

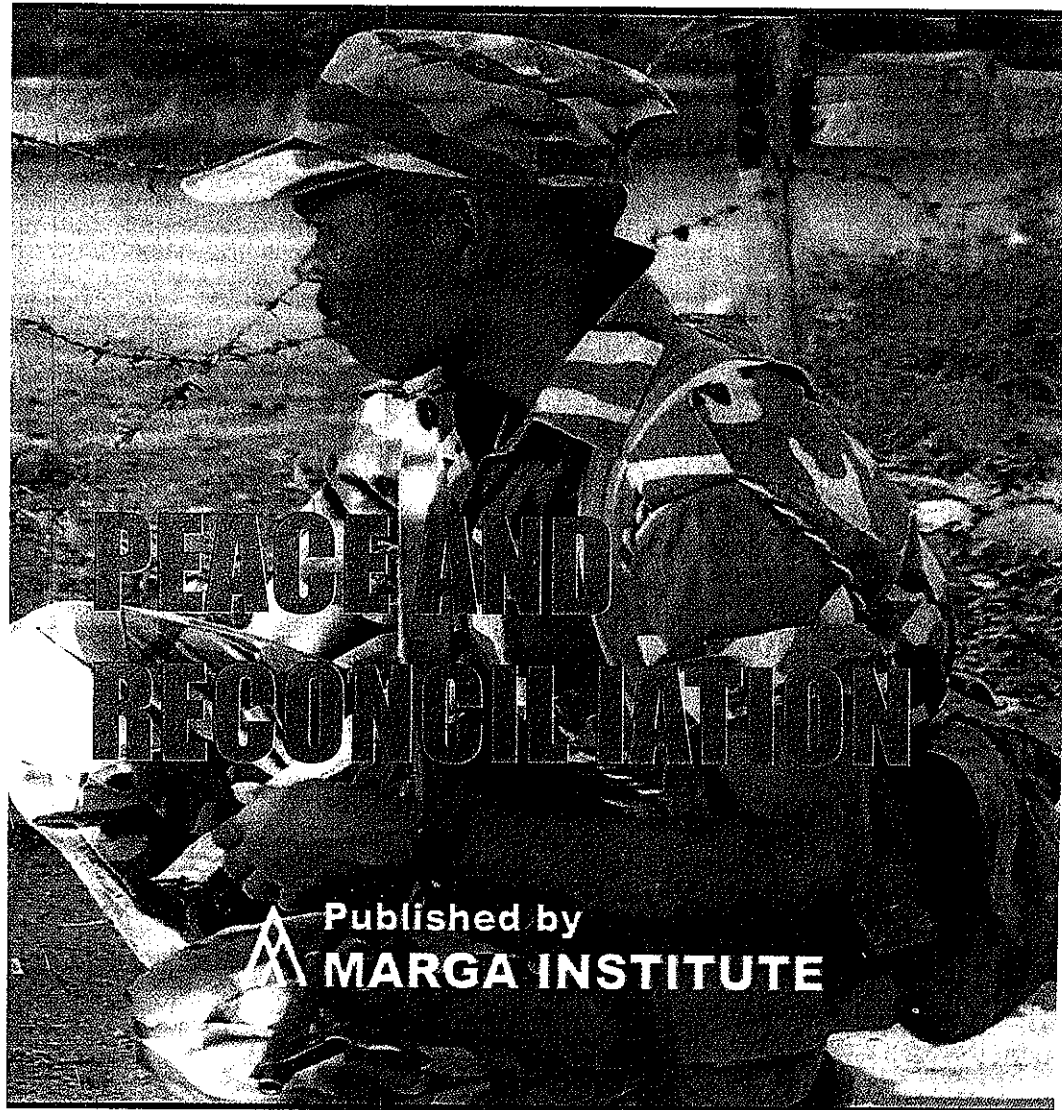
## TAMIL AND MUSLIM IDENTITIES IN THE EAST

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### Introduction

Because of its tri-ethnic population, Sri Lanka's eastern coastal region has become pivotal to the island's political future. The densely populated Jaffna peninsula and the adjacent Dry Zone districts in the northernmost part of the island will always remain overwhelmingly Tamil in population and culture, and thus the cynosure of any kind of Tamil Eelam, but the eastern coastal plain south of Trincomalee, including the fertile lagoon-laced agricultural region administered from the district centers of Batticaloa and Amparai, is up for grabs in the island's communal tug-of-war. More than any other part of the island, it is a site for multicultural contestation and alternative ethnic futures. One of the reasons is that post-Independence Sinhala resettlement and irrigation schemes here impinge upon older Tamil-speaking coastal areas, and as the Sri Lankan development planners should have foreseen, this process has radically altered the political demographics of the region (Manogaran 1987, Peebles 1990, G.H. Peiris 1991, Mallick 1998, Herring 2001). The other reason is that, apart from a small community of Burghers (McGilvray 1982a), the eastern coastal belt itself is inhabited by two contentious but historically interlinked Tamil-speaking communities, both of which are minorities within the larger Sri Lankan polity: the Tamils and the Muslims (Sri Lankan Moors).

The coastal zone in the East, and especially Batticaloa and Amparai Districts which are the geographical focus of this essay, became an unexpected crucible of ethnic tensions and geopolitical uncertainties when the Eelam War turned "hot" in 1983. Because



of its geographically juxtaposed and ethnically diverse population of Tamils, Muslims, and Sinhalese, it is here, not in monocultural Jaffna, that the LTTE's hopes for a greater Tamil Eelam — or the moderates' vision of a unified federal Tamil-speaking province in the North-East, or the Muslims' proposal for a new Islamic-majority southeastern province — will ultimately be decided. When you get down to the specific ethnographic details, the local picture in the eastern region becomes even more complex, the local politics even more intertwined and ambivalent. To understand why this is so, we must first acknowledge the history and cultural traditions of the region.

### Batticaloa as a Cultural Region

In the early colonial period, the easternmost region of the island was not closely integrated with Jaffna, but it did have mercantile and feudal connections to the Sinhala kingdoms, of which it was an outlying and at times tenuous part. In a larger sense, both Trincomalee and Batticaloa are best considered as part of a geographical and political zone called "the Vanni," an unstable and at times rebellious Dry Zone buffer region between the centers of Sinhalese royal power in the south (Kotte, Sitawaka, Kandy) and the Tamil Kingdom of Jaffna in the north. When the Portuguese and Dutch reached Sri Lanka in the 1500s and 1600s, they found that Batticaloa (in Tamil, *Mattakkalappu*), although a part of the Kandyan territories, was under the grassroots control of Tamil Hindu chiefs of the dominant landowning caste, the Mukkuvars.<sup>1</sup> As the European colonial noose tightened around the southwestern coast, a good deal of Kandyan trade continued to be conducted through the ports of Trincomalee and Batticaloa. According to Dutch reports, the Dissave of Bintenne, who resided in Kandy, would journey to the region every two years to collect his tribute from a fractious group of Tamil sub-regional chiefs bearing the titles of Vanniya and Podiyar.

The population of the region was largely Tamil-speaking, except for some Sinhalese and Veddah villages to the west and

south, and there was an ancient Buddhist pilgrimage shrine at Dighavapi.<sup>2</sup> However, the Tamil-speaking population was — and remains today — religiously divided between interspersed Hindu and Muslim villages. The dominant Tamil Hindu agricultural castes in the east coast region are the Mukkuvars and the Velalars, supported in the traditional hierarchy by a range of service and specialist castes including goldsmiths and blacksmiths, climbers and tappers, fishermen, washermen, barbers, and drummers. There are also some powerful local communities, such as the Cirpatam (Seerpatham) caste centered around the historic Kandaswamy temple at Mandur (Whitaker 1999). The medieval and early modern history of the Batticaloa region still remains to be written, drawing upon and interpreting the fragmented palm-leaf legends and chronicles known as the *Mattakkalappu Manmiyam* and the *Mattakkalappu Purva Carittiram* (Nadarajah 1962, Pathmanathan 1978, Sivaram n.d.). However, from these historical sources and from contemporary ethnographic evidence, the origins of some of the castes in the Batticaloa region appear linked to the South Indian invasion of Kalinga Magha, who defeated the Polonnaruwa kingdom in 1215 C.E. with the help of soldiers and sailors recruited from both Tamilnadu and Kerala.

This axial event gave the preexisting Batticaloa society a political elite of landed chiefs and petty kings drawn from Magha's Kerala-based Mukkuvar warrior battalions and from the Vanniya (also known as Palli or Padaiyatchi) warrior caste of northern Tamilnadu. While it was the Vanniya legacy that led to the use of "Venniah" as a political title, it was the hegemony of the Mukkuvars that seems to have institutionalized the distinctive regional pattern of tracing family descent, and succession to many political and religious offices, matrilineally (through the female line) from a man to his sister's son (McGilvray 1982b). Marriages in the Eastern region are typically matrilineal, with the son-in-law joining the household of his wife, a pattern similar to the Sinhala *binna* marriage. For as far back as records exist, all of the Tamil Hindus of the Batticaloa region appear to have followed this distinctive

matrilineal clan (*kuti*) system, including even the service castes and the high-status Velalars (who follow quite different customs in Jaffna). Matrilineal kinship and marriage patterns of a similar sort are found among some groups in modern-day Kerala, where Magha would have recruited his Mukkuvar warriors.

Kerala and the southern coastline of Tamilnadu also provide important geographical linkages for the Muslims in Batticaloa and elsewhere in Sri Lanka, most of whom share some kinship and social institutions with coastal Muslims living all the way from Kayalpattinam to Cannanore (McGilvray 1999). The eastern Muslims, like their compatriots elsewhere in the island and around the entire South Indian littoral, are Sunnis and members of the Shafi legal school. Most accounts based on Portuguese sources attribute the origin of Muslim communities in Batticaloa to the strategic resettlement policy of King Senerat of Kandy in 1626 C.E., but an important ethnohistorical document, the *Natu Katu Paravani Kalvettu* (Neville 1887, Pathmanathan 1976), indicates that Muslims were already well-established in east coast villages and paddy fields, and organized into ranked matrilineal clans exactly like the local Tamils, by then. Despite their skills in commerce and trade, the east coast Muslims have always been primarily engaged in paddy agriculture, another fact that makes them strikingly similar to their Tamil neighbors in the region. As many contemporary strategists have noted, the settlements and rice fields of the Muslims in the Trincomalee, Batticaloa, and Amparai Districts form a checkerboard pattern interspersed with adjacent Tamil settlements, and the coordination of the cultivation season may involve representatives from both communities.

From the early colonial period up to the late 20th century, and in many locations even today, the Hindu temples and the Muslim mosques of the Batticaloa region have provided not only a focus for worship and prayer, but a public arena for the dramatic display of local caste hierarchies and clan-based privileges expressed in the language of religious ritual. In an earlier era when the Mukkuvar chief Podiyars controlled most of the land and exercised local

political power, their matrilineal authority and clan rights superseded all others in ceremonies held at major regional temples such as Tirukkivil and Kokkaddichcholai. In some cases, the Muslims were granted subordinate ritual rights in these temples, rights which they renounced in the 20th century as part of their movement toward economic independence and Islamic religious reform. Within many east coast mosques, however, the Muslims still utilize matrilineal clan membership as a principle of administrative organization. Four hundred years of colonial administration steadily eroded the power of the Mukkuvar Podiyars, so that by the time of Independence in 1948 — and during my early fieldwork in the 1970s — there were only localized vestiges and pockets of their former *vannimai*, or traditional chiefship, especially on the western shore of the Batticaloa Lagoon. From the 18th century onward, other Tamil castes such as the Karaiyars and the Velalars were increasingly recognized and rewarded by the Dutch and the British, and the Muslims rapidly acquired more paddy lands and opened more businesses throughout the region. However, while doing fieldwork in the decade prior to the outbreak of the Eelam conflict, I found that cultural memories of the historic Mukkuvar chiefship were still widely recalled, sometimes in a positive and sometimes in a negative light, depending upon who was talking and why.

This brief excursion into Batticaloa history and anthropology has been necessary in order to explain two important things about the region's contemporary cultural character and inter-ethnic relations. First, there are social, economic, political, and religious patterns deeply-rooted in the region that make the Tamil-speaking parts of Batticaloa and Amparai Districts, and even the southern parts of Trincomalee District, culturally and sociologically distinct from Jaffna and from the Upcountry Tamil region. The east coast Tamil and Muslim culture complex includes joint cultivation systems and interspersed village settlements, matrilineal clan-based temple and mosque leadership roles, matrilineal marriage patterns and total pre-mortem transfer of wealth (both houses and land) as dowry, non-Brahmanical Hindu ritual traditions and ecstatic Muslim Sufi

devotional performances by Bawas and faqirs, and a regional dialect of Tamil that preserves a number of older literary forms. The high caste Jaffna Tamils, especially the aristocratic Jaffna Velalars, look down upon the Batticaloa Tamils for their alleged lower caste origins and for their less Sanskritic forms of Hindu ritual. The Batticaloa Tamils reciprocate with an ambivalent view of the northerners: while the "Jaffnese" are admired for being ambitious and highly-educated, they are also viewed as arrogant, exploitative, and exclusivist. Some 20th century Tamil and Muslim intellectuals have compiled folklore compendia, poetic anthologies, and local histories openly celebrating Batticaloa's unique cultural heritage (Kandiah 1964; Uwise 1986; Saleem 1990). Although the ideology of Tamil Eelam and the violent events of recent decades have made Batticaloa's home-grown regional loyalty appear less salient, it is still a potential factor in any long-range solution. As I will discuss in the next section, east coast Muslim interests and sentiments gave a very significant boost to the creation of the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress party (SLMC).

The second lesson we can learn from local history and ethnography is that rivalries between the different Tamil communities in the Batticaloa region, and between the Tamils and the Muslims, have their roots in pre-colonial and colonial-era caste politics. Judging from Dutch accounts (e.g., Burnand 1794), the reign of the Mukkuvar chiefs was harsh. Other Tamil communities as well as the Muslims were subordinated politically by hereditary Mukkuvar caste privileges, just as they were oppressed economically by monopolistic Mukkuvar landholding. While the lower service castes were in no position to challenge this situation, the higher castes, and in particular the Velalars — farmers who were also delegated the role of temple functionaries under the Mukkuvar chiefship — were eager to assert their own higher rank as soon as the opportunity arose. These castes were given increasing responsibility by the Dutch and British for the supervision of cultivation and the collection of taxes, and by the mid-20th century they had stopped participating in temple rituals that formerly dramatized their subordination to Mukkuvar authority. By the 1970s, many of the lower castes, too,

had withdrawn from Hindu festivals where their inferiority to the dominant Mukkuvars and high ranking Velalars would have been publicly validated in hierarchical ceremonial roles.

The Muslims in the 20th century withdrew from participation in Hindu temple festivals for exactly the same reason, and also to express their renewed sense of Islamic orthodoxy. They also severed ties that had given lower Tamil Hindu castes such as the Paraiyar drummers a customary role in the celebration of Muslim saints' festivals and Islamic holidays at local mosques. The overall relationship between the Muslims and the Tamils in the pre-colonial period can only be gauged from indirect evidence, but it seems there had been a significant degree of intermarriage (hence their shared matrilineal clan system) and also some occasional military or political alliances (as reflected in Batticaloa legends of local Muslims who assisted the Mukkuvars in fighting their caste rivals, the Timilars). Eighteenth century Dutch reports from Batticaloa took little direct notice of the Muslims, even though they were acknowledged to be a large segment of the population. Instead, it was always the restive and recalcitrant Mukkuvar chiefs who attracted the Dutch colonial gaze, suggesting that the Muslims were more or less encapsulated and subordinated within the Mukkuvar political universe, allowed to conduct their farming and business in semi-autonomy as long as they posed no challenge to the authority of the chief Podiyars. The attitudes of the Tamil high castes toward the Muslims back then were probably similar to their attitudes in the 20th century, looking down upon the Muslims as energetic but uneducated farmers, seeing them as a middle-to-lower ranking caste or "race" (*inam*) with some strange non-Hindu practices such as circumcision and beef-eating. Since the 19th century, the Muslims of the east coast have strongly emerged from the shadow of Tamil domination to become a fully self-sufficient, economically prosperous, and independent-minded community. In fact, many Tamils are astonished at the economic and political gains the Muslims have made since Independence, while the Muslims themselves remain sensitive to any lingering attitudes of ethnic or caste superiority on the part of the Tamils.

## Eastern Identities in the 20th Century

On the east coast, the ethnic designation "Tamil" could refer to a Tamil-speaking Saivite Hindu as well as to a Tamil Catholic or a Methodist. Their linguistic identification with Tamil, a Dravidian language with an impressive ancient literature and a passionate 20th century nationalist following, serves to anchor their modern-day ethnic and political identity, just as it does for Tamils in the Upcountry, in Jaffna, and in South India (Ramaswamy 1997). The Muslims of the Batticaloa region also speak Tamil as their mother tongue, but with slightly different intonation and a specialized vocabulary, much of it Arabic-derived, for kinship terminology, verbal etiquette, and Islamic religious practices. Their modern identity, like that of Muslims elsewhere in the island, was forged on the anvil of Portuguese religious persecution as "Moors" (*mouros*), while Sonagar (*conakar*) was their commonly applied Tamil name until the mid-20th century when it began to be replaced by "Muslim." Today the terms "Moor" and "Muslim" may be used interchangeably in English, although the former seems now limited largely to print media, while "Muslim" has become the common term of reference in spoken and written Tamil throughout the island.<sup>3</sup> The twists and turns of 20th century Moorish identity politics have been traced elsewhere (de Silva 1998, McGilvray 1999, ), but it is worth noting that the Sri Lankan Moors took a different historical path from the Muslims of Tamilnadu, who, despite feelings of discrimination, still maintain their ethnic and linguistic identification as Muslim Tamils. In the Sinhala majority districts of Sri Lanka where two-thirds of the Moors live, where Sinhalese mobs destroyed Muslim shop owners in 1915 and killed thousands of Tamil city-dwellers in 1983, and where anti-Muslim riots and massacres continue to occur today, a "Muslim Tamil" identity could obviously have some life-threatening drawbacks.

While Muslims on the east coast are fully aware of potential conflicts with the Sinhalese, it is their relationship with the local Tamils that is a more pressing concern. In this regard, east coast Muslim suspicions toward the Tamils still echo the feelings voiced

by many Colombo-based Muslim leaders a century earlier, when the Tamil Ceylonese nationalist leader Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan sought to define the Muslims as "Islamic Tamils," thereby signaling the start of a political schism between the two communities that gradually widened over the following decades, finally splitting wide open in the post-Independence period. In a speech delivered in 1885, Ramanathan marshaled linguistic and ethnographic evidence to argue that, apart from religion, the Moors and Tamils shared many cultural and linguistic traits resulting from conversion and intermarriage over the centuries. When he published it three years later as an academic essay on "The Ethnology of the 'Moors' of Ceylon" in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Ceylon Branch*, Ramanathan's views seemed to acquire scholarly respectability, much to the displeasure of the Moorish elites of Galle and Colombo who saw it as an effort to sabotage their hopes for a separate Muslim (Moorish) seat on the Legislative Council.

Ironically enough, Ramanathan was promulgating a more inclusive definition of "Tamil-ness" than many high-status Hindus of Jaffna and Batticaloa would have preferred, given their historic reluctance to recognize members of the lowest castes as "Tamils." Even though Ramanathan's strategy failed, and a Moorish seat was created, his essay seemed to embody the patronizing Tamil outlook found in many areas of the island, including Batticaloa, where even today some high caste Tamils look down upon the Muslims as their inferior and uneducated neighbors. In the narrow rhetorical space of colonial politics, the logic of Ramanathan's aggrandizing ethnological thesis forced the Muslim leaders to repudiate their Tamil-ness, and they did so in the prevailing colonial discourse of "race." In 1907 the Moorish editor I.L.M. Azeez published a rebuttal of Ramanathan's claims, arguing that a Moorish Arab patrilineal "racial" pedigree distinguished them from the Sinhala and Tamil "races." In the 1930s, a broader pan-Islamic religious identity as Ceylon Muslims began to be fostered as well. Then, as Independence loomed on the horizon in the 1940s, and the era of Sinhala majoritarian politics was about to commence, the west coast urban Muslim political

leaders strategically transferred their support to the Sinhala-majority party, explicitly denying any necessary link between Moorish ethnicity and the Tamil language.

In the eastern zone, where Tamils and Moors live side by side and share a common language, the idea of "Tamil-speaking" solidarity continued to have some local appeal as late as 1956, when both communities elected candidates on S.J.V. Chelvanayakam's Federal Party (*Tamil Arasu Katci*, literally "Tamil government party") ticket. Generally, however, the Muslim politicians from Independence up to the mid-1980s opted for a strategy of flexible and adroit coalition politics within the two major Sinhala nationalist parties, the UNP and the SLFP. During my fieldwork in the 1970s, many east coast Moors acknowledged that Muslim MPs would readily "reverse hats," i.e., switch party affiliations, to ally themselves with the party in power, a maneuver perfected by the late Gate Mudaliyar M.S. Kariapper of Kalmunai, his son-in-law M.M. Mustapha, and his nephew M.C. Ahmed (Phadnis 1979, Mohan 1987). It should be noted, however, that several east coast Tamil MPs learned this tactic as well (UTHR(J) Report 7, 1991: 45-46). Sir Razik Fareed, who emerged as the leading Moorish spokesman in the early decades of Independence, conspicuously endorsed the Sinhala Only national language policy in 1956 and railed against what he called the "political genocide" of the Moors under the "the Tamil yoke." During the Official Language debate in 1956, a Tamil MP sarcastically accused him of being a Sinhala defector. Fareed retorted that at least the Moors were not "Tamil converts," and a heated replay of the old Ramanathan-Azeez "ethnological" argument of 1888-1907 immediately ensued on the floor of Parliament (Hassan 1968: 96-106).

As Kingsley de Silva forthrightly notes, "Tamil-Muslim rivalry in Sri Lanka is a political reality, and the Muslims themselves have responded with alacrity to Sinhalese overtures to back them against the Tamils" (de Silva 1986a: 449). De Silva and others have approvingly viewed the Muslims' cultural integration with Sinhalese society, and their pragmatic accommodationist politics, as the mark

of a "good" minority, implicitly contrasting them with the troublesome and recalcitrant Tamils, whose politicians by the 1970s had coalesced into the Tamil United Liberation Front and were calling for a separate Tamil homeland, or federal province, in the northeast (de Silva 1986b, 1998; Dewaraja 1994, 1995). A tangible reward for the Muslims' pliant political behavior was the establishment of a separate system of government schools for Muslim students in the 1970s and the training of a corps of Muslim teachers to staff them. Apart from standard academic subjects, the curriculum in the Muslim schools includes Islam and optional Arabic language, and in recent years a distinctive Muslim school uniform has been introduced as well. This has demonstrably improved Muslim educational success (Ali 1986-87, 1992a), but it has arguably worsened ethnic tensions by restricting direct face-to-face contact between students and faculty from different ethnic communities.

As Christian Wagner has documented in detail, post-Independence governments privileged the west coast Moorish urban elite politically while they disempowered the rural east coast Moorish farmers socio-economically (Wagner 1990, 1991). This pattern might have continued indefinitely, if not for the fact that after 1983 the government could no longer guarantee the lives and property of Muslims in the east coast Tamil guerrilla combat zone. In the mid-1980s, when President J.R. Jayewardene's UNP government employed Israeli military advisors and proposed submerging the key Moorish parliamentary constituencies of Amparai District within an enlarged Sinhalese-dominated Province of Uva, the Muslims, led by east coast sentiment, finally broke with the UNP and SLFP, organizing the first distinct Muslim political parties in independent Sri Lanka. These included the East Sri Lanka Muslim Front (ESLMF), which later became the Muslim United Liberation Front (MULF), and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC). When in 1989 the SLMC won four parliamentary seats, the political initiative within the Muslim community had been seized for the first time by leaders self-consciously representing the Eastern Province. Whether the SLMC can continue to attract the support of Muslims

island-wide in the 21st century is now an open question, particularly in the wake of the death of its founder, M.H.M. Ashroff, and the ensuing schism between his widow Ferial (originally from Gampola), who obtained the support of east coast SLMC stalwarts, and Rauf Hakeem, a Kandyan who attracted many followers among west coast urban Muslims. What is certain is that the vital interests of the east coast Muslims have now become a recognized part of Sri Lanka's ethnic equation.

Overall, the Sinhalas, Tamils, and Muslims each account for roughly one third of the population of the eastern region. However, because of the fragmented, Balkan-like settlement pattern, none of the three ethnic groups can easily be encompassed within a single territorially contiguous unit. To the north, in the Trincomalee District, the Muslim, Tamil, and Sinhala populations are now of almost equal size, the result of Sinhalese colonization under the Accelerated Mahaweli Project (Manogaran 1994, Kemper 1991:148 ff.). Tamils still predominate in the Batticaloa District, but there are significant Muslim enclaves at Kattankudy and Eravur. In Amparai District, where dramatic demographic change has occurred as a result of the Gal Oya irrigation and colonization project, Sinhalas and Muslims now predominate, but there are significant Tamil enclaves at Karaitivu, Akkaraipattu, and Tirukkovil. It is here on the east coast that one of the pivotal issues of the Tamil separatist movement must be decided: will the Muslims eventually agree to join the Tamil-led movement for a Tamil-speaking homeland or province, perhaps with a constitutional provision to safeguard their rights in Muslim-majority subregions? Will the Tamils ever allow the Muslims to create a new Southeastern Province, an entity sarcastically identified by some pundits as "Muslim Eelam"? Will the Sinhalas peacefully accommodate a very large Muslim population in their eastern districts if the Tamils pull away? Sri Lanka's modern history is replete with episodes of communal conflict between each of these three ethnic communities.

## Tamil-Muslim Stereotypes: Intimate Apprehensions

In the sandy coastal zone of the Batticaloa and Amparai Districts, residential neighborhoods of Tamils and Muslims often look similar to the eye, lushly planted with hibiscus, coconut, arecanut, and mango trees, each household lot guarded by masonry walls or formidable barbed-wire fences. At a glance it is not always obvious where Muslim villages stop and Tamil villages begin. As with the popularly alleged "racial" differences between Sinhalese and Tamils, outward physical differences between Tamils and Moors can sometimes be difficult to discern. Local people may occasionally point to Muslims with lighter skin or aquiline features as evidence of Arab ancestry. However, the most reliable markers of Tamil versus Muslim identity "on the street" are the cultural ones: dress, occupation, and to a minor degree Tamil vocabulary and dialect. Although Western-style shirts are nearly universal, older Muslim men tend more often to wear as a lower garment a tubular stitched cotton sarong, typically in a strong plaid or check pattern, sometimes with a wide black belt, while Tamil men more often wear a plain white unstitched cotton waistcloth (*vetti*) and never a belt. Hindu Saivite face and body markings (sacred ash, sandalwood, paste, vermilion powder, male earrings) remain unmistakably Tamil. Simple white kerchiefs, knitted or embroidered caps, or the nowadays almost extinct fez may be worn by Moorish men, especially as the hours of prayer approach. However, ambiguity and disguise are always possible: during anti-Tamil riots in Sinhala areas, Moorish men have sometimes escaped mistaken slaughter only by displaying anatomical proof of circumcision. However, this could have quite the opposite effect in a communal confrontation with Tamils in the East.

In the course of fieldwork in the Tamil and Muslim town of Akkaraipattu, I have been struck by the difference in religious behavioral styles between the Hindu Tamils and the Muslims. Many Tamils seem to enjoy attending and performing rituals, and they often encouraged me to enter temples and attend pujas at will. The Muslims have sometimes seemed more protective of their sacred



spaces and more eager to engage in preemptive theological debates concerning my personal religious beliefs. As a first approximation, the distinction between Hindu "orthopraxy" (emphasis on ritual) and Muslim "orthodoxy" (emphasis on doctrine) works pretty well. However, the east coast Tamil Hindus are notably less Sanskritic or Brahmanical in their rituals than one would find in the agamic temples of Jaffna, an ethnographic fact that has posed major problems for Obeyesekere's Freudian interpretation of the goddess Pattini/Kannaki (Obeyesekere 1984, McGilvray 1988). In the sphere of public worship, there is now very little crossover or joint participation by Hindus and Muslims in shared ceremonies. The only exceptions I have observed were some Tamil Hindus who made vows and offerings at the tombs of local Muslim saints (*avuliyas*) and one or two Moors who fulfilled firewalking vows at the Pattirakali temple in Akkaraipattu.

The Batticaloa Moors and Tamils share very similar cultural understandings of sexuality and the body, of heating and cooling foods and substances, and of folk medicine derived from the Siddha and Ayurvedic traditions (McGilvray 1982c, 1998). Local specialists in both communities are called "curers" (*parikari*; colloq. "parisari"); I found that no Muslims in Akkaraipattu practiced the Arabic Unani medical system or used the title of *hakim* (Unani physician). At the level of ghosts and malevolent spirits (Hindu *pey*, Muslim *jin*), the Tamils and the Moors have a similar construction of the supernatural. There are both Tamil and Muslim sorcerers (*mantiravatis*, experts in the use of mantras to control demonic forces), and there is some propitiation of local female spirits (*taymar*, "the mothers") discretely conducted beyond the male gaze by Moorish women. Until venturing outside of one's own ethnic neighborhood became a dangerous undertaking as the Eelam "problems" progressively worsened, Muslims in Akkaraipattu would consult Tamil astrologers concerning marriage, career, and house-construction plans. This has been resumed in some places where public safety has been restored. Similar guidance remains available from Muslim numerologists and ink-readers, although I never heard of any Tamils seeking their services.

Young Muslim children of both sexes continue to attend private neighborhood "recitation schools" (*otuppallikkutam*) to memorize Quranic scripture, but the agents of modern pan-Islamism are nowadays highly visible, particularly young alims and maulavis, college and seminary-trained teachers of Islam in the Muslim government schools. In recent decades, grassroots Islamic reformist organizations such as the Tabliqi Jamaat and the Jamaat-i-Islami have also become well-established in the Muslim communities of the east coast, as they have elsewhere in the island and throughout South Asia (Ahmad 1991, Ali 2001). Efforts to suppress local traditions and practices as "non-Muslim" have met with mixed success, and it is sometimes difficult to differentiate the pro-Islamic from the anti-Tamil motives which may lie behind such actions. For example, Muslims in many areas seem to have stopped employing lower caste Tamil musicians at local ceremonies and circumcisions because this Islamic "purification" also amounts to an anti-Tamil economic boycott. During my visits to Akkaraipattu in 1993, 1995, and 2001, many Moors still employed Tamil Washermen for domestic laundry services, and Tamil Blacksmiths still forged agricultural tools and bullock cart wheels for Moorish farmers, despite the heightened ethnic tensions. For very practical reasons, poorer Muslim women must still work as members of female weeding and threshing teams in the fields, bringing home cash or a share of the paddy harvest for their families, despite Islamic pressures for greater female seclusion.

Despite the lifeways they have in common, there are barriers to direct social interaction between the Tamils and the Moors, such as the bifurcated government school system mentioned earlier. There seem to be virtually no Tamil-Moorish intermarriages today, although they must have occurred widely in the past. Similarly, contemporary Tamil converts to Islam are rare; since I began doing fieldwork in the 1970s I have come across only a handful, always Tamil women who married Moorish men. I also observed very few regular Tamil-Muslim inter-household visitations, gift-giving relationships, or food exchanges except those associated with



landlord/tenant obligations or with hereditary low caste Tamil service to Muslim land owners. Women are generally shielded from contact with the opposite community more than men, and Muslim women are shielded more than Tamils.

The remaining opportunities for direct Tamil-Muslim social interaction are largely vocational and economic. In the 1970s, before the escalation of the Eelam War, Tamils and Muslims might cultivate paddy on adjacent tracts of land, in which case they would also participate together on irrigation committees. Tamil and Muslim landowners would also recruit tenant cultivators and field laborers from the opposite community. As a result of violence starting in the 1980s, paddy cultivation and land tenure patterns in the Batticaloa region have been severely disrupted, and farmers in some areas have lost control of their fields to members of other ethnic communities, or even to the LTTE itself. I do not know whether joint Tamil-Muslim irrigation committees continue to function in the same manner today, but many Tamil laborers are still reported to be employed by Muslim land owners in Akkaraipattu (UTHR(J) Bulletin 11, 1993). In the 1970s, ethnic resentment and suspicion in the marketplace was often noted, particularly among the Tamils, because the majority of retail establishments in Akkaraipattu were owned by Moors or Sinhalese or Jaffna Tamils. In recent decades the purchasing power and the commercial success of the Tamils in a town such as Akkaraipattu have been drastically reduced by the Eelam conflict, while the Muslims have become visibly more prosperous.

The high caste Tamils with whom I became acquainted expressed at least a vague awareness of being heirs to a great Tamil cultural tradition, a Dravidian civilization with linguistic roots possibly going back to the pre-Vedic Indus Valley culture — and therefore much older than either Buddhism or Islam. Yet, while the linguistic and cultural chauvinism so characteristic of Tamil politics in the 20th century has also been felt on the east coast, there is a tinge of ambivalence about the arrogance and presumed cultural authority of the Jaffna Tamils who have led this movement. My

Tamil friends were not doctrinaire on these issues, but they prided themselves on adhering to a coherent and time-tested set of rules for living, including standards for Tamil food and attire, Tamil family patterns, Tamil religiosity, Tamil language and manners.

I detected many of the very same elements in Moorish self-perceptions, especially the concern to evince a rule-bound cultural system for living. From the religious point of view, for example, the Moors have always enjoyed a robust, unequivocal self-definition as mainstream Sunni Muslims; indeed several of my friends urgently referred me to locally respected treatises on *sunna* and *hadith*, especially the 19<sup>th</sup> century Arabic-Tamil work of "Mappillai Alim" (Ahmad Lebbai 1963). However, in the broader cultural domain the Muslims have the option of drawing upon both the Islamic and the Dravidian traditions, and back in the 1970s there was occasional debate over which one to emphasize. Among the young educated Muslim men who became my close friends during early fieldwork in the 1970s there was some concern about their own "hybrid" cultural traits, which they humorously self-caricatured as consisting of an Arabian religion, a South Indian language, and a mixed repertoire of clothing and cuisine. Shouldn't the Moors have their own unique "national dress," some of them asked, instead of just borrowing a Sinhala-Malay sarong and a Tamil sari? A further sartorial complication in the 1970s was the official introduction of the "Punjabi costume" of *salwar kameez*, for Moorish high school girls, more recently augmented with a white hooded *parta* (purdah) head-covering. With grudging admiration, a Moorish friend of mine remarked in the early 1970s that, regardless of where she might be living, a Tamil woman would unhesitatingly wish to wear a traditional silk Kanchipuram sari and tie a garland of fragrant jasmine blossoms to her oiled and plaited hair. Lacking such a strong cultural identity, a Muslim woman in the 1970s, he felt, might be more inclined to adopt local, or even Western, dress. How wrong this turned out to be! By the 1990s, a strict new Islamic code of dress for Muslim women had been adopted virtually everywhere in Sri Lanka: the full-length *abayah* outer garment and the embroidered *hijab*

headdress that fastens under the chin. The traditional blouse and sari, once the daily garb of Muslim and Tamil women alike in a town like Akkaraipattu, is rarely seen. Most younger Tamil women have switched to wearing tailored frocks and housedresses except on special occasions.

There are many different perceptions and opinions of Tamil/Muslim cultural difference, but some basic themes emerged in offhand remarks I heard from members of each group. Tamils I knew generally conceded that the Muslims were extremely energetic and hardworking, a fact visibly reflected in their improved houses and growing material wealth. In fact, the increasing prosperity of the Muslims is of acute concern to many high caste Tamils, because it challenges their traditional self-image as the leading members of society. Not only are the Muslims getting richer, they are also accused of having too many children. They have maintained the highest birth-rate of any ethnic community in the country over the past 50 years (Kurukulasuriya, *et.al.* 1988: 191), a trend which is also true among Muslims in India. With demographic and electoral trends in mind, many Tamils and Muslims – and nowadays some Sinhalas as well (Schrijvers 1998:12) – view such persistent fecundity as a political act.

I also encountered some covert kinds of ethnic perceptions constructed from private beliefs and suspicions, a more concealed discourse typical of younger men, reflecting both their curiosity and their anxiety about matters of the body. Because they are blocked from public view, the intimate domains of Muslim diet, sexuality, and hygiene typically generated the most imaginative Tamil gossip. For example, some Tamils theorized that the Muslims' vigor and fertility come from their consumption of beef, in Hindu eyes a polluting and highly "heating" meat that energizes the body and the libido.<sup>4</sup> Whether these ideas have had any practical impact whatsoever upon Tamil-Muslim communal politics is impossible for me to say, but at some level they form part of the web of cultural stereotypes that separates the two groups.

There are other grooming and adornment practices as well which serve to distinguish the Muslims from the Tamils in the eastern region. It is considered good (*sunnat*) from an Islamic point of view for Muslim men and women to shave or clip their armpit and pubic hair every forty days in order to ensure that all parts of the body are moistened during bathing to remove Muslim ritual pollution (*mulukku*). Some informants also told me there was a *hadith* against body hair (but not beards) long enough to grasp. I knew a number of older, more traditional Muslim men in the 1970s who had their heads and armpits shaven monthly by a Muslim barber, while there was no corresponding tonsorial practice among the Tamils except to fulfill special Hindu vows and penances. While women of both communities wear pierced earrings, and Tamil women wear nose ornaments, it is forbidden in Islam for Muslim women to pierce the septum. Similarly, unlike traditional Hindu Tamils, Muslim men must not pierce their ears or wear earrings (Ahmad Lebbai 1963:480).

In the sort of intimate observation that only a few of my closest male friends in Akkaraipattu ventured to offer, it was suggested that the substantive focus of everyday pollution anxiety is somewhat different among the Tamils and Moors. While both communities share an aversion to contact with blood, semen, menstrual and childbirth substances, the Tamils have a marked aversion to saliva which is not reciprocated as strongly among the Muslims. Indeed, some ecstatic Muslim Sufi rituals conducted by the local Bawas involve the transfer of sacred power to implements of self-mortification from the breath and saliva of the presiding sheikh or kalifa. The Muslims, on the other hand, seem to have stronger taboos on contact with urine and sexual fluids. Muslim men are taught to take special precautions when they squat to urinate so that no urine touches their sarong or other clothing, a form of contamination which would bar them from the mosque and from Muslim prayers. Some male friends of mine said they would use a porous piece of brick to absorb the last drops of urine, mirroring a Muslim practice also reported in North India (Mehta 2000:86).

Islam requires a full head-bath not only after, but *between*, all acts of sexual intercourse, a rule that can cause some embarrassment when the squeaking sound of one's well-sweep is heard late at night in Moorish neighborhoods.

The most frequent complaints I heard from Tamils concerning the Muslims as a group were that they were politically unreliable (but shrewd in bargaining for alliances), that they were relatively less educated (which was true earlier in the century, but not now), that they lived in unhealthily overcrowded houses and neighborhoods (for example, in Kattankudy, sometimes said to be the most densely-inhabited town in Sri Lanka), that they ate beef (a source of Hindu regret but not religious enmity), and — admittedly a minor point — that they had a fondness for overpowering scents and perfumes (*attar*). The latter is obviously a case of selective criticism, for the Tamils burn strongly pungent camphor resin and apply aromatic sandalwood paste in all of their Hindu rituals.<sup>5</sup>

Muslim stereotypes of the Tamils seemed less voyeuristic about their grooming and sexual practices. Instead, Muslims complained to me about the monopoly of Tamils in the professions and the civil service, a charge more properly directed against the Jaffna and Colombo Tamils, who have historically far outnumbered the Batticaloa Tamils in these career paths. Muslims would acknowledge that, until recent decades, the Tamils had been better educated, both in traditional Tamil culture as well as in the modern professions, but they resented the Tamils' unnecessary arrogance and ingrained attitudes of social superiority. Muslims attributed much of this to the rigidity of the Hindu caste system and to the inegalitarian frame of mind upon which it is based. All Muslims, they assured me, are equal before Allah. Although my fieldwork eventually turned up some very small, hereditarily-ranked, endogamous Moorish sub-groups (*Osta* barber-circumcisers, and *Maulana* descendants of the Prophet), the claim of broad ritual equality among the Muslims remains valid. In a town like Akkaraipattu, however, wealth and socioeconomic class differences seem more pronounced among the Muslims than among the Tamils.<sup>6</sup>

Tamils are stigmatized in the eyes of the Muslims for their propensity to waste time and money on alcohol, although the charge could sometimes be reversed. Finally, although they had little eyewitness knowledge of these matters, the Muslims' opinion of Hindu religious practices was uniformly negative. Tamil Saivism was criticized for being polytheistic, idolatrous, and demonic, and for not being a prophetic Religion of the Book. On this issue, the local Muslims and the Christians definitely saw eye to eye.

### From Local "Mix-Ups" to Extreme Transgressions

Popular memory recounts the many localized Tamil-Muslim riots and civil disturbances (*kulappam*, "mix-up"; *cantai*, "fight") which have plagued communal relations on the east coast throughout the 20th century and probably earlier.<sup>7</sup> Although I directly witnessed no local Tamil-Muslim violence, I did gather oral accounts of such outbreaks. One type of incident was the post-election reprisal, typically an attack upon members of the opposite community for failure to deliver blocs of votes which had been purchased in advance with money or arrack (and sometimes purchased twice, by different candidates). A second type of conflict would arise from an individual provocation, which was perceived as a collective insult to the entire Tamil or Moorish community. When, for example, in the late 1960s a drunken Muslim man allegedly snipped off the braided hair of a Tamil woman who had spurned his advances in the market, an innocent Muslim bystander soon lost his ear, and there were communal ambushes and roadblocks for a week. A year or so later, Muslim youths organized Akkaraipattu's very first, and possibly only, Gandhian-inspired Shramadana community self-help project: a new road allowing Muslim cultivators to circumambulate Tamil villages, thereby evading ambush when they travel to their fields during future communal riots.

A third type of violence is related to the growing competition for land, including scarce residential building sites. The historical tendency over the last 150 years has been for successful Muslims to expand their agricultural landholdings and businesses, while

upwardly mobile Tamils have sold their fields in favor of education and a career in the professions. With the upsurge of warfare between Tamil guerrillas and Sri Lankan security forces in the region since 1983, Muslim seizure of agricultural lands abandoned by fleeing Tamil refugees and reprisal depredations by Tamils of exposed Muslim fields have further enflamed the inter-ethnic situation (UTHR(J) Report 7, 1991; Report 11, 1993). Because of the determination of Muslims to reside together in established enclaves and wards, the pressure on adjoining Tamil neighborhoods has resulted in both irresistible buy-outs and violent evictions of Tamil residents by their Muslim neighbors. For example, lower caste Tamils have been forcibly driven out of their neighborhoods in the Kalmunai-Sainthamaruthu area, and Muslims have quickly moved in (UTHR(J) Report 7, 1991: 49-55, and my own fieldnotes). Based upon published accounts of Hindu-Muslim rioting in North India, I had initially assumed that Tamil-Muslim conflicts in Sri Lanka would be sparked by religious provocations: Muslim cow slaughter, Hindu processions near mosques, and the like. However, the actual incidents I recorded suggest that "religious" issues have not been a trigger, nor even a major underlying cause, of local Muslim-Tamil violence on the east coast. Even when religious sites have been targeted, such as the destruction of the Pattirakali temple in Akkaraipattu by Muslims (with the acquiescence of the Sri Lankan Army) after the withdrawal of the Indian Peace-Keeping Force in 1989, the underlying motive appears to have been a desire to expand the boundaries of the Moorish residential neighborhood near which the Hindu temple was situated (McGilvray 1997).

From the very start of the Eelam conflict in the early 1980s, communal interests represented by the Sinhala majority parties repeatedly sought to deepen the schism between the Tamils and Muslims by deliberately provoking violence between them (Ali 1986-87:164; UTHR(J) Report 7, 1991; personal fieldwork data 1993 and 1995). Even so, when the Eelam War first broke out in the 1980s, Tamil militant groups, including the LTTE, were able to induct some Muslim fighters from the Eastern and Northern Provinces on

the basis of regional loyalty to a "Tamil-speaking" homeland and their shared outrage at the indiscriminate massacres, mass abductions, rapes, and grisly extra-judicial executions carried out by the Sri Lankan security forces. This militant collaboration between Tamil and Muslim youths, with its echo of the historic Moor-Mukkuvar alliance celebrated in Batticaloa legend, was shattered in 1990 when the eastern command of the LTTE, acting on local grudges and resentments, launched a series of attacks and pogroms against Muslims, including the well-publicized Kattankudy Mosque massacre (Sivaram 1991, 1992; McGilvray 1997). In response, government-armed Muslim Home Guards were recruited in some Moorish settlements, and these Muslim militias have been accused of vendetta operations against local Tamils. Also working against Tamil-Muslim cordiality have been the various armed and thuggish "ex-militant" Tamil groups (e.g., PLOTE, TELO, EPRLF) who have implemented the Sri Lankan Security Forces' strategy of divide and rule in the Batticaloa region since the withdrawal of the Indian Peacekeeping Force in 1989 (Krishna 1994:312). The depth of misunderstanding and miscalculation was illustrated by a speech given in 1990 by LTTE spokesman Y. Yogi, scolding the Muslims for failing to properly identify themselves as Islamic Tamils and justifying their mass expulsion from Jaffna and Mannar as punishment for their alleged ethnic betrayal (UTHR(J) Report 7, 1991:42-43, Sivaram 1992, Hennayake 1993, Hasbullah 1996). Tragically, this was Ramanathan's original "ethnological" thesis yet again, but this time enforced with Kalashnikov rifles and a brutal agenda of ethnic cleansing.

A low point in Muslim-Tamil relations definitely occurred in 1990, but to leave the story there would be too pessimistic. Cultural membership is always contextual and historically conditioned, and a great deal of new history is presently being made in Sri Lanka. Several modern observers have suggested that the Moors of Sri Lanka are now starting to differentiate themselves into several distinct sub-regional and linguistic communities within the island, the most significant of which would differentiate the one-third of all

Muslims concentrated in the Tamil-speaking agricultural east from the remaining two-thirds who live widely dispersed in the Sinhala-speaking areas of the south-west (Sivathamby 1987; Ali 1992; Ismail 1995). However, it is only on the east coast that the Moors constitute a geographically concentrated ethnic population capable of controlling a significant bloc of parliamentary constituencies and local governing councils. For these Moors, the prospect of being submerged within a single Tamil nationalist homeland, especially one demographically dominated by (as they would see it) chauvinistic Jaffna Tamils, is not particularly inviting. Similarly, while some of the younger Batticaloa Tamils, particularly those who have fought as LTTE cadres on the battle lines of Vavuniya and Elephant Pass, may have forged a closer pan-Eelam identification with their Jaffna comrades in the heat of war, members of the older generation of Tamils in the Batticaloa region continue to voice suspicions and resentments against the northerners. In other words, the east continues to be an unpredictable ethnic crucible.

### **Tamil and Muslim Identities after Two Decades of War**

A number of scholars have begun to document the personal traumas and cultural resources of both innocent victims and active combatants in the Batticaloa region (Lawrence 1997, 1998, 2000, and in press; McGilvray 1997, Thangarajah 1997, Thiruchandran 1999, Trawick 1997, Whitaker 1997, Hesbullah 2000), but the fate of older cultural practices, social institutions, and collective identities remains to be seen. What has become of the matrilocal marriage and family patterns of the Batticaloa Tamils and Moors during the nearly two decades since the outbreak of the Eelam Wars? What changes have occurred in popular religious practices as a result of the violence and collective insecurity? How have the Tamil diaspora and the availability of modern telecommunications media affected life in the east? Because violence and security problems make long-term fieldwork difficult and hazardous, the full answers to such questions are by no means clear. However any solution to Sri

Lanka's ethnic conflict will be affected by the social resilience, cultural adaptability, and political wisdom of the Tamil and Moorish communities in this multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-religious region. In this concluding section, I offer some impressions based upon short-term fieldwork in Akkaraipattu and in other parts of the Batticaloa region in the summers of 1993, 1995, and 2001.

### **A Climate of Fear**

When, after a fifteen year absence, I returned to the Batticaloa region in 1993, the atmosphere of suspicion and fear was absolutely palpable in my interactions with the local Tamils, but markedly less so among the Muslims. The government, eager to cultivate good relations with the Muslims and anxious to discourage them from collaborating politically with the Tamils, has kept a lighter hand upon the Moorish settlements of the east. The economic power of Muslim merchants trading between the east coast and Colombo must also be a significant factor in this situation, both in terms of their relations with politicians and the government security apparatus, and in terms of their pragmatic dealings with the LTTE. In the Tamil areas in 1993, the security forces were using masked informers to identify detainees, and people spoke only in hushed tones about the STF, the Army, the LTTE, and the mercenary Tamil militant groups then collaborating with the government. I sensed this pervasive climate of fear again in 1995, but in 2001 it seemed to have abated somewhat, at least in the areas I visited, which were all located on the eastern, government-controlled side of the Batticaloa lagoon.

### **Separation and Accommodation**

One of the most obvious effects of the Eelam struggle on the east coast has been to further polarize the formal political divisions between the Tamils and the Muslims. Both groups now appear to have accepted the premise that there are two distinct, independent Tamil-speaking communities in Batticaloa, each deserving of its own political representatives, territorial boundaries, and social services. This can be seen, for example, in the creation of two

totally separate Tamil and Muslim *pradeshya sabhas* out of a formerly unitary local government council in Akkaraipattu. Tamil trust in Muslim politicians, and Muslim trust in Tamil politicians, is generally low but not totally absent. In fact, although vengeful memories of fratricidal ethnic betrayals are still alive in popular consciousness, I was struck by the down-to-earth attitudes of many Batticaloa survivors who recognize the legitimate grievances of the opposite ethnic group, whether it be the Tamils or the Muslims. Many of the Muslims I have spoken with since 1993 seem to wish the Tamils well in their quest for some form of self-determination and political autonomy, but they vehemently oppose being hijacked or punished in the name of the Eelam cause. Many people share my astonishment at the LTTE's brutality and short-sightedness in their relations with the Batticaloa Muslims — as well as with the Muslims of Mutur, Mannar, and Jaffna — who otherwise might have provided solidarity and support for a geographically and linguistically united, but ethnically and religiously pluralistic, Eelam or Northeastern Province. In this case, it is not only the Sri Lankan government's provocative post-Independence peasant colonization schemes that have placed a barrier to peaceful multiculturalism in the eastern region, but mindless Tiger zealotry as well. Meanwhile, in those areas where the Muslims have been able to reap the benefits of their political clout with the central government, Tamil civilians are eager to share the Muslims' good fortune. In Akkaraipattu, for example, Tamil boys and girls now regularly cycle across town to attend computer classes in the Muslim neighborhoods at new private "tuition shops" with names like Bill Gates Technology. Both Tamil and Muslim students now attend the newly built Southeastern University campus at Oluvil, an impressive trophy of the influence of Mr. Ashroff's SLMC in Colombo.

### **Diaspora, Dowry, and Matrilocal Marriage**

The search for foreign employment and the diaspora of fugitive Tamils escaping the violence of the eastern war zone over the past two decades have created a situation in which nearly everyone has

a relative or acquaintance currently or previously living abroad. Both Muslims and Tamils frequently obtain work in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf emirates, but the Tamils are more likely than the Muslims to have relatives permanently living in London, Toronto, or New York. This is because the pressure to emigrate from the Muslim settlements is not nearly as strong as it is in the Tamil areas, where members of the civilian population have experienced repeated massacre, rape, and torture since the mid-1980s. The changes wrought by expatriate influence and money on Batticaloa's social structure may prove to be quite significant in the long run. In 2001 I happened upon a lavish Hindu temple wedding in Akkaraipattu, and I learned that the groom had briefly returned from his lucrative position in Switzerland to marry his local sweetheart, who was a member of a different caste. The Muslim neighborhoods of Akkaraipattu are burgeoning with new houses being constructed with money earned in the Middle East.

Both the Eelam war, which has tragically decimated many otherwise eligible young Tamil men in the marriage pool, and the diaspora, which has relocated the most upwardly mobile Tamil men to Europe or North America, have had a disastrous effect upon the traditional matrilocal marriage and dowry system. The dowry levels for the most desirable grooms are now beyond the means of many Tamil farming families, and in some cases the boy will refuse to accept dowry land or a dowry house in a dangerous location exposed to LTTE or Army violence. The very idea of liquidating family real estate and moving to a larger city to satisfy the demands of a squeamish son-in-law undermines the basic cultural premises of the Batticaloa matrilocal family system, especially the physical proximity of mothers and their married daughters, and a wife's shared ownership of paddy lands. I know of one attractive university-trained Tamil teacher bride who was unable to find a suitable matrilocal groom until the age of 42, and even then it was a hybrid Mukkuvar-Karaiyar, Hindu-Catholic marriage. I am told that when Tamil and Muslim marriages are being arranged nowadays, the dowry negotiations and the traditional gift and food exchanges

between the two families are rapidly accelerated so that the transaction can be clinched in a few weeks.

### Popular Religion as a Response to Collective Violence

When I visited the region in 1993, local memories of the Army massacre of Tamil civilians at a Kannaki Temple near Kokkaddichchola, and the LTTE attack on Muslims worshipping at a mosque in Kattankudy, were still vivid. I had expected to see a great many temples, churches, and mosques damaged and in disrepair because of violence and forced neglect. However, while several shrines were totally demolished, I was struck by the fact that most of the religious establishments of the Batticaloa region were gleaming with new plaster and fresh paint. They looked larger, brighter, and better than I ever recall seeing in the 1970s, a peaceful period when the main Hindu temple in Akkaraipattu was ritually moribund and positively shabby looking. The dangers posed by the Eelam war seem to have sparked a widespread resurgence of interest in the fulfillment of religious vows and the completion of temple and mosque renovation projects, helping to insure that divine protection will be there when it is needed. The management plan of both temples and mosques nowadays often includes a president, a secretary, and a treasurer, but the boards of trustees are still constituted by traditional matrilineal clan elders. It appears that hereditary titles of rank and authority can coexist with newer bureaucratic-style roles, and that the younger generation has not rejected the clan-based system as old-fashioned or outdated. The general pattern of festival sponsorship by means of allocating ritual "shares" and responsibilities to specific caste or matrilineal clan groups is still very much in operation, as is the de facto adjustment of local "traditions" to accommodate the shifting status and power relationships between these groups.

At Hindu temples, large amounts of money have been raised to build higher *gopuram* towers and new shrines for subsidiary deities in the temple compounds. I also noticed many bright acrylic

murals of Hindu gods painted on the external walls of temple sanctuaries. While this may just be a new artistic trend, these prominent divine portraits also spread the protective vision (*darshan*) of the god outward in all directions and at all times, rather than keeping it concealed in the sanctum, to be revealed only during puja ceremonies. The government security forces do prowl through Hindu temples on a regular basis, and in fact my only tense encounter with an STF commando patrol in the summer of 2001 occurred at a brightly painted temple to Pattirakali. There is no doubt that Hindu vows to trance-inducing *amman* goddesses such as Pattirakali, Mariyamman, and Pecciyamman, and consultations with popular individual possession-trance oracles, have undergone a dramatic increase in the course of the ethnic war, a phenomenon vividly described in the work of Patricia Lawrence (1997, 1998, 2000, and in press).

In the Muslim communities of the east coast, the construction and reconstruction of local mosques has also become highly visible everywhere. In part, this is a response to the rapidly growing size of Muslim mosque congregations that must be able to assemble together for Friday *jumma* prayers, but it is also a response to the desire for a stronger visual connection to the Middle Eastern mosque styles more commonly found in the Muslim world. Sadly enough for Sri Lanka's architectural heritage, this neo-Arabian remodeling process has meant the demolition of older, traditional-style mosques, some of which were both distinctive and charming, having clear resemblances to those of coastal Kerala and Tamilnadu. In some places, for example at the Grand Mosque in Akkaraipattu, the older teak-pillared prayer hall has been preserved, encased within a new outer structure with the desired arches, domes, and minarets. Smaller mosques and shrines known as *taikkyas* have also been multiplying in Muslim villages and neighborhoods, some of them associated with specific Islamic reformist congregations, and others constructed by increasingly popular Sufi orders under the leadership of local sheikhs and kalifas.



Although the itinerant Bawa faqirs, who perform ecstatic displays with spikes and other sharp implements, have always been based primarily in the Eastern Province, the growth of newer types of Sufism in the last 25 years among the general population is an unexpected development, given the simultaneous spread of Islamic fundamentalist movements such as the Jamaat-i-Islami and Tabliqi Jamaat that have typically opposed Sufism and the veneration of saints. I think it is possible that the increased popularity of mystical and emotional forms of Sufi devotion is itself a reaction, or alternative, to the rigidity and spartan nature of reformist Islam. Sufi orders in eastern Sri Lanka, which have historically had few native-born saints to venerate, are now developing their own local cohorts of living sheikhs, who will eventually become enshrined saints. One Indian Sufi leader from Androth Island in the Lakshadweep archipelago has designated an Akkaraipattu man to be his successor, and the older sheikh has agreed to be buried in a pre-built dargah tomb-shrine in Akkaraipattu after his death. In the dangerous, guerrilla and Army-infested agricultural zone between coastal Tamil and Muslim settlements and inland Sinhala Buddhist villages nearer to Amparai, I found that the tomb of a new Muslim saint had recently been "discovered" at an isolated rural Muslim village mosque. Such Muslim saints, like local Hindu deities, are believed to be capable of protecting houses and fields from wild animals, but they may also provide protection from the agents of ethnic violence and terror.

### Media and Popular Discourse

As one typically finds throughout the island (except for the war-bound North) families with relatives abroad now usually have at least indirect access to international phone service, fax, or email. Television broadcasting and videocassette distribution have made wider access to regional and global media possible for almost everyone. Friends of mine estimated that television sets would be found in nearly 80% of homes in contemporary Akkaraipattu, a town fully caught up in Sri Lanka's cricket mania. While such developments are part of a world-wide trend, there have also been

some interesting changes in localized Batticaloa identities. On the Tamil side, one of the more surprising developments is the articulation, by local amateur historians and caste proponents, of a martial heritage for the Mukkuvars. In an unexpected case of postmodern reflexivity, some Mukkuvars in the Kokkaddichchola area have cited my own previously published work on the early colonial-era Mukkuvar chiefships (1982b) to support their claims for a contemporary Kshatriya-style warrior identity. At the opposite end of the Hindu caste hierarchy, the Paraiyar drummers in Akkaraipattu, about whom I have also written (1983), now totally reject their hereditary obligations to the higher castes and no longer perform any drumming services at Hindu funerals. Instead, bereaved high caste families must resort to playing recorded Hindu hymns over portable loudspeaker systems, and the Hindu funeral priest — formerly a leader of the local barber caste — has been replaced by an imported Upcountry Tamil barber from Badulla.

### Conclusion

The eastern region of the island remains an ethnic crucible out of which a political link essential to resolving Sri Lanka's conflict must still be forged. Over the past century, a combination of colonially-engineered ethnic competition, opportunistic party politics, and eventually civil war preempted whatever goodwill might have developed between the two groups under more foresighted leadership. However, because their common geographical and historical destiny offers them little choice, the Tamils and Muslims in the Batticaloa region must eventually come to a renewed appreciation of their shared cultural roots, as well as an honest appraisal of their past prejudices. The cultural, political, and economic basis for a respectful inter-ethnic community of interest between the Tamils and the Muslims is still there, but in the wake of massacres and reprisals, expulsions, displacements, land thefts, and masked betrayals, both deep compassion and true ethnic statesmanship on all sides will be needed to nurture it.

## (Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup> A more literary caste designation is Mukkukar, referring to Guhan, Rama's ferryman in the Ramayana.

<sup>2</sup> There were both Sinhala and Tamil Buddhists in the ancient and medieval period (Indrapala 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Because "Moor" honors and preserves some of the historical and cultural distinctiveness of Sri Lanka's Muslim community, I have used both terms interchangeably in this essay.

<sup>4</sup> According to a source highly respected among Muslims in Sri Lanka, Imam Shafi himself encouraged the consumption of meat for masculine strength (Ahmad Lebbai 1963:467).

<sup>5</sup> Mappillai Alim's treatise commends the use of perfume before attending Friday prayers and at other times as well (Ahmad Lebbai 1963:274, 467). I found that long-lasting, concentrated attar scent was routinely applied to guests and participants at many Moorish events simply to enhance the sense of ritual occasion.

<sup>6</sup> Neighboring Muslim towns such as Nintavur and Sammanturai are said to have even greater concentrations of landed wealth in the hands of Moorish podiarys.

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, E.B. Denham, the Government Agent in Batticaloa, reported "no trouble of any kind in this Province" at the time of the 1915 Sinhala-Muslim riots (Denham 1915: E5).

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