
The root of Sri Lanka's turmoil.

MYTHCONCEPTIONS

By William McGowan

The violence in Sri Lanka, of which the assassination of President Ranasinghe Premadasa at a May Day rally is the most recent and unhappy example, has been described as a conflict of ancient hatreds between the Sinhalese Buddhist majority and the Hindu Tamil minority. In this view, Sinhalese opposition to a separatist homeland called Tamil Eelam is an extension of struggles dating back more than 2,000 years, when Buddhist kings fought off Tamil invaders. Others, however, see the fighting as a more recent creation, the result of Sinhalese efforts to assert their primacy over the Tamils after Ceylon (the country was renamed in 1972) was given its independence from Britain in 1948.

While the second explanation is more accurate, there's a twist. The Sinhalese have used ancient religious myths to fuel modern enmities. As in many ethnically riven societies such as Yugoslavia and India, a sense of long-standing communal animosity in Sri Lanka has been manufactured to serve contemporary political ends. However historically dubious, the mythology exerts a powerful hold over the Sinhalese nationalist imagination and has been used to justify their resistance to Tamil demands.

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Composed in the sixth century A.D. by Sinhalese monks, these myths, contained in a sacred Buddhist text called the Mahavamsa, or the Great Chronicle, describe the Sinhalese as the Buddha's chosen people. According to the story, the Buddha foresaw the demise of Buddhism in India, where it originated, and a bright future for it in Sri Lanka. The faith would be preserved by *aryans* from northern India, whom he would steer there divinely. After ridding the island of supernatural demons (the Yakkas), the Buddha engineered the rescue of Vijaya, a renegade Bengali prince who had been set adrift with 700 followers in unseaworthy boats in the fourth century B.C. "In Lanka, O Lord of Gods . . . shall my religion be established and flourish. Therefore carefully protect him and his followers, and Lanka." Several centuries later the Buddha's prophecy was fulfilled when Asoka, the Buddhist emperor of India, sent an emissary to convert Vijaya's progeny—the Sinhalese people—who made Buddhism the state religion. In this way, Theravada Buddhism was spared destruction from the forces of resurgent Hinduism in India at the beginning of the eighth century A.D.

Later chapters in the Mahavamsa tell how invading Dravidian hordes from south India under the leadership of Elaru, a powerful Tamil king, took control of the Sinhalese throne and allowed Buddhist institutions to wither. In response Duttugemunu, a young Sinhalese prince, raised an army from a splinter kingdom in the south and marched north to reconquer the island. "Not for glory, but for the religion do I wage this battle," declared the pious Duttugemunu, who carried a spear tipped with a relic of the Buddha and was accompanied by 500 monks. After a bloody war, Duttugemunu vanquished Elaru in single-handed combat atop elephants. The victory marked the beginning of the Sinhalese Golden Age, which lasted from the second to the thirteenth century A.D.

Though the epic reinforces the current Sinhalese-Tamil conflict as an ancient genocidal struggle, the groups have lived peacefully for most of their history. Wars were motivated by power, not religion. Indeed, there was considerable interracial mixing and cultural cross-fertilization. The last king of Kandy, for example, captured by the British in the early 1800s, was part of a Tamil dynasty tapped when Sinhalese royal bloodlines

could not produce a suitable successor. And Tamil Hinduism and Sinhalese Buddhism were highly syncretic—deities, rituals and caste structures were mixed and matched.

In fact, for most of the time, the Mahavamsa had little mass appeal, since it was written in Pali, the language of classical Buddhist study, understood only by monks. Not until the mid-nineteenth century, when it was first popularized by Sinhalese nationalists, did it become a tool to rally against British colonialism. (Ironically, the tale was translated from Pali into English by a scholarly British civil servant.) The British had dismissed Buddhism and other aspects of Sinhalese culture as manifestations of “Oriental barbarism” and had favored Christianized Ceylonese, as well as Tamils, in the distribution of status and privilege. When turn-of-the-century Sinhalese nationalists like Anagarika Dharmapala—the name means Defender of the Faith—urged countrymen to “Let the Mahavamsa be your guide,” a new, more militant Sinhalese Buddhist identity began to coalesce.

Even then, it was only with the elections of 1956, which brought the fiery Sinhalese nationalist Solomon West Ridgeway Dias Bandaranaike to power on promises to restore “the just and proper order” of pre-colonial Ceylon, that the country’s ethnic fabric began to unravel. Although the Oxford-educated Bandaranaike embodied the Westernized elite he campaigned against, he rode the myths of Sinhalese identity and manifest destiny to victory by portraying himself as the Great Deliverer incarnate. “It was not right,” he thundered in one speech given in the ruins of the sacred city of Anuredhapura, “that a servile race should inhabit the same locality which their ancestors inhabited in power and glory.”

What incidental damage his demagogic appeals might wreak on relations with the Tamils could, Bandaranaike assumed, be repaired once he was in power. But the tide of nationalism got away from him: in 1959, after the election, he was assassinated by radical Buddhist monks after reneging on a campaign promise to make Sinhala the country’s only official language. After his death, the Sinhalese majority used its uninvited power to “reconquer” the island, à la Duttugemunu, through government policies and legislation designed to favor it over the Tamils.

The result of such policies? A generation of disaffected lower-middle-class Tamil youth, grist for the emerging Tamil Tiger militancy. Not only did the Mahavamsa mentality ignite the Tamil opposition, it fanned the flames. For many Sinhalese the Tigers were the reincarnation of the Tamil armies that had attacked the ancient Sinhalese kingdoms. This was an association that the Tamils encouraged: they used as their emblem the tiger, the symbol of the ancient (Tamil) Chola kingdoms of south India.

The myth’s ability to hamper peace was most evident in the late 1980s, when ultranationalist Sinhalese youth in the People’s Liberation Front (JVP) almost brought

down the government for signing the Indo-Lankan Peace Accord. To many Sinhalese, the pact, which sent 75,000 Indian peacekeeping troops into the country and eventually led to the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991, represented an “invasion by invitation,” and would only help Tamils achieve their goal of “pushing the Sinhalese into the sea.” Quite self-consciously, the leader of the JVP, Rohanna Wijeweera, presented himself as the Sinhalese people’s savior. Even his first name had a messianic resonance, invoking the Sinhalese kingdom of Ruhuna, the land of mythic heroes like Duttugemunu.

Mahavamsa-ism encouraged even mainstream politicians like Premadasa to resist the accord. One of the ruling United National Party’s most ardent nationalists with a keen appreciation for the power of myth in the Sinhalese psyche, Premadasa refused to denounce the JVP, even as thousands of UNP party officials and functionaries were being killed by its assassins. In a monograph he published about Duttugemunu in the late 1980s, the politician dedicated his book to “the patriotic youth of Sri Lanka who have pledged to the end of their lives the territorial integrity of the motherland.”

Though he was elected president, the JVP rejected Premadasa’s overtures: by this point it would accept nothing less than a radical nationalist order, based on Sinhalese purity. In response to the JVP insurgency, Premadasa went after it with a vengeance, going so far as to employ death squads. Perhaps as many as 30,000 Sinhalese died before the party was decapitated with the arrest and killing of its leadership in 1990. The president’s power enabled him to offer a kind of federalist arrangement to the Tamils, which was further than any other Sinhalese politician had been able to go. Chances are it would never have worked, though. Premadasa was probably assassinated by a Tamil bomber, which leads one to believe that the Tigers would not have gone along with a peace plan. And even if they had, there was no guarantee the Sinhalese would agree. Among the Sinhalese in the patriotic south, where the diet of Buddhist myth has always been the richest, Premadasa was seen as a race traitor; any accord would have eventually met with resistance born in the name of “defending the motherland.”

The revival of traditional identities after the cultural and social damage of colonialism has been a necessary step in the evolution of many former Third World colonies. The trouble with the revival of traditional Buddhist identity in Sri Lanka is that it deprived the newly independent country of an inclusive national identity, better suited to its multiethnic reality. Sinhalese nationalists used an ancient myth to restore what they said was a traditional social and political order that gave them pride of place over other groups. What satisfaction they got from that, however, has surely been outweighed by a war that seems to go on forever.

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