



THE NEED TO USE TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE IN LANKAN PEACEBUILDING

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Abstract

Traditional knowledge is linked to Sri Lankan heritage. It ranges from soil and water conservation, farming techniques, medicinal science, diet, engineering, construction, ancient educational priorities, language studies, martial arts, entrepreneurship know-how, and spiritual traditions. These are also referred to as Intangible Heritage by UNESCO. This study aimed to identify the potential of traditional knowledge in creating empathy between Sinhala and Tamil communities in the context of creating tradition-based solutions to the current national economic crisis. In this study, the primary narrative given voice to is that of the Sinhalese to understand their fears and aspirations as well as the potential to use their own narratives pertaining to traditional knowledge as tools of peacebuilding, although their narratives may appear on the surface to be ultra-nationalistic or radical. The methodology of the study was to follow a range of commentaries of Sinhala patriotism-based WhatsApp groups to identify keywords and phrases connecting traditional knowledge/heritage with either conflict or peace. The main finding was the core message given out concerning the destruction of traditional knowledge and self-respect of the Sinhalese by the colonizers and equating it with the current-day policies. Hence the conclusion arrived at was that using what these Sinhala activists demanded, reinstating their religious priorities, ancient educational norms, traditional hydraulic systems, indigenous farming, and medical system, could be strategically used to build peace between Sinhalese and Tamils by linking similar traditional knowledge patterns as practised.

Keywords: intangible cultural heritage, traditional farming, traditional knowledge, traditional medical systems

Introduction

The term 'peacebuilding', a buzzword in international non-governmental organisations today, was created in 1975 by Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung. Galtung provided an integrated framework for delving into the humanistic purpose of building peace in the world. His work linked aspects ranging from the sociological lens of the environment, history of civilisations, sustainable development strategies, and human rights (Ercoskun & Burak, 2021).

In this backdrop, this paper argues that this modern theoretic of peace has failed in the world because it largely becomes a career path for the elite in societies of developing countries, thereby creating a vacuum in the authentic tradition-focused representation of hostile communities. It further argues that the religious-ethnic phenomenon as seen in Sri Lanka is connected to social (ethnic) identity and that identity is fundamentally linked to that which is traditional, indigenous, and heritage driven, which has practical knowledge-linked significance.



Although the Tamil civilians of Sri Lanka no longer represent this stance of a separate State, the prevention of peace as an ideology is triggered in the minds of the Sinhalese, based on the heritage of 'Sinhale,' one of the ancient traditional names for the country which was the parlance of the Sinhalese majority for the homeland. Although many in the Western peacebuilding sector may not understand it, the name Sinhale did not indicate that it was in any way 'racist' as no such notions were held as such by ancient Sinhala kings who enrolled even foreigners in their kingdoms, (Dassanayake, Rohitha, Arabs in Serandib, 20018). One of Sri Lanka's veteran heritage scholars Prof. Nimal de Silva points out that the armed conflict between the Sinhala king Dutugamunu and Elara cannot in any way be seen as an ethnicity-based conflict relevant to Lankan Tamils because Elara was an invading Chola from India and the justification for combat was based on this identity, De Silva, Nimal, Sunday Observer.

Methodology

First-hand discussions, interviews, and friendships were made with some of the Sinhala 'nationalistic' sub-groups, which on social media pursue the goal of establishing the way of life, traditional knowledge, and heritage practices before colonization before colonization that began in 1505 with the Portuguese. The Sinhala heritage they refer to is largely intangible such as the ancient Sinhala medical science (Sinhala wedakama) that predates Ayurveda, the traditional farming methods of the Sinhalese, and the Buddhist identity that contravenes some of the Western norms of life that have established itself in Sri Lanka, such as the casino culture that is webbed into local tourism. The study's approach was ethnographic where much time was spent on internalizing the discourses and commentaries of these groups that focused very heavily on the critique of the lack of traditional knowledge-based policy for handling the COVID pandemic. In addition, direct participation in social media-related events and face-to-face seminars on the use of traditional knowledge to enhance Sinhala identity was carried out. At times the researcher's role as a peacebuilding practitioner was carried out parallel in mainstream settings responsible for Buddhist culture. These were used to research deeply into how peacebuilding occurs naturally once a basic setting is provided through the route of traditional knowledge. One example was the traditional food and medicine-based trade exhibition organized by the All-Ceylon Buddhist Congress (ACBC) a practitioner of national unity, this researcher facilitated five traditional knowledge-based entrepreneurs of the North to be represented at the trade fair of the Buddhist Congress, selling their products alongside the Sinhalese. This provided a base for this researcher to juxtapose the holistic possibility to create links within the realm of heritage, culture, and tradition while catering to the Sinhalese yearning, as seen in WhatsApp and social media, to restore their traditions as part of the country's traditional knowledge base. Therefore, the research design was not rhetoric and theoretic-based but featured the actual lived-in experience of dissecting what is commonly taken at face value to be 'racist' or 'ultra-nationalistic.'



Results and Discussions

The result of the study showed a major vacuum in the use of traditional/intangible cultural heritage-driven knowledge in national policy (health systems, education, authentic sustainability, farming, and financial policy) as is in the peacebuilding sector which Western-based humanitarian agencies drive. This was found to be a major aggravator of the sentiments of the Sinhalese, who were not represented in English speaking elite. Western culture adopted circuits and there was a major disparity between what international agency influenced peacebuilding projects in Sri Lanka and the actual core need. The core need was the authentic linking of the non-elite masses which consist of the majority of Tamils and Sinhalese. What was found to be important was to create a sense of national identity that is not seen as a hybrid influence of any international agenda that could be equated with neo-imperialism but a holistic, genuine peacebuilding practice that is enshrined in the traditional identity and knowledge so valued by the Sinhalese and Tamils. As pointed out in the sections above, this system of knowledge was found to be useful in the current context of food and medicine scarcity and the need for dollar conservation.

Based on the results of this study, it is argued that in the Sri Lankan context, the international and local peacebuilding sectors have missed identifying some of the root causes of identity issues, especially among the majority Sinhalese community that view non-Sinhala Buddhists as ‘the other.’ The resurgence of this nationalism and the expectation of a ‘saviour’ for the Sinhalese in the form of ‘Diyasen Prince’ saw a peak during the COVID-19 virus and continues to date. During the COVID-19 virus, the authentic traditional knowledge/linked intangible heritage practitioners (as opposed to English-educated theoreticians) staunchly protested moves of neo-imperialism through the Western medical industry to force vaccination of Sri Lankans. Although vaccination was being promoted for all Sri Lankans, segments of Sinhalese, saw it primarily as a conspiracy to distort the genes of Sinhalese with untested vaccines. Also strongly voiced were the calls for the priorities of the hydraulic water systems, reviving the hundreds of traditional varieties of rice, stopping the needless food imports, doing away with over-dependency on Western medicine, and allowing traditional physicians of the Sinhala Wedakam tradition to restore the immunity of the nation. However, there was no opposition or protest against using Siddha or Unani traditional medicine for COVID with some of the traditional knowledge-promoting Sinhala nationalist groups supporting such a move. This was identified by this researcher as a key window of opportunity in peacebuilding using traditional knowledge and in February 2022, supported by ONUR and facilitated by the Northern Governor Secretariat, this researcher organized a group of Sinhalese practitioners of arts/heritage/traditional knowledge to visit Jaffna and arranged for the launch of three key works related to art, poetry, and drama that spoke of traditional lifestyles of the Tamil community.



In many of the WhatsApp groups researched for this study it was noted that where the flag and the name of the country were concerned, for the past two years in particular there have been increased calls for names such as Siwhela or Sinhale or Thun Sinhale to be used as the name of the country.

Using these as windows of opportunity for clarity this researcher used the media for analyzing from a heritage lens the practical meaning of the words such as Sinhale, as used to identify Sri Lanka in ancient times and clarified with detailed interviews from Sinhala heritage scholars that the term Sinhale or Hela indicated the name of the land and included everybody who lived in it. There were windows of opportunity for peacebuilding even within such a scenario of current polarization and suspicion. Many of these Sinhala nationalist lobbyists agreed when questioned whether as in the time of ancient Sinhala kings, the ancient Tamils of this nation and the Muslims who settled after they came for trade, could be referred to as occupants of ‘Sinhale’ or ‘Siwhela.’ In a detailed conversation with them what unravels is not hate but a heartfelt need to restore the Sinhalese and the nation in which they occupy, the status, honor, and recognition received to tradition and resources prior to colonization which destroyed it using drastic measures. Some argue that the modern human rights framework is pitched to collude with neo-imperialism and undermine small countries by permanently destabilizing them.

This is the verbatim account of Anoj Suranjeewa de Silva, a traditional physician in the Sinhala tradition who actively promotes establishing ‘Hela Wedakama’ of the Sinhalese in the land but respects Siddha and Unani forms of traditional medicine. Promoting doing away with democracy and seeing as a tool of manipulation introduced by the British Suranjeewa holds that all of the problems with regard to ethnic riots and conflict emerged only after the British divide and rule policy.

Below is an excerpt from a YouTube presentation of traditional physician Suranjeewa de Silva:

“What are we Sinhalese known for today? We are known internationally as oppressors of Tamils and Muslims and those who are non-Buddhists. Yet, the Buddhist heritage of this nation is witness to the fact that there were no ethnic-based riots until the British arrived in this country. They carefully structured the riots through their cunning divide-and-rule policy. Buddhism is a nonviolent philosophy and should be the nation's identity without any trouble made for the Tamils, Muslims or Christians. They are the Hela people of this land too. Anyone who accepts this land is a Hela citizen. Elara cannot be seen as a Sri Lankan Tamil. We cannot use the Elara war to the ethnic conflict with the Tamils. Elara was an invader. We have waged war on invaders of the past and will do so for invaders of the future as well.”



Hence, this paper shows that the route to contemporary peacebuilding in ancient civilisations such as Sri Lanka requires a non-elite, credible understanding of the psyche of the Sinhalese who see elite Sinhala leaders (although they too are identified largely as nationalists) as ‘enemies’ of the nation and who have ruined it through corruption and selling the country to multinationals.

Conclusions and Contributions

Having covered Sri Lanka’s peace process from 2002 to 2005 as a journalist and foreign correspondent, directly interacting with those involved in Sri Lanka’s 30-year-old conflict, and having worked in the peacebuilding training sector with foreign and local stakeholders, a conclusion I have arrived at alongside my personal journey towards spirituality is that a subject such as peacebuilding cannot be learned or taught in classrooms or training sessions. Human prejudice, love, compassion, hate and forgiveness are vast, paradoxical tapestry tapestries that exist within the heart of every saint and every ‘terrorist,’ and anyone falling between these two categories. It is this world, its histories, and its politics that have created these categories of people. Thereby the route to understanding is only through the heart.

In my interviewing of diverse personalities who are seen as ‘problematic’ or ‘terrorists’ or ‘heroes’ or ‘racists’ depending on who is viewing them and including a vast number of people at various levels who are direct or indirect stakeholders of the socio-political-war peace dimension within the past 20 years such as Nadesan, the police chief of the LTTE, Anton Balasingham, theoretician of the LTTE, and in 2019 Ven. Gnanasara Thero of the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), Ven. Ratana Thero, over twenty former LTTE cadres and their family members, as well as some Sri Lankan politicians, have moved away from the typical journalistic or academic type of interviewing to a type of questioning that will usher in retrospection from the interviewee.

Therefore, in all recent attempts at what are seemingly journalistic or academic research-based interviews, I have attempted to see through the heart of these individuals to find out the hidden core of ‘absolute goodness’ which I staunchly believe every human being holds in the depths of their being, sometimes as secret as the hidden shine of a diamond before it is polished. To find this out I often frame my questions in a very non-clinical manner, influenced by my personal spiritual search for the common One Truth embedded in all religious traditions. This pattern was strongly followed in this study on; The need to use traditional knowledge in Lankan peacebuilding.

In every peacebuilding event I have been to and even those I myself organized when I was working within an institutionalised framework of Western-controlled peacebuilding, there was only a culture of highlighting conflict or issues in the total absence of the stakeholders to the conflict. It is to change this that this study focused on understanding the comments by segments of Sinhala



nationalists rooted in the yearning for a pre-colonial past that the Sinhalese enjoyed and where the study looked at the opportunities for peacebuilding within these narratives.

The conclusion reached is that the only way to permanent peace in Sri Lanka is to examine the nation's pre-colonial identity and establish social structures that honor the traditions of the Sinhalese and Tamils through the vast realm of knowledge and practices that have practical significance within the modern economy. Traditional farming, soil nurturing, learning from ancient water conservation traditions of the Sinhalese and Tamils, the economy of indigenous foods and above all a national policy that would look to safeguard the health-based economy by respecting and using all traditional medical systems of the nation is identified as a key component of sustainability as well as a solid route to an authentically local model of peacebuilding.

Traditional knowledge and intangible heritage are owned by Sri Lankans and are the birthright of all children of mother Sri Lanka. All forms of knowledge such as the Siddha, Sinhala Wedakam, and Unani-based nature-focused medical sciences are part of intangible heritage as are spiritual beliefs, customs, and rituals. Hence spirituality and religious beliefs were also found in the study to be a major unexplored peacemaking route that could link Sinhalese and Tamils. The Ravana King so cherished by the Sinhalese and believed by them to be 'rising again soon,' is agreed by them to be a worshipper of the god Shiva of the Sri Lankan Tamils. This is another unexplored route to peacebuilding which if tackled subtly and sensitively, be a major factor in building ties between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. Hence for the concerns raised above through this paper, the following recommendations are provided on using intangible heritage and traditional knowledge in media and in peacebuilding programs;

Recommendations

- Establish a Traditional Knowledge Peacebuilding Centre in Sri Lanka which will also act as a media research center to educate all Sri Lankans on the wealth of traditional and indigenous knowledge belonging to Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims of this nation.
- Create a discourse that will look at the rural economic upliftment of all communities and regions of Sri Lanka by upholding and utilizing the traditional knowledge of Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims, and including the Burghers. This knowledge is strongly recommended to encompass the food sector, including the cultivation, preservation, and entrepreneurship that look at both local and export criteria.



- The current food crisis could be used very positively for peacebuilding. This researcher is currently part of such a mechanism where traditional food products such as yams, tubors, and Jackfruit (to name a few) that require no chemical fertilizer and alongside a vast range of indigenous fruit, medicinal flowers, and herbs can be promoted for agrarian linked health entrepreneurship across the North and the South to foster unity and shared knowledge.
- Language is a key part of traditional knowledge and intangible heritage. Thus, promoting more translations of literature – poetry, short stories, and novels involving the life of Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims living in diverse locations of Sri Lanka and significantly on the ethnic conflict and post-conflict situations will help to create adjustments in fixed views.
- Encouraging breaking of the polarization among ethnoreligious groups in Sri Lanka through nationally relevant activities linked to the economic contexts such as industrial training and renewable energy promotion.

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