activities of Sinhalization', visiting Tamil areas and 'excavating' Buddha statues that they themselves had planted earlier.¹²⁴ Minority Rights Group interviewed people in Trincomalee in the Eastern Province who insisted that they saw state officials and police

partaking in the nocturnal planting of artefacts.¹²⁵ While these archaeological findings may or may not be authentic, they are politically appropriated in the service of Sinhala-Buddhist domination, justifying the ‘re-conquest’ of the region by reference to an ancient past. Tellingly, former President Rajapaksa appointed a Sinhala-Buddhist monk as the curator for the archaeological sites and artefacts in the Jaffna peninsula.¹²⁶

Authoring ancient architecture

The state’s strategic authorship of space is not a new phenomenon in Sri Lanka. Scholars have examined processes of nationalistic authorship in relation to the ancient and sacred sites of Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Sri Pada and Kataragama.¹²⁷ These scholars show how the post-colonial state excavated and renovated ‘sacred places’ such as temples and ancient sites in order to construct the ‘nationalist consciousness’ of Sinhala-Buddhism. The colonial ‘conjunction of European historical imaginings and local chronicle histories’ altered the meaning of sacred sites.¹²⁸ The process of authorship by which sacred sites were reconfigured into (Sinhala-)Buddhist sites in the post-colonial period were directed by both state actors and individual, non-state activists.¹²⁹ This process is illustrative of the diffusion and enforcement of Sinhala-Buddhist hegemony through various public and private apparatuses. The physical authorship of territory is both politically symbolic and a practical violation of rights: minorities have been excluded and displaced from private land and sites of worship. Crucially, the authorship of these sites in contemporary history is not a post-colonial restoration: it represents ‘a manifestation of current ideas about an ancient past and its relation to the present’.¹³⁰

Casting a critical eye over historical accounts in Sri Lanka, Pradeep Jeganathan highlights the linkages made ‘crudely and unselfconsciously’ between the Mahavamsa’s history of the Sinhala-Buddhist nation and current day society and politics.¹³¹ In his analysis

of the ruins of the Kingdom of Anuradhapura (founded in 377 BC), Jeganathan demonstrates how the conflicts between Sinhalese kings and ‘invading Tamils’ are contained in ‘micro-historical narratives’ at each particular ruin site. Recounted by the site’s historical information notices, ethnic antagonism is inscribed on the landscape; the ruins of the desecrated kingdom are said to bear the scars of assaults by the Tamils. The site’s dilapidated majesty and sophistication is presented as evidence of the former glory of the Sinhala-Buddhist nation, a glory perpetually under siege by the Tamils. The ruins are a physical symbol of both Sinhala-Buddhist supremacy and historical victimisation. E. Valentine Daniel notes that Anuradhapura has become a victim of the ‘gaze’ of historians and archaeologists.¹³² At the site, tour guides take on the task of interpretation and repeat the mythico-history of the Sinhala-Buddhist past.

The physical remnants of Anuradhapura are understood by the Sinhalese as symbols of ancient greatness, a national sovereignty that stands ready to be re-established in the present day. This royal and religious centre was threatened by Tamil invasion and ‘lost’ under colonialism; it was swallowed by the jungle and emptied of people. Since Independence, it has been redeemed and returned to its ‘pristine’ state, reasserted under Sinhala-Buddhist rulers as the heartland of a Buddhist nation.¹³³ The ‘apparent inevitability’ of the ruins’ return to greatness confirms that Sinhala-Buddhist hegemony is the natural state of the Sri Lankan nation.¹³⁴ The Tamil ‘other’ is the disruptive presence in this continuity. The violation and subsequent abandonment of the sites feeds into the defensive nationalism that makes up the core of Sinhala-Buddhist ideology; the threat to the Sinhala race is signified by the ruined condition of these ancient sites.¹³⁵ A Sinhalese duty to protect the sites from the Tamils connects their purported historical efforts to corrupt the sacred Buddhist character of the land with contemporary separatist aspirations. History is projected on the contemporary moment

and the battle against the LTTE is framed as the final scene in the epic saga that stretches back to the glory of Anuradhapura.

Nissan's analysis of the 'ancient city' of Anuradhapura's post-colonial redevelopment explains how the site was excavated, reordered and authored by successive Sinhala majoritarian governments. It was both a source of political legitimacy for politicians, whose conservation and regeneration efforts enhanced their Sinhala-Buddhist credentials, and a site of individual Buddhist and decolonial activism. Under the auspices of Buddhist activist Brahmachary Walisinghe Harischandra, who pursued a relentless campaign to 'win Anuradhapura back for the Buddhists', Anuradhapura was reconfigured as an exclusionary, Buddhist-only ancient site.¹³⁶ The wider process of 'Buddhification' has rendered certain sites sacred and inaccessible to 'outsider' minorities. Sites have been closed to traditional Hindu, Christian and Muslim pilgrimage routes, disrupting cultural patterns of behaviour and modes of being, and marketed as tourist attractions exclusively in accordance with their Buddhist history.¹³⁷ Thus, the Sinhalese majoritarian ideology, with its intimate connection to Buddhism, is claimed as the 'correct' history of the place.

This process of authorship is continued in contemporary Sri Lanka. In the post-war Northeast, as described below, the project has hastened. Daniel analyses the story of the ancient city of Polonnaruwa as the 'ontic centre of rising Sinhala nationalism'.¹³⁸ Polonnaruwa, he argues, was 'historicised' by colonising Europeans: the site became a 'discovery' and a 'museum'. The Kataragama temple—historically a predominantly Hindu pilgrimage site—was re-authored as an exclusively Buddhist site in the mid-twentieth century.¹³⁹ The hegemonisation or 'Buddhification' of sacred sites is often achieved 'with maximum use of state power and resources', though other examples of Buddhist reordering such as Sri Pāda and Kelaniya occurred without state sponsorship.¹⁴⁰ The diffusion of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism into society ensured participation in the "national

regeneration” project that would have a dominant, devastating impact on post-colonial Sri Lankan politics’.¹⁴¹ Sri Pāda’s predominantly Buddhist nature was established during a ‘restoration’ or ‘reordering project’ undertaken by the Chief Priest Dhammānanda from 1954 to 1970.¹⁴² Though religious rituals at Sri Pāda were diverse, Dhammānanda restricted non-Buddhist participation at the temple site, reducing non-Buddhists to onlookers. The Kelaniya temple, similarly, was reconstituted as a popular place of Buddhist worship not under state patronage but due to the ideological and monetary influence of Colombo’s wealthy Wijewardene family. The temple became a site of important religious and political activity in post-colonial Sri Lanka.¹⁴³

Mahinda Rajapaksa and authorship of ancient sites

The popularity of the Rajapaksa Government hinged largely on the destruction of the LTTE; the war facilitated the consolidation of national identity on Sinhala-Buddhist principles. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that the historical episode recalled in reference to the end of the war in 2009 is the Mahavamsa’s account of the battle between the Sinhala King Dutugemunu (who reigned from 161 BC to 137 BC) and the ‘invading Tamil’ Prince Elara from India’s Chola Kingdom. The continuity between the ancient battle and the defeat of the LTTE in 2009 was recognised in popular discourse. Flattering comparison between Dutugemunu and Mahinda Rajapaksa served as a powerful populist tool.¹⁴⁴ The echoes of mythology cemented support for the government and bolstered majoritarian consent for a military solution to the conflict. Government-issued billboards and pro-government television advertisements where Rajapaksa stood proudly in a formation of ancient Sinhala kings made explicit the connection.¹⁴⁵ In Dutugemunu’s time, ‘[t]he victory of the king was a victory over Tamils’.¹⁴⁶ The echoes of the past in the present day reinforced Rajapaksa’s popularity and power.

The past was not echoed, however, in the commemorative arrangements of the respective Sinhalese leaders. The triumphant Dutugemunu ordered a monument to be built for the defeated Elara, and buried him below. As a mark of respect, the people were directed to bow to the monument when passing.¹⁴⁷ In contrast, Sri Lankan army sources stated that the LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran's remains would be buried in a mass grave, along with all the LTTE fighters killed in the final phase of the war. The official position was that the 'psychopathic leader of world's most barbaric terrorist outfit' ought to be treated in death 'like any other terrorist'.¹⁴⁸ A mass burial would 'prevent any sort of hero worship or memorial being built in the honour of Prabhakaran'.¹⁴⁹ Military spokesperson Brigadier Udaya Nayayakkara confirmed: 'We did not want anything that people could use to remember him. He should not be remembered as a martyr'.¹⁵⁰ The physical presence of his remains would add a more meaningful dimension to any site of remembrance or veneration.¹⁵¹

The Sri Lankan state has struggled to suppress public commemoration of the LTTE since 2009 and has deployed the military in Jaffna town on successive *Maveerar Naal*—Heroes' Day, 27 November—the LTTE's annual day of remembrance for fallen fighters.¹⁵² The LTTE predicted apocalyptic visions of defeat and destruction by the Sinhalese state in order to consolidate support, presenting itself as the only viable protector of the Tamil people.¹⁵³ The end of the war has proven this catastrophic prediction to be true: Tamils have suffered mass death, prolonged detention in camps and post-war socio-economic and political abjectness. Aware of the persistent symbolic dimension of physical structures, the triumphant state forces destroyed LTTE monuments and buried graveyards under the concrete of Sri Lankan army camps in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. Army structures now dominate and possess the bodies of LTTE cadres that represented the 'seeds' of separatism.¹⁵⁴ Physical reordering is a technique designed to decimate organised resistance and separatist ideology,

communicating to the Tamil people that unity in Sri Lankan nationhood is the only political future. The construction of these monuments is a violent act of colonisation and domination: a crucial symbolic element of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist encroachment into Tamil territory. Conflict memory is authored by the state as the entity with the 'power and the ability to dictate reality'.¹⁵⁵ These physical changes, Perera argues, indicate how insecure Sri Lanka's nationhood has become, where political opponents must be 'razed and vaporized from the face of the earth, and history'.¹⁵⁶

War tourism: commodifying the war, marketing ideology

While LTTE graveyards and monuments were destroyed post war, certain parts of the LTTE infrastructure became a hive of tourist activity. The selective destruction, construction, showcasing and appropriation of physical sites is revealing in terms of the state's selective remembering and consolidation of a favourable conflict narrative.¹⁵⁷ Curious Sinhalese people from Southern villages (many of whom have family members in state military employment) rent private tour buses and travel collectively to the final sites of conflict in the Northern Province.¹⁵⁸ The buses take tourists to Prabhakaran's home, to the LTTE-run prison complexes and to the LTTE's offices of administration. Although official tours are not organised by the state, soldiers guide predominantly Sinhalese visitors on the 'terrorism tour' and offer a state-sanctioned narrative of events.¹⁵⁹ All signboards erected for the purposes of guiding the tourists are in Sinhalese and English, though the tours take place in a Tamil-dominated area.¹⁶⁰ Investigative journalism has problematised the establishment of an LTTE museum and militarily guided tours in the Northern Province as economic exploitation of the Sinhalese 'morbid curiosity in the defeated enemy'.¹⁶¹ Kim Wall's photographic account in Al-Jazeera offers insight into the state's authorship of LTTE machinery and infrastructure.

Capturing a scene featuring a group of Sinhalese tourists surveying the scale of the Sea Tiger swimming pool, Wall quotes the sign:

*While the nation was swarming with pools of blood with the spate of LTTE's heinous crimes elsewhere, the terrorist had constructed this huge swimming pool in 2001 for exclusive use of the cream of terrorists.*¹⁶²

This statement captures the state's portrayal of the LTTE as bloodthirsty, self-serving and apolitical, obstinate in its pursuit of war over peace. Amarasingam and Hyndman observe that Prabhakaran's name is rarely mentioned—erasing his name from the post-war lexicon, it is substituted for titles such as 'the terrorist leader'.¹⁶³ Wall's work includes a rare image of the interior of Prabhakaran's family home. The army demolished the house in 2013, leaving commentators to speculate that the destruction was strategic, rather than on the basis of 'safety concerns': 'to prevent the site from becoming a shrine'.¹⁶⁴ The LTTE bunkers themselves have now been destroyed as military officials preach the importance of laying the 'ghosts of terrorism' to rest.¹⁶⁵

In post-conflict and post-atrocity settings, governing powers often draw on museum spaces and 'historical' tours as zones of evidence and authoritative explanation, seeking to enhance both popular national unity and international sympathy that elicits material assistance.¹⁶⁶ Daniel contends that the 'theatrics' performed at historical sites are enhanced by the demands of tourism.¹⁶⁷ Just as tour guides at the ancient site of Anuradhapura reproduce the mythico-history of Sinhala-Buddhism, the state-military authorship of LTTE sites promotes the contemporary narrative of Sinhala supremacy, predestined territorial integrity and the defeat of 'terrorists'. The military tours are designed to legitimise and glorify the actions of the state forces, and to promote the popularity of the military in order to naturalise militarisation.¹⁶⁸ The sophistication of the operation's infrastructure serves to

emphasise the LTTE's military strength, celebrating the state's triumph over a formidable enemy and justifying the force used at the end of the war.

To showcase the 'defeat of terrorism' as a consumable product in an economy reliant on tourism, physical traces of the LTTE's infrastructure are maintained and displayed. Gillis warns of the results of commodification and commercialisation of memory.¹⁶⁹ Public institutions of 'history' such as museums and official guided tours of battlegrounds offer a narrative delivered in the service of power. They are sites of ideological control and often, as in the Sri Lankan case, denigration of political adversaries. Far from the state discourse of reconciliation, the institutionalisation of a 'history' based on Sinhala supremacy and Tamil 'terrorism' is a violent interpretation, designed to justify and glorify the enormous violence perpetrated against the Tamil people, and promote the Rajapaksa Government as war heroes. Crucially, also, tourism in a recent war zone is a way to further militarise civilian space during peacetime. The state's selective remembering of the LTTE—curated in tourist sites—fuels a triumphalist Sinhala nationalism, reproduces the LTTE as a viable future threat and, as a result, 'provides grounds for ongoing militarization of civilian spaces by the state and marginalization of Tamils and other minority groups in the country who are represented as latent threats'.¹⁷⁰

Sri Lanka's state-military-corporate nexus is manifest in the development of tourist resorts and hotels in the Northeast. The state's neo-colonial programme of expansion into Tamil areas combines rapid progress in the tourism industry with normalised militarisation and permanent displacement of local Tamils. Mahinda Rajapaksa's 2012 election manifesto, Mahinda Chinthana, identified tourism as a key driver of post-war socio-economic development;¹⁷¹ the state-military complex moved rapidly to build up the industry's capacity. As affirmed by Commander of the Army Lieutenant General Jagath Jayasuriya, the army has been 'spear heading the nation building effort of the government in the post conflict period'.

Thus, the army felt ‘obliged to align its resources in the leisure sector’ in order to contribute to Sri Lanka’s tourism policy goals.¹⁷² Deepening militarisation and tourism projects are co-constitutive. The gains from tourism are benefiting the state and military as owner-investors and not the local Tamil population.

The military owns a range of hotels and resorts catering to both military personnel and the public. This is marketed by the military as ‘another landmark in the sphere of Army welfare while contributing simultaneously to Sri Lanka’s growing hotel industry in a competitive manner, to coincide with the country’s forward-march to be the “Miracle of Asia”’.¹⁷³ In 2012, the army launched its own resort brand, Laya—a Sanskrit word that means rest and repose.¹⁷⁴ The tourism industry increasingly provides employment for Sri Lanka’s swollen forces—a huge military with no war to fight—and the profits of all these tourism endeavours are directed to the ‘enhancement of welfare projects of soldiers’.¹⁷⁵

Military-run tourism projects register on a spectrum of harm caused to the Tamil population, ranging from insensitivity to outright dispossession: sites of importance to the Tamil nationalist cause have been destroyed and the land on which many of these structures are built is private land occupied by the military and acquired by the state, relegating its rightful owners to prolonged displacement and dispossession.¹⁷⁶ The Lagoon’s Edge hotel in Mullaitivu, for example, overlooks the site of the final battle with the LTTE and the hotel is marketed to Sinhalese tourists wishing to ‘bask in the afterglow of the battlefield’ where the military defeated the Tiger ‘terrorists’.¹⁷⁷ The John Keells Group Resort in Chaaddi on Kayts Island is allegedly being built on land where an LTTE memorial formerly stood; the military sold this land to the corporation rather than return it to its local resident owners.¹⁷⁸

Thalsevana Resort in Kakasanutharai, Jaffna, is situated on a 6,000 acre High Security Zone: land confiscated by the army on the grounds of national security.¹⁷⁹ The area’s fisherman inhabitants were expelled without compensation in the early 1990s so that the military could

build a naval base. These fishermen are some of the 1,474 petitioners in a pending case against the government, who are challenging the continuing occupation of their land.¹⁸⁰

The acquisition and development of land in the Northeast serves corporate interests and the state-military economic project. In the process, tourism celebrates the defeat of ‘terrorism’, erases the physical traces of Tamil nationalist ideology and secures the ‘oneness’ of the Sri Lankan state. The process dispossesses the people, cuts off their livelihood resources, and also seals off areas where mass graves are suspected to exist. Mullaitivu, for example, the site of the final battle, is currently being developed as a wildlife sanctuary.¹⁸¹ Echoing the nationalist rhetoric associated with the degradation and subsequent ‘rediscovery’ of Anuradhapura, the army describes the development of tourist sites in the Northeast as a ‘rediscovery’: their ‘natural beauty was earlier destroyed by LTTE terrorists after cutting trees and dumping explosives’.¹⁸²

The Chief Minister of the Northern Provincial Council, C.V. Wigneswaran—a man selected for his current position on the basis of his moderate politics and appeal to the Sinhalese—is now vocally critical of the process of militarisation and tourist development, describing the military as ‘an occupying force’, ‘taking over people’s lands, cultivating them with the owners having to buy the produce from their own land and building hotels and golf courses’, while ‘the dwelling homes of the people devastated by the war remain like pock marks in the Northern landscape’.¹⁸³ Militarisation, Wigneswaran states, ‘takes place not due to any real security threat, but to maintain a stranglehold over the populace; to subjugate them and make them compliant; to stifle any form of democratic or political dissent’.¹⁸⁴

Anti-Muslim rhetoric, violence and displacement

The post-war expansion of state land acquisition has also affected the Muslim community in the South, precisely at a moment when anti-Muslim rhetoric is at its strongest since the anti-

Muslim riots of 1915. Those riots were the result of anti-minority rhetoric central to the rise of the ‘Protestant Buddhism’ overseen by Anargarika Dharmapala.¹⁸⁵ This political Buddhist call to action flourished on an island populated by colonisers and dominated by the colonial plantation economy. Christians, Muslims, Moors and ‘foreigners’ were seen as pollutants and business competitors who fell outside of the ‘frontier of authenticity’ defined in Sinhala discourse from the mid-nineteenth century: the image of the Sinhalese peasant and the traditional rural economy.¹⁸⁶ While economic disparity was a key factor in the 1915 riots, as Moor traders thrived despite a period of economic hardship brought on by the outbreak of the First World War,¹⁸⁷ Sinhala nationalist groups framed the friction between the Sinhalese community and the Muslims as a religious and ethnic struggle, where the very existence of the Sinhala Buddhist civilisation was under threat.¹⁸⁸

In June 2014, a period of anti-Muslim rhetoric by far-right Sinhala groups culminated in riots in Aluthgama and wider Welipitiya. The JHU (National Sinhala Heritage Party) and the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS)—a JHU-breakaway organisation of monks who advocate militancy and violence in protecting Buddhism—were accused of inciting the violence. Three people were killed, 78 were injured and Muslim properties were attacked and burnt down.¹⁸⁹ The BBS—the ‘Buddhist Brigade’—have sparked moral panic among the Sinhalese about the purported exponential growth of the Muslim population—a claim that has no basis in reality—and have carried out sporadic attacks on Muslim property and mosques.¹⁹⁰ The current Islamophobia, echoing 1915, relates directly to Sinhala fears of a Muslim threat to Buddhism and Sinhalese interests. The JHU tabled an ‘anti-conversion bill’ in Parliament in 2005, attracting global controversy and condemnation from human rights groups.¹⁹¹ The BBS have also launched an ‘anti-halaal’ campaign, attempted to ban the burqa and the Islamic legal system, issued warnings of Muslim extremism, and alleged that Muslim businesses were overshadowing and threatening the economic security of the Sinhalese.¹⁹² Muslim shop-

owners have faced unfounded accusations of the rape and attempted conversion of Sinhalese girls.¹⁹³ Gotabhaya Rajapaksa—Mahinda’s brother and former Secretary of Defence—actively supported the BBS. He was a chief guest at a BBS seminar in 2013, where he defended the group’s public profile, saying that the ‘venerable monks always came forward to protect our country, race, religion and culture’.¹⁹⁴

In the eastern town of Batticaloa, where the Muslim population is highly concentrated, Tamil and Muslim lands have been requisitioned for Sinhalese settlement.¹⁹⁵ Activists and human rights workers believe that the purpose is to alter the demography of the area, in order to undermine historical Tamil and Muslim claims to the land and ensure Sinhalese parliamentary representation in the region. As the Sinhala-Buddhist project ‘reclaims’ Muslim land, the justifying discourse is that Islam represents a threat to the safety of Sinhala-Buddhists and that Islamic religious institutions are displacing Buddhist sacred sites.¹⁹⁶ Muslims based in the general area of Buddhist sites are framed as ‘encroachers threatening the Buddhist nature of the site’.¹⁹⁷ On 20 April 2012, 2,000 Buddhists and Buddhist monks—including members of the BBS—marched to a mosque in Dambulla in north-central Sri Lanka and demanded its demolition, claiming that it was built on a Buddhist site. The government ordered the closure of the mosque two days later.¹⁹⁸ The monks demanded the demolition of ‘illegal’ Islamic religious sites all over Sri Lanka, wherever they exist in the ‘sacred’ region surrounding Buddhist sites.¹⁹⁹ This incident is illustrative of the post-war process of physical re-authorship—a process that intimidates, displaces and dispossesses minorities in favour of Sinhala-Buddhists. The monks’ demands echo the remapping and development of Anuradhapura, where the redesign of the ‘sacred city’ displaced thousands of non-Buddhist residents.²⁰⁰ In August 2013, another mosque was attacked and five people were injured in the Grandpass district of Colombo.²⁰¹ The attack prompted mosque goers to

relocate to another mosque in a 'more discrete location': shying away from Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist violence, they have been displaced from their place of worship.²⁰²

The contention underpinning these attacks on mosques is that the structures are actually built on ancient and sacred Buddhist sites. The BBS's online manifesto declares the organisation's intention to protect Buddhist archaeological sites. As Stewart observes, this goal seems relatively innocuous, but in practice, rationalises the destruction of, and necessitates restrictions on the building of, non-Buddhist constructions.²⁰³ The BBS has, for example, objected to the construction of a mosque in Kuragala, stating that the Muslims are destroying Buddhist rock caves in the area and deliberately displacing Buddhists, and have vowed to have it torn down.²⁰⁴ This process goes hand-in-hand with the 'rediscovery' of ancient Sinhala-Buddhist sites in the Tamil-dominated areas and is, in fact, not entirely new to the post-conflict phase. Fernando recalls how the JHU attempted to undercut and oppose the 2002 Ceasefire Agreement between the state and LTTE on a platform of regaining Sinhala heritage—a powerful populist idea.²⁰⁵ The party's then leader, Ellāvala Mēdhānanda Thera, travelled to the Eastern Province to propagate the notion that ancient Sinhala-Buddhist sites in the region were 'vandalised', 'desecrated', 'destroyed' and 'occupied' by the LTTE, Muslims and by treasure hunters.²⁰⁶ The Thera's public writings perpetuated a narrative of historical and perpetual Tamil invasion and of Muslim occupation and neglect of Sinhalese land and cultural and religious artefacts. In one article, he states: 'It is with great patriotism we invite the Sinhala people to colonise these areas once again'.²⁰⁷

In the post-war period, Sinhalese politicians have insinuated that the Tamils and the Muslims, who make up a majority of the population in the north-eastern provinces, may form a dangerous alliance as Provincial Councils are elected in the East and North. Addressing the 10th annual JHU congress, party leader Patali Champika Ranawaka made a speech designed to spark concern about minority solidarity, stating that Tamil and Muslim parties had already

allied to grab power in the Eastern Provincial Council and toppled the rule of the Sinhala-Buddhist United People's Freedom Alliance.²⁰⁸ The process of dispossession and intimidation underway post war has so far undermined inter-community solidarity and prevented minorities from uniting against the oppressive Sinhala-Buddhist state.

Conclusion

This article has explored the Sinhala-Buddhist re-authorship of public and 'sacred' spaces in Sri Lanka, describing the continuity of this process from Independence and how it has come to define the state's post-war nation-building project. These processes, I have argued, are generated by a longstanding Sinhala-Buddhist territorial entitlement revived in anti-colonial resistance narratives and couched in the rise of the nation state in the international order. The Rajapaksa Government, in the massacre that ended the war in 2009, defeated the Tamil 'other' constructed in a contemporary, militaristic Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism and made good on its promise to deliver the unitary state. This article has described Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist inscriptions on the land, where physical sites are energised with meaning as vehicles of nationalist ideology and conflict memory. Imposing this dominant narrative is an effort to erase Tamil history and to denigrate and depoliticise the Tamil nationalist movement. The process amounts to 'denial of the memory of resistance'²⁰⁹—particularly evident in the state's authorship of conflict history as 'terrorism' in tourist sites—and is practiced in pursuance of a politics of minority subordination and dispossession. The encroachment of Sinhalese settlements and military encampments into the Tamil-dominated Northeast is bound up with economic and military prerogatives and the markers of militaristic triumph—memorials and sites of war tourism—are 'mnemonic practices'²¹⁰ loaded with nationalist territorial associations of 're-conquest' that actively inform majoritarian collective memory.

Public and private land has been seized in the process of consolidating the ‘unitary state’: a Sinhala-Buddhist project and a geopolitical accomplishment that necessitates physical domination of Tamil territory and ‘reclamation’ of Muslim space. The haste to colonise, dispossess and oppress the Tamil people since the end of the war also suggests that the state is wary of future Tamil resistance and acts as a reminder to the Muslim population to keep their allegiance to the state in check. Tamils, Muslims and all minorities are presented in discourse as inhabiting Sri Lanka at the sufferance of the Sinhalese; this discourse finds expression in sporadic attacks on minorities and the assertion of power over space. Minorities are reminded that the power to author space belongs to the Sinhala-Buddhist majority and that this performance of identity and power, of ethnicity and culture, is protected and promoted by the state.

Notes

¹ Jazeel and Brun, *Spatialising Politics*, 2.

² Ibid.

³ Jacobs, *Edge of Empire*, 5.

⁴ See Khalili’s description of similar dynamics in Gaza in ‘A Habit of Destruction’, *Society and Space*. Available at: <http://societyandspace.com/material/commentaries/laleh-khalili-a-habit-of-destruction/>. [Accessed 20 June 2016.]

⁵ Olick and Robbins, ‘Social Memory Studies’.

⁶ Nissan, ‘History in the Making’, 65.

⁷ Khalili, *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine*, 3.

⁸ Amarasuriya, ‘Elite Politics and Dissent’, 3

⁹ See M.M. Perera, ‘President Sirisena Returns Land to Tamil to Reconcile North and South’. *Asia News*, 14 March 2016. Available at:

<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/President-Sirisena-returns-land-to-Tamil-to-reconcile-north-and-south-36942.html>; and *IRIN News*, 'Sri Lanka Returns Land Confiscated by Military During Decades-Long War', 19 June 2015. Available at:

<http://www.irinnews.org/report/101655/sri-lanka-returns-land-confiscated-military-during-decades-long-war>. [Accessed 20 June 2016.]

¹⁰ Rajapaksa's defeat can be attributed to the exposure of massive levels of corruption, excess, abuse of power and family nepotism which drew together a range of diverse civil society-led protests on common themes of 'good governance', abolition of the Presidential system and the promise of 'change'. See Amarasuriya, 'Elite Politics and Dissent', 3.

¹¹ Rasaratnam, 'Reality Check'.

¹² Seoighe, 'Discourses of Victimization', 5–6.

¹³ Jazeel and Brun, *Spatialising Politics*.

¹⁴ Perera, 'Territorial Spaces and National Identities', 24.

¹⁵ See Schrikker, *Dutch and British Colonial Intervention*.

¹⁶ Perera, 'Territorial Spaces and National Identities', 25, 30.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 29–30.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 31. For a comprehensive and nuanced approach to Sri Lankan politics and kingship under Dutch and British colonial rule, see Schrikker, *Dutch and British Colonial Intervention*.

¹⁹ Van De Voorde, 'Sri Lankan Terrorism'.

²⁰ The violence of the imposition of (European-designed) international law is captured beautifully by Anghie in *Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law*, 105: 'the development of the idea of sovereignty in relation to the non-European world occurs in terms of dispossession, its ability to alienate its lands and rights'.

²¹ Cunneen, 'Postcolonial Perspectives for Criminology'.

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- ²² Tiruchelvam, 'Federalism and Diversity in Sri Lanka'.
- ²³ Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, 10.
- ²⁴ United Nations, *Report of the Secretary-General's Panel*.
- ²⁵ Rajapaksa, 'Address at the Ceremonial Opening'.
- ²⁶ Fernando, 'War by Other Means', 175.
- ²⁷ Rajapaksa, 'Address at the Ceremonial Opening'.
- ²⁸ Wickramasinghe, 'After the War', 1046.
- ²⁹ Nadarajah and Sentas, 'Politics of State Crime and Resistance', 74.
- ³⁰ Thirangama, *In my Mother's House*.
- ³¹ Rampton, 'Deeper Hegemony'.
- ³² Lewis, 'The Failure of a Liberal Peace', 651.
- ³³ Richmond, 'A Post-Liberal Peace', 1.
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ Nadarajah and Rampton, 'The Limits of Hybridity', 21.
- ³⁶ Richmond, 'UN Peace Operations', 88.
- ³⁷ Nadarajah and Rampton, 'The Limits of Hybridity', 4.
- ³⁸ Walton, 'Peace Building', 21; Rampton, 'Deeper Hegemony', 268.
- ³⁹ United Nations, *Report of the Secretary-General's Panel*.
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- ⁴² Wood, *Vectors of Memory*, 2.
- ⁴³ Olick, *States of Memory*.
- ⁴⁴ Halbwachs, quoted in Olick, *The Politics of Regret*, 20.
- ⁴⁵ Khalili, *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine*, 3.
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- ⁴⁸ Nora, ‘Between Memory and History’.
- ⁴⁹ Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, 143.
- ⁵⁰ Davies, ‘The Museum and the Politics’, 90.
- ⁵¹ Olick and Robins, ‘Social Memory Studies’, 126.
- ⁵² Minority Rights Group, ‘No War, No Peace’; Amarasingam and J Hyndman, ‘Touring “Terrorism”’.
- ⁵³ Goodhand et al., ‘Sri Lanka: Strategic Policy Assessment’; Rampton, ‘Colonisation, Securitised Development and the Crisis’.
- ⁵⁴ Gowing, ‘War by Other Means?’; International Crisis Group, ‘Sri Lanka’s North II’; Fernando, ‘War by Other Means’; S. Varatharajah, ‘A Topography of Terror’. *Tamil Guardian*, 7 November 2014.
- ⁵⁵ Rampton, ‘Colonisation, Securitised Development and the Crisis’.
- ⁵⁶ Lindberg and Orjuela, ‘Corruption and Conflict’; Interviews with civil society actors in Colombo, Jaffna, Batticaloa and Trincomalee, February and March 2012.
- ⁵⁷ Adnan, ‘Panel Discussion on Comparative Land Issues’.
- ⁵⁸ Fernando, ‘War by Other Means’, 225.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid.
- ⁶⁰ Majeed, ‘28 Buddha Statues Erected’.
- ⁶¹ Fernando, ‘War by Other Means’.
- ⁶² Jazeel, *Sacred Modernity*.
- ⁶³ Winslow and Woost, ‘Epilogue, or Prelude to Peace’, 203–204.
- ⁶⁴ However, diaspora remittances and international aid support many post-war economic recovery initiatives at a localised level, which enable communities to maintain and develop their own character. See Jayatilaka et al., ‘Conflict, Displacement and Post-War Recovery’.

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- ⁶⁷ Interview, civil society representative, Trincomalee, 2012.
- ⁶⁸ Jayatilaka et al., 'Conflict, Displacement and Post-War Recovery', 27.
- ⁶⁹ Fernando, 'War by Other Means'.
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- ⁷¹ Rampton, 'Colonisation, Securitised Development and the Crisis'.
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⁸² Fernando, 'War by Other Means'.

⁸³ Peoples Alliance for the Right to Land, 'Land Grabs in North and East'.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Fonseka and Raheem, 'Trincomalee High Security Zone'.

⁸⁶ Nissan, 'History in the Making', 62.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Jeganathan, 'Authorising History, Ordering Land'.

⁸⁹ Nissan, 'History in the Making'.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 68.

⁹¹ Jeganathan, 'Authorising History, Ordering Land', 112.

⁹² Nissan, 'History in the Making'; Jeganathan, 'Authorising History, Ordering Land'.

⁹³ Jazeel and Brun, *Spatialising Politics*, 10.

⁹⁴ Jeganathan, 'Authorising History, Ordering Land', 128.

⁹⁵ Turnour, quoted in Nissan, 'History in the Making', 68.

⁹⁶ Nissan, 'History in the Making'.

⁹⁷ Fernando, 'War by Other Means', 179.

⁹⁸ Moore, *The State and Peasant Politics*, 45.

⁹⁹ Tennekoon, 'Rituals of Development'; Rampton, 'Colonisation, Securitised Development and the Crisis'.

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- ¹⁰² de Mel, *Militarizing Sri Lanka*.
- ¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 19, 117.
- ¹⁰⁴ Olick and Robbins, 'Social Memory Studies'; Khalili, *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine*.
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- ¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 88.
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¹²⁰ Adnan, 'Panel Discussion on Comparative Land Issues'.

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¹²³ Minority Rights Group, 'No War, No Peace', 14.

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- ¹⁴⁰ de Silva, 'Buddhism, State and Nationalism', 158; Walters, *The History of Kelaniya*.
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- ¹⁴² Ibid.
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- ¹⁴⁷ Mahavamsa, chapter 25, quoted in Perera, 'Remembering and Contested Patriotism', 28.
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- ¹⁵² *Groundviews*, 'Updates on Ground Situation'.
- ¹⁵³ de Silva, 'The Efficacy of Combat Mode'.
- ¹⁵⁴ Natali, 'Building Cemeteries, Constructing Identities'.
- ¹⁵⁵ Perera, 'Vaporizing the Opponent'.
- ¹⁵⁶ Ibid.
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interrogation of soldiers, government officials and curators of these sites about their meaning, history and purpose.

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¹⁵⁹ Wijedara, 'Soldiers Guide Predominantly'; Prabhakaran, 'This Land Belongs'.

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¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ Amarasingam and Hyndman, 'Touring "Terrorism"'.

¹⁶⁴ *Al-Jazeera*, 'In Pictures'.

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¹⁶⁶ Hughes, 'Nationalism and Memory'.

¹⁶⁷ Daniel, *Charred Lullabies*, 62.

¹⁶⁸ Amarasingam and Hyndman, 'Touring "Terrorism"', 564.

¹⁶⁹ Gillis, 'Memory and Identity'.

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¹⁷¹ Mahinda Chinthana, 'Victory for Sri Lanka'.

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¹⁷⁴ Brady, 'Soldiers at Your Service'.

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¹⁷⁶ Centre for Policy Alternatives, 'Land Issues in the Northern Province'.

¹⁷⁷ Brady, 'Soldiers at Your Service'.

¹⁷⁸ Sri Lanka Campaign, 'Holiday Providers Linked'.

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¹⁸⁵ Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed?*; Gombrich and Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed*.

¹⁸⁶ Rampton, ‘Deeper Hegemony’, 258; Gombrich and Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed*.

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¹⁸⁹ D. Bastians and G. Harris, ‘Buddhist-Muslim Unrest Boils Over in Sri Lanka’. *New York Times*, 26 June 2014. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/07/world/asia/deadly-religious-violence-erupts-in-sri-lanka.html> [Accessed 17 March 2015].

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²⁰² *Ibid.*, 245.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 247–248.

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