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The Institutionalisation of Difference

A Study on Conflict and Tamil Ethnicity in Sri Lanka



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Abstract

Despite increased* academic interest in ethnic conflict in the wake of the Cold War, the relationship between ethnicity and conflict remains unclear. A focus on the causes of conflict has meant that while it is widely accepted that ethnicity is not a source of political violence, the reason that it appears as such a salient dimension of contemporary conflicts remains unsettled. Taking Tamil ethnicity in Sri Lanka as a case study, this paper aims to come closer to an understanding of the role of ethnicity in contemporary conflict by moving away from explanations of causes of conflict to focus on the nature of ethnic identity, its formative processes and the way it is influenced by nationalism and political violence.

It argues that the prominence of Tamil ethnicity in the Sri Lankan conflict can be understood as a result of a process of reification, through which it has been transformed from a relative, pliable and subjective phenomenon to a seemingly natural, objective, and autonomous way of ordering human behaviour. Central to this transformation has been the "institutionalisation of difference": the institutionalisation of exclusionist discourses so that they are systematically articulated, reproduced and legitimated by institutional structures of domination. A dominant reified Tamil identity has emerged, as available interpretations of self have been limited to the singular and uniform understandings of Tamil identity provided by these prevailing narrative reconstructions of reality.

Introduction

The 1990s saw a wave of ethno-nationalist conflicts that sparked a new scholarly interest in ethnicity, nationalism and conflict. The dissolution of the Soviet Union brought a close to the long period in which a single international conflict dominated the international system. But early optimism that the end of the Cold War might herald a new world order was quickly shattered. Instead, internal conflicts in which ethnic identity represented a dominant dimension proliferated, sweeping across parts of Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union and Africa. This final, blood soaked decade of the last century saw the slaughter of 200,000 – 250,000 people in the Balkans and the butchering of 600,000 – 800,000 children, women and men in Rwanda¹. The world watched in astonishment and horror at the “maelstrom of conflicts over political identities and ethnic fragmentation”². As Horowitz has observed, such conflicts have “fought and bled and burnt their way into public and scholarly consciousness”³. But despite increased academic interest in conflict, elements of the relationship between ethnicity and conflict still remain unclear. Is ethnicity a cause of conflict? If not, why do so many contemporary wars revolve around issues of ethnic identity? Authors remain divided on these questions.

An overview of theories of conflict shows three broad camps that focus on human nature, structural factors and instrumental reasons to explain the recourse to political violence. Centring on the role of the individual, the first approach refers to (bio)psychological explanations to claim that we all have the drive to kill, and that these drives emerge with certain triggers, such as the collapse of state. Ethnic conflict is therefore seen simply as “the

¹Keneth D. Bush, *The Intragroup Dimensions of Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: Learning to Read Between the Lines*, New York, Pargrave Macmillan, 2003, p. xviii.

²Anthony D. Smith, *Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1995, p.2.

³Donald Horowitz cited in Keneth D. Bush, *The Intragroup Dimensions of Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: Learning to Read Between the Lines*, New York, Pargrave Macmillan, 2003, p. 3.

product of 'deep-seated hatreds' or 'ancient animosities' that have been unleashed with the collapse of authoritarian structures that had contained them"⁴. While this view seems readily applicable to the widespread ethnic violence that was associated with state collapse in the Soviet and Yugoslav cases, it has been criticized for its unsustainable understanding of ethnic identity as a fixed and permanent phenomenon portraying conflict as a natural or even inevitable process. The prevailing view is therefore that ethnic identity is not the source of political violence. As Lake and Rothchild have succinctly put it, "by itself ethnicity is not the cause of violent conflict. Most ethnic groups most of the time pursue their interests peacefully through established political channels"⁵. This conclusion however begs the question of why, if ethnicity is not a cause of political violence, it appears as such a prominent dimension in the persistent and violent conflicts across the globe. The remaining two approaches have not been able to answer this question conclusively.

The second, structuralist school, argues that objective social conditions and structural changes are at the root of political violence. But by concentrating on the interests inherent in social relations, structuralist approaches have been criticized for failing to account for the processes through which some interests gain primacy over others⁶. In short, they do not explain why ethnic identity becomes so central in the recourse to collective violence. The final instrumentalist school seeks to explain conflict as the mobilization of masses by elites through the struggle for power. As Brown has argued "most major conflicts are triggered by internal, elite led activities, to put it simply, bad leaders"⁷. While representing a welcome

⁴ Human Rights Watch cited in Hugh Miall, Oliver Ramsbotham, Tom Woodhouse, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution: The Prevention, Management and Transformation of Deadly Conflicts*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1999, p. 90.

⁵ David A. Lake, Donald Rothchild, *Spreading Fear: The Genesis of Transnational Ethnic Conflict*, in David A. Lake, Donald Rothchild (eds.), *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict: Fear Diffusion, and Escalation*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 6.

⁶ Vivienne Jabri, *Discourses on Violence, Conflict Analysis Reconsidered*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1996, p. 61.

⁷ Michael Brown cited in Hugh Miall, Oliver Ramsbotham, Tom Woodhouse, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution: The Prevention, Management and Transformation of Deadly Conflicts*,

move away from the portrayal of conflict as an inevitable process, theories of mobilization do not however explain why masses may be mobilized so quickly. In particular, they do not recognize that influential leaders do not necessarily benefit automata from "a willing citizenry absorbing pronouncements of identity"⁸. Thus the reason why ethnic identity is a prominent dimension in so many contemporary conflicts not conclusively settled.

The persisting lack of clarity in this field may be partly explained by the fact that the main body of conflict research concentrates on the causes and lifecycles of various wars⁹. As such, the central aim of these approaches has not been to explain the primacy of ethnic identity in contemporary conflict, but to explore the sources of and the reasons for the committal of collective violence. Once it is accepted that ethnicity is not the source of political violence however, such approaches can offer only a limited perspective on the relationship between ethnicity and conflict. Thus although the literature surveyed above offers important insights into the reasons for political violence, it is perhaps not surprising that the relationship between ethnicity and conflict remains unclear.

With the emphasis on the causes of conflict, a perspective that has received less attention is one that focuses on the nature of ethnic identity, its formative processes and the way it is influenced by nationalism and political violence. While understandings of ethnicity as a permanent and fixed phenomenon persist in academic debate, there are strong arguments to suggest that it is a socially pliable, contextual and dynamic phenomenon. From this perspective, it becomes possible that the prominent role of ethnic identity is itself a product of conflict: that ethnicity is just as much influenced by conflict as it contributes to it.

Cambridge, Polity Press, 1999, p. 90.

⁸ Vivienne Jabri, *Discourses on Violence, Conflict Analysis Reconsidered*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1996, p. 133.

⁹ Idem, p. 55.

Emphasis on the causes of conflict has however meant that relatively little is known about the ways in which ethnic identity is transformed by conflict and the processes through which this occurs.

In her structurationalist theory of conflict, Jabri has shown that an approach that moves away from explaining the causes of collective violence can be revealing of its identity formative influences¹⁰. Following this approach, this paper moves away from examining the reasons for political violence, focusing instead on the nature of ethnic identity and the way it is influenced by conflict. Taking Tamil ethnicity in Sri Lanka as a case study, it seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between ethnicity and conflict by showing that the prominence of ethnic identity in contemporary conflict can be understood as the result of the identity transformative influence of nationalism and political violence. The central aim of this paper is therefore to show the way in which Tamil ethnicity has been transformed with periods of nationalism and political violence in Sri Lanka and provide an analysis of the processes through which this transformation has taken place.

Tamil ethnic identity has represented a salient dimension of the violent conflict that has gripped the Sri Lankan island for the past two decades. Since 1983, militant members of the island's Tamil minority have been fighting the Sinhalese dominated Sri Lankan government in the bid to win a separate Tamil state in the northern and eastern provinces of the island. This separatist war, which can now be described as being led by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), provides a stark example of large scale violence revolving around issues of ethnic identity. Raging off and on with increasingly ferocity, it has killed more than 65,000 people and displaced, injured or otherwise devastated upwards of two million others

¹⁰ See Vivienne Jabri, *Discourses on Violence, Conflict Analysis Reconsidered*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1996.

in an island of less than twenty-million¹¹. Since its inception, thousands of men, women and children have joined the LTTE forces in a bid to fight for their own ethnically defined state. In a bleak demonstration of commitment to this cause, each LTTE cadre carries a cyanide capsule worn on a cord around their neck, to be swallowed in the case of capture. More notoriously, the LTTE's suicide force, "The Black Tigers," have received international attention for their readiness to commit sacrifice in their fight for separatism.

Appearing as a major facet of this ongoing civil war in Sri Lanka, Tamil ethnicity thus provides an excellent case study for the identity transformative processes of conflict. The LTTE's separatist war represents the paradigm of ethno-nationalist conflicts that have erupted in recent decades: conflicts in which minority ethnic groups have fought for the right to self-determination in their own ethnically defined nation-state. The Sri Lankan conflict however, with its roots further back in history, includes a long period of rising Sinhalese and Tamil nationalist movements, dating from the decade after the island's independence from British colonial rule in 1948. As such, the case study of Tamil ethnicity in Sri Lanka is particularly amenable to an analysis of the ways in which ethnic identity is transformed by conflict, both during periods of rising nationalisms and with political violence.

In seeking to come closer to an understanding of the relationship between ethnicity and conflict, the central questions addressed by this paper are how Tamil ethnicity has been transformed during the period of conflict in Sri Lanka and what the processes are through which this transformation has occurred. This enquiry requires an understanding of ethnicity and in particular Tamil ethnicity. Chapter one therefore presents a conceptualization of Tamil

¹¹ Alan Keenan, *Building a Democratic Middle Ground: Professional Civil Society and the Politics of Human Rights in Sri Lanka's Peace Process*, forthcoming in J. Mertus, J.W. Helsing (eds.), *Human Rights and Conflict: New Actors, Strategies and Ethical Dilemma*, United States Institute of Peace, 2004.

ethnicity through an examination of theories on ethnic identity and their application to the Tamil case. Based on this conceptualization, the first section of chapter two examines the way in which the nature and meaning of Tamil ethnicity been transformed with the period of conflict in Sri Lanka. The second section of this chapter examines theories of identity formation to present a theoretical understanding of the processes through which this transformation has occurred. This theoretical framework is employed in the third and fourth chapters to analyse the process through which Tamil ethnicity has been transformed during the periods of rising nationalisms from the mid-1950s to the late 1970s, and increasing political violence from the late 1970s till present, respectively.

The central thesis that will be pursued is that with the conflict in Sri Lanka, Tamil ethnicity has been transformed by a process of reification – of changing dominant discourses – from a relative, pliable and subjective phenomenon to a seemingly natural, objective, and autonomous way of ordering human behaviour. Chapter one argues that ethnicity is a socially constructed cognitive and contextual belief in collective belonging. Tamil ethnicity is a recent social construction which is therefore dynamic and changeable. Chapter two argues that during the period of conflict in Sri Lanka, Tamil ethnicity has been *reified* or transformed from a relative, pliable and subjective phenomenon to a seemingly natural, objective and absolute form of belonging. Identity is formed as individuals interpret their notion of self through an active selection of dominant discourses. Thus the *process of reification*, through which this transformation has occurred, is one of changing dominant discourses. Chapter three argues that during the period of rising Sinhalese and Tamil nationalist movements, from the mid-1950s to the late 1970s, this process of reification took the form of the “institutionalisation of difference”. Singular, uniform understandings of Tamil ethnicity emerged as discourses of nationalism became implicated in structures of dominance and discursive privilege. Chapter four argues that from the late 1970s till present,

interrelated facets of political violence in Sri Lanka have had the mutually reinforcing effect of shifting positions of discursive dominance to eliminate alternative truths and identifications. This has fixed a particular reified understanding of Tamil ethnicity - constructed by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) - as the only "true" form of self-hood.

Before continuing, it is necessary to clarify the main terms used in this paper. *Ethnic identity and ethnicity*, although notoriously difficult to define, are used here to mean a socially constructed cognitive belief in collective belonging¹². An *ethnic group* is therefore a collectivity which is defined as distinct from others on broadly accepted markers of difference¹³. A more elaborate analysis of the nature of ethnicity is given in chapter 1. *Nationalism* is used in the meaning provided by Gellner, as "the principle which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent"¹⁴. The *national unit* or *nation* is used to denote an "imagined community"¹⁵ that seeks to forge a link between this (self-defined) cultural group and state¹⁶. Ethnic groups are thus distinguished from nations in that while the ethnic group is not political, the nation by definition makes a political claim to a certain territory. *Conflict* is used to mean "the pursuit of incompatible goals by different groups"¹⁷. Its usage is intended to mean any political conflict and therefore to include competing nationalist movements. *Violent conflict* is used to distinguish conflict where parties resort to

¹² J. Nagel, *Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture*, in N. Yetman (ed.), *Majority and Minority: The Dynamics of Race and Ethnicity in American Life*, Allyn and Bacon, 1993, p. 2.

¹³ Kenneth D. Bush, *The Intragroup Dimensions of Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: Learning to Read Between the Lines*, New York, Pargrave Macmillan, 2003, p. 13.

¹⁴ Ernest Gellner, *Nationalism*, London, Phoenix, 1997, p. 1.

¹⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London and New York: Verso, 1991, p. 1.

¹⁶ Eriksen, Thomas H., *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*, London, Pluto Press, 1993, p. 100.

¹⁷ Hugh Miall, Oliver Ramsbotham, Tom Woodhouse, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution: The Prevention, Management and Transformation of Deadly Conflicts*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1999, p. 20.

the use of force or *political violence*¹⁸. *Political violence* is distinguished from violence in general in that it is legitimized by an explicitly designated reordering purpose¹⁹.

¹⁸ Hugh Miall, Oliver Ramsbotham, Tom Woodhouse, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution: The Prevention, Management and Transformation of Deadly Conflicts*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1999, p. 21.

¹⁹ David E. Apter, *Political Violence in Analytical Perspective*, in David E. Apter (ed.), *The Legitimization of Violence*, New York, New York University Press, 1997, p. 5.

1 Conceptualizing Tamil Ethnicity

The aim of this chapter is to provide an understanding of Tamil ethnicity that will form the basis for the analysis that will follow in this paper. A survey of academic definitions of ethnicity in the first section of the chapter will be used to inform a conceptualization of Tamil ethnicity in the second section. The chapter argues that while Tamil ethnicity masquerades as a largely fixed and permanent phenomenon, it is actually a socially constructed dynamic and changeable one that is just as likely to be influenced by conflict as it contributes to it.

1.1 Defining Ethnicity

Part of the difficulty in understanding the relationship between ethnicity and conflict is arguably attributable to the elusive nature of the concept of ethnicity itself. Isaac has aptly described this situation of definitional fog:

In recent seasons especially there have been dozens of academic safaris, trying to track down the snowman of "ethnicity," everyone is sure now that it exists and is important, more important than people thought, but no one is sure what it looks like, much less whether it is abominable or not.²⁰

The term ethnicity is used today to denote such diverse phenomena in diverging social contexts - from urban minorities and indigenous peoples to secessionist "proto-nations" and groups in plural-societies²¹ - that it is perhaps not surprising that definitional projects have produced a plethora of sometimes seemingly contradictory definitions. Despite considerable

²⁰ Harold R. Isaacs, *The Idols of the Tribe, Group Identity and Political Change*, New York, Harper-Colophon, 1975, p. 27.

²¹ Thomas H. Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*, London, Pluto Press, 1993, pp. 13 - 14.

divergence however, most approaches agree that ethnicity has something to do with the *classification of people and group relationships*²². Perhaps the most influential work in the social anthropological study of this field has been that of Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth,²³ who urged a move away from discussions on the content of ethnic identity – from “the cultural stuff” – to a consideration of the boundaries that mark the limits of such contents. Recognizing that groups cannot exist in isolation but only in contrast to other groups,²⁴ Barth contributed to a significant shift in the focus of social anthropological analysis that paved the way for the extensive academic research on ethnic groups that was to follow.

The diverse approaches to ethnicity can for analytical purposes be divided into three broad camps: the instrumentalist, the primordialist and the constructivist, which to some extent can be regarded as chronological²⁵. Present in much of the early literature, the instrumentalist school conceptualises ethnicity as primarily a resource for political and social competition. But while this approach played an important role in illuminating the dynamics of ethnic competition, its failure to capture the emotions and intensity surrounding ethnic relations and conflict led to the emergence of a contrasting primordialist approach, strongly influenced by the work of Edward Shils.

Following Shils, Clifford Geertz describes ethnicity as primordial attachments – or “the givens” of social existence – that have an “an ineffable, and at times overpowering coerciveness in and of themselves”²⁶. While most primordialists emphasize the emotional

²² Idem, p. 4.

²³ Fredrik Barth, *Introduction*, in Fredrik Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social Organization of Difference*, Oslo, Scandinavian University Press, 1969, pp. 9 – 38.

²⁴ Idem, pp. 14 – 15.

²⁵ This distinction was first made by Crawford Young, see Crawford Young, *The Rising Tide of Cultural Pluralism: The Nation-State at Bay?* Madison, Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin Press, 1993, pp. 21 – 25.

²⁶ Clifford Geertz, *The Integrative Revolution*, in C. Geertz (ed.), *Old Societies and New States*, New

force and qualitative uniqueness of ethnic ties, there are two different arguments amongst them should be distinguished. The first contends that ethnicity *is* primordial: it is a core of identity received at birth and handed down through generations. Capturing this view, Isaacs states that "basic group identity consists of the ready-made set of endowments and identifications which every individual shares with others from the moment of birth by chance of the family into which he or she is born at that given time and at that given place"²⁷. At its extreme, this approach leads to socio-biological explanations that claim that ethnicity is a result of genetic reproductive drives for individuals to favor close kin groups²⁸. The second version argues that it is the *belief* in primordiality that arouses these overpowering emotions. Defending the primordialist position, Grosby therefore reminds us that it only asserts that individuals classify themselves and others according to perceived primordial criteria. The affective responses emphasizes are thus responses to *perceived* properties²⁹.

While the primordialist view emphasizes the force of "the affective tie" that helps make comprehensible the intense emotions latent in ethnic conflict³⁰, it has come under strong criticism for implying the fixity of identity and failing to account for ethnic change and dissolution. Thus the most harsh critics of Geertz's theory, Jack Eller and Reed Coughlan, have strongly contested the "apriority, ineffability and affectivity" of ethnic bonds³¹. Ethnic ties are not, they argue, underived or "given" prior to all social experience, impervious to sociological analysis or qualitatively different from other kinds of ties. By suggesting that

York, Free Press, 1963, pp. 108 – 110.

²⁷ Harold R. Isaacs, *The Idols of the Tribe, Group Identity and Political Change*, New York, Harper-Colophon, 1975, p. 31.

²⁸ Pierre Van den Berghe, *Ethnicity and the Sociobiology Debate*, in John Rex, David Mason, (eds.) *Theories of Race and Ethnic Relations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986.

²⁹ Steven Grosby, *The Verdict of History: the Inexpungeable Tie of Primordiality - a Response to Eller and Coughlan*, in <<Ethnic and Racial Studies>>, 17: 2, 1994, p. 164 - 71.

³⁰ Crawford Young, *The Rising Tide of Cultural Pluralism: The Nation-State at Bay?* Madison, Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin Press, 1993, p.23.

³¹ Jack Eller, Reed Coughlan, *The Poverty of Primordialism: The Demystification of Ethnic Attachments*, in <<Ethnic and Racial Studies>>, 16: 2, 1993, pp. 187 – 92, 199 – 201.

ethnicity sociologically analyzable, the primordialist approach is therefore singularly unhelpful.

Breaking away from an understanding of ethnicity as a "fixed essence", a final constructivist approach has sought to conceptualize it as a constructed, manufactured social identity that is both fluid and volitional. So Joane Nagel argues that ethnicity is "a socially constructed, variable definition of self and other, whose existence and meaning is continuously negotiated, revised and revitalized"³². At its extreme, this leads to an anti-essentialist approach that seeks to deconstruct ethnicity itself "suggesting not only that all ethnic communities are deeply divided, but also that ethnicity itself is an optional identity and is often overshadowed by other (gender, class, regional) identities"³³

In reality, these groupings are neither distinct nor mutually exclusive. As Young observes in his broadened and illuminating contribution, ethnic identity actually involves an interaction of all three dimensions:

Ethnic identity often involves deep emotional attachments to the group, supplies an internal gyroscope and cognitive map through which the social world is perceived, and historicizes selfhood in a web of primordial cultural meanings. In everyday political and social interaction, ethnicity often appears in an instrumental guise, as a group weapon in the pursuit of material advantage; thus its activation is contingent, situational and circumstantial. Ultimately, all identities are socially constructed, a collective product of the human imagination...Social encounters are invoked, used

³² J. Nagel, *Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture*, in N. Yetman (ed.), *Majority and Minority: The Dynamics of Race and Ethnicity in American Life*, Boston, Allyn and Bacon, 1993, p. 2.

³³ Marcus Banks, *Ethnicity: Anthropological Constructions*, London, Routledge, 1996, p. 12.

and rewoven in the myriad encounters of everyday life at both the individual and group level³⁴.



In this way, each of the three approaches clearly highlights an important aspect of ethnicity. However, a crucial difference in the aim of their ventures should not be overlooked. While the primordialist and instrumentalist arguments aim to understand what *drives* ethnic behaviour, the constructivist approach seeks to explain the very *existence* of ethnic groups themselves³⁵. For the purpose of this paper it is the latter approach that is central. For to ask how ethnicity has been transformed by conflict is first to ask, not what are the forces that drive Tamil ethnic action, but what *is* Tamil ethnicity and to understand the processes that led to and maintain its existence.

From this perspective, it is essential to separate what ethnicity *is* and what it is *perceived* to be. As Grosby insisted, ethnicity identity is often perceived as a core of identity passed down through generations, and ethnic groups as culturally distinct and persisting entities. Indeed, for most people, most of the time, ethnic identity is acquired at birth and retained for life. There are however numerous examples in the literature that suggest that ethnicity is, as constructivist theories suggest, something very different.

In his influential work, Barth made the important observation that although ethnic groups viewed themselves as culturally distinct, they often displayed considerable cultural overlap with other groups, even more than differences between them³⁶. In the same vein, in his study

³⁴ Crawford Young, *Ethnic Diversity and Public Policy: An Overview*, Draft Occasional Paper for the UN Research Institute for Social Development, World Summit on Social Development, UN(2728/84/8), Geneva, 1994.

³⁵ Crawford Young, *The Rising Tide of Cultural Pluralism: The Nation-State at Bay?* Madison, Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin Press, 1993, p.24.

³⁶ Fredrik Barth, *Introduction*, in Fredrick Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social Organization of Difference*, Oslo, Scandinavian University Press, 1969.

of The Lue in Thailand, Moerman observed that the group had no exclusive livelihood, language, customs or religion. Thus he concluded that "someone is Lue by virtue of believing and calling himself Lue"³⁷. These findings touch on the fact that ethnicity is essentially a *cognitive* phenomenon, by which groups "consider themselves and are regarded by others as culturally distinct"³⁸. But as Eriksen suggests, belief in distinctness can only be activated by contact and interrelationship. "To speak of an ethnic group in total isolation is as absurd as to speak of the sound from one hand clapping"³⁹. Thus ethnicity is not as Glazer and Moynihan suggested, "the character or quality of an ethnic group"⁴⁰, but "essentially an aspect of a relationship, not the property of a group"⁴¹. Understanding ethnicity in this light suggests that, like other forms of identity, it emerges through a process of social interaction as individuals constantly define and redefine themselves through the "innumerable transactions of everyday life"⁴². As such, it takes on different connotation and meanings, depending on the social climate in which it is experienced⁴³. Again, the literature provides clear examples of the social plasticity of ethnic identities.

In some situations, individuals can systematically cross boundaries to assume alternative ethnic identities. Barth found that in western Pakistan and Afghanistan, members of the Pathan group were able to intermittently reclassify themselves and be accepted as Baluchi⁴⁴.

In some circumstances, the scope for choice may be even greater. Mayers' study on rural

³⁷ Michael Moerman, *Who are the Lue: Ethnic Identification in a Complex Civilization*, in <<American Anthropologist>> vol. 67, 1965, p. 1219.

³⁸ Thomas H. Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*, London, Pluto Press, 1993, p. 4.

³⁹ Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*, Glasgow, Fontana, 1979, p. 78.

⁴⁰ Nathan Glazer, Daniel Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting-pot*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1963, p.1.

⁴¹ Thomas H. Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*, London, Pluto Press, 1993, p. 12.

⁴² Crawford Young, *The Rising Tide of Cultural Pluralism: The Nation-State at Bay?* Madison, Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin Press, 1993, p.24.

⁴³ Gerd Baumann, *The Multicultural Riddle*, London & New York, Routledge, 1999, p. 64.

⁴⁴ Fredrik Barth, *Introduction*, in Fredrick Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social*

Xhosa immigrants to the town of East Cape in South Africa discovered that those who arrived from rural areas were not constrained by the identities they were born with. Instead the "possibilities of transferring allegiance from one reference group to another are considerable" and "a man's choices have a particular significance"⁴⁵. Finally, ethnic identities themselves may emerge out of the social context, where they had not existed before. Mitchell's much cited analysis of Kaela Dance showed that Bisa ethnicity in the African Copperbelt had not existed in the tribal homelands, but was invented and stressed in the new multiethnic environment of the mining compounds.

Ethnicity is then a matter of choice and ascription, of internal and external identification. As such, it may be "stressed or unstressed, enjoyed or resented, imposed or even denied, all depending on the context"⁴⁶. This relativity is exemplified in situations where individuals contest taxonomic categories imposed on them. In the *Kaela Dance*, Mitchell describes how a Ngoni man challenged a woman who classifies him as a Ndebele because they were, in her view, for all practical purposes the same. Ethnic boundaries are thus a matter of negotiation and contestation⁴⁷. Ethnicity is not therefore what it masquerades as being: "it is the product of people's actions and identifications, not the product of nature working by itself"⁴⁸. It is a socially constructed belief in collective belonging that is contextual, relative and pliable, and therefore dynamic and changeable. Nature provides infinite similarities and differences, but these need interests to turn them into classifications of identity that have meaning. Choosing an analogy with wine, to contrast the "blood" view of ethnicity, Baumann captures this process brilliantly:

Organization of Difference, Oslo, Scandinavian University Press, 1969.

⁴⁵ Philip Mayer, *Tribesmen or Townsman: Conservatism and the Process of Urbanisation in a South African City*, Cape Town, Oxford University Press, 1961.

⁴⁶ Gerd Baumann, *The Multicultural Riddle*, London & New York, Routledge, 1999, p. 64.

⁴⁷ Clyde J. Mitchell, *The Kaela Dance*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, Rhodes-Livingstone papers, no. 27.

⁴⁸ Gerd Baumann, *The Multicultural Riddle*, London & New York, Routledge, 1999, p. 63.

[N]ature itself does not produce wine, just as little as ancestry by itself produces ethnicity: The natural ingredients need to be added in order to achieve a process of fermentation, just as ethnic categorizations need political and economic interests to turn them into markers of identity that can operate in daily life. At the next stage, wine needs the right condition to mature, just as ethnicity needs particular social conditions to acquire meaning among those who see themselves as sharing it. Finally, a wine will develop different flavours at different temperatures, and at some stage cease to be wine and turn to vinegar or water. Ethnicity likewise takes on different connotations and meanings depending on the social climate in which it is experienced.⁴⁹

Why, then, has the view of ethnicity as a fixed and unchangeable identity been dominant in public discourse? Why have primordial arguments persisted in the academic debate? One explanation is that, as Grosby has suggested, the belief in unity of descent often forms an important element in ethnic belonging. An even more important reason is that ethnicity is most salient in contexts where it has been transformed by processes that make it appear to be objective, natural and absolute. Often, by the time ethnicity becomes divisive, or by the time it is put in the public spotlight, it has already been made to “appear as if it were about absolute and natural differences, instead of relative and cultural choices”⁵⁰. Berger and Luckmann coined the term “reification” to describe such processes by which “the apprehension of human phenomena as if they were things, that is...the apprehension of the products of human activity as if they were something other than human products—such as facts of nature”⁵¹.

⁴⁹ Gerd Baumann, *The Multicultural Riddle*, London & New York, Routledge, 1999, p. 64.

⁵⁰ Idem, p. 64.

⁵¹ Peter L. Berger, Thomas Luckmann. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, New York: Anchor Books, 1967, p. 106.

How does this happen? Bauman gives the example of racism: anti-racists unwittingly reinforce the belief that ethnic differences are really absolute as soon as they fight discrimination on an ethnic platform⁵². This paper will show that to this we may add the processes of nationalism and political violence. Theories that see ethnicity as a cause for conflict assume that it is an autonomous and natural factor that explains human behaviour. What these approaches fail to grasp however, is that ethnicity is not a static phenomenon. It is contextual and dynamic and therefore just as likely to be influenced by nationalism and political violence as it contributes to them. Based on this understanding, the following chapters therefore seek to analyse the way in which Tamil ethnicity has been influenced by the conflict in Sri Lanka. First, the foregoing discussion of ethnicity will be used to inform a conceptualization of Tamil ethnicity that will form the basis for the analysis to follow.

1.2 Conceptualizing Tamil Ethnicity

According to the last official census carried out in 1981, the Sri Lankan Tamils (the Tamils) make up eleven percent of the population of the Sri Lankan island. Their boundary of ethnicity is predominantly marked by the linguistic criteria of speaking the Tamil language, although they are distinguished from Indian Tamils, who were brought to work on the tea and coffee plantations by the British during the nineteenth century, and also from the Sri Lanka Moors, a group of Tamil speaking Muslims. The majority of the population of the island, seventy-four percent, is Sinhalese, a predominantly Buddhist group speaking the Sinhalese language.

Tamil ethnicity: instrumental, primordial or constructed?

As Young predicts, Tamil ethnicity displays primordial, instrumental and socially

⁵² Gerd Baumann, *The Multicultural Riddle*, London & New York, Routledge, 1999, p. 62.

constructed elements, but it is undoubtedly the primordial dimension that appears as most salient. Dominant discourses in Sri Lanka represent the island's history as one of two historically distinct kingdoms - Sinhalese and Tamil - continuously opposed through warfare.⁵³ Theories of a distinct Tamil history most commonly find their source in the Yalppana Vaipava Malai, a largely mythical chronicle, translated into Tamil in 1878. Various interpretations present Tamils as partly descendents of a pre-Sinhalese, Dravidian indigenous people and partly descendents from the Cola empire in south India who settled on the island some time between the second century B.C. and the twelfth century A.D. These immigrants formed their own polity, the kingdom of Jaffna, which flourished until it was overrun by the Portuguese in the early seventeenth century.

How primordial are these attachments of Tamil collective belonging in reality? Is "Tamilness" grounded in an ancient ethnic consciousness, a core of identity passed down through generations? Or is it just the perception of such unity that forms the basis for such powerful ties? As the previous section suggested, there is good argument for contending that the latter is nearer the truth.

Tamil ethnicity as a recent construction

The concept of Tamil ethnicity defined predominantly by the linguistic marker only became dominant in the end of the nineteenth century⁵⁴. Hellmann-Rajanayagam identifies two competing constructions of "Tamilness" running side by side before this time⁵⁵. On the one hand, the linguistic marker was especially promoted by Western missionaries because it allowed Saivite Tamils to convert to Christianity without compromising their ethnicity. On the other,

⁵³ A. S. Balasingham, *Liberation Tigers and Tamil Eelam Freedom Struggle*, Jaffna, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

⁵⁴ Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam, *Ethnicity and nationalism. The Sri Lanka Tamils in the late nineteenth century: Some theoretical questions*, in D. Weidemann (ed.), *Nationalism Ethnicity and Political Development: South Asian Perspectives*, New Delhi, Manohar, 1991, pp. 30 - 32.

⁵⁵ Idem, pp. 30 - 32.

the religious construction was the result of a religious revivalist movement against the "perceived usurpation of language and culture by the Christian missionaries and the religious conversions among Saivite Tamils"⁵⁶. Significantly, although the former would eventually triumph, both had included Tamils in India and it was not until the late nineteenth century that there was a slow "weaning from India" and a consciousness of being "Ceylon Tamils" emerged. Eventually this would mean that while Tamils established in the north and the east were unquestioningly subsumed under the term 'Ceylon Tamils', the Indian Tamils brought by the British to work on the plantations were excluded from this collective identity⁵⁷.

Thus from the time that consciousness of being Tamil emerged amongst the literate Tamil speaking classes, the boundaries and markers of this ethnic group warped and shifted until they settled in the form they are known today. Perplexed by the seemingly arbitrary distinctions drawn in this process, Hellmann-Rajanayagam asks:

Who is granted Tamil status and why do they accept it? What advantages can be derived from being so labelled? And which boundary marker is powerful enough to override the differences between Tamil and Tamil?⁵⁸

Her questions serve to highlight the socially constructed nature of Tamil ethnic identity. During this period, identities were created, assumed, ascribed, and even denied. Individuals and groups consciously and subconsciously chose and rejected ethnicity on the basis of real and perceived interests. Nothing illustrates this better than the experience of the Ceylon

⁵⁶ Idem, pp. 31.

⁵⁷ K. Stokke, A. K. Rynqvist, *The Struggle for Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka*, in <<Growth and Change>>, vol. 31, Spring 2000, p. 290.

⁵⁸ Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam, *Ethnicity and nationalism. The Sri Lanka Tamils in the late nineteenth century: Some theoretical questions*, in D. Weidemann (ed.), *Nationalism Ethnicity and*

Moors: Tamils who had converted to Islam. In the 1880s these groups contested an attempt to subsume them under the common "Tamil label" by vehemently denying their Tamil ancestry⁵⁹. In particular, claims were made on the basis of common language, customs and physical resemblance in favour of self-ascribed boundary markers. So while Tamil Christians had been easily subsumed under the term "Tamil", the Muslims emerged with a separate identity.

Thus the markers of modern Tamil ethnic identity were clearly established in the nineteenth century. But can it be safely assumed that Tamil ethnicity was thus a completely modern social construction? Or does it, as Smith for example would argue⁶⁰, nevertheless have its roots in some form of pre-modern ethnic ties?

Pre-modern Tamil collective belonging?

When the early colonizers arrived on the island of Sri Lanka in the early sixteenth century, they did indeed find a heterogeneous population. As well as two Sinhalese speaking Buddhist kingdoms and a Hindu king ruling over a settlement of Tamil speaking people, they discovered as a number of Tamil speaking chiefdoms with populations of Hindus and Muslims⁶¹. In the words of Hugh Cleghorn, Colonial Secretary of Ceylon in 1799:

Two different nations, from the very ancient period have divided between them the possession of the island: First the Cinhalese, inhabiting the interior of the country in its southern end and western parts of Wallouve to Chilow, and

Political Development: South Asian Perspectives, New Delhi, Manohar, 1991, p. 38.

⁵⁹ K. Stokke, A. K. Rynvtiet, *The Struggle for Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka*, in <<Growth and Change>>, vol. 31, Spring 2000, p. 290.

⁶⁰ Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origin of Nations*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1986.

⁶¹ Bryan Pfaffenberger, *Ethnic Conflict and Youth Insurgency in Sri Lanka: The Social Origins of Tamil Separatism*, in J. V. Montville (ed.), *Conflict and Peacemaking in Multiethnic Societies*, USA, Lexington Books, 1990, p. 241.

secondly the Malabars (Tamils), who possess the northern and eastern districts.

These two nations differ entirely in their religion, language and manners⁶².

There are however a number of anomalies which suggest that the Tamil and Sinhalese kingdoms were not distinct social formations as is often claimed. First, research points to the likelihood that there was a considerable flow of persons between these "different nations"⁶³. Second, substantial similarities between these communities suggest that there was probably close communication and interaction between them. Pfaffenberger thus observes deep and mutual influence on "the sentence structure of each other's languages, their strikingly similar kinship classification systems, the structure and organization of their caste systems and the details of their village rituals"⁶⁴. Finally, this ancient intermixture of culture, religion, and language is supported by archaeological evidence in those very areas that are considered the strongholds of unadulterated Sinhala or Tamil life⁶⁵. Thus while it was not apparent to the eyes of the colonizers, anthropologically, the Tamil and Sinhalese people are – as Barth may have predicted - much more similar to each other than either group is to the people of northern or southern India⁶⁶.

Ethnicity is not of course precluded by interaction. It is, as we have seen, a function of it. The real significance of these observations is that they highlight the error in seeking to understand pre-modern identity through modern day eyes. It is crucial to recognize that the

⁶² Cited in K. M. de Silva, *Separatism and Political Violence in Sri Lanka*, in K. M. de Silva (ed.), *Conflicts and Violence in South Asia*, Kandy, International Centre for Ethnic Studies/Clingendael Institute, 2000, p. 384.

⁶³ Bryan Pfaffenberger, *Ethnic Conflict and Youth Insurgency in Sri Lanka: The Social Origins of Tamil Separatism*, in J. V. Montville (ed.), *Conflict and Peacemaking in Multiethnic Societies*, USA, Lexington Books, 1990, p. 247.

⁶⁴ Bryan Pfaffenberger, *Introduction: The Sri Lankan Tamils*, in C. Manogaran and B. Pfaffenberger, *The Sri Lankan Tamils: Ethnicity and Identity*, Boulder CO, Westview Press, 1994.

⁶⁵ David Little, *Sri Lanka: The Invention of Enmity*, Washington D.C, United Institute of Peace Press, 1994, p. 30.

⁶⁶ Bryan Pfaffenberger, *Introduction: The Sri Lankan Tamils*, in C. Manogaran and B. Pfaffenberger, *The Sri Lankan Tamils: Ethnicity and Identity*, Boulder CO, Westview Press, 1994.

form of pre-modern states in Sri Lanka was drastically different to the present day. In contrast to the modern centralized state, the pre-modern political organization in Sri Lanka consisted of loosely structured organizations around a largely symbolic centre with substantial autonomy for outlying units of political and cultural life⁶⁷. This social structure meant that "at various times groups would speak different languages, adhere to alternative religions and claim alternative identities" and "ethnic, religious and linguistic differences were not used as the bases for inclusion or exclusion from the polity"⁶⁸. So as Hellmann-Rajanayagam argues, it is likely that "Tamils have always felt themselves to be Tamils...but this in itself was not enough to activate ethnic consciousness. While it is inherently difficult to speculate on the sentiments of the pre-modern masses, the foregoing observations serve as a credible counter-argument to assumptions of pre-modern Tamil collective belonging⁶⁹. In fact, there are good arguments for locating the roots of Tamil ethnicity, not in pre-modern feelings of collective belonging, but strongly in the colonial experience.

The colonial experience and changing self-perceptions

The early periods of Portuguese and Dutch rule did not greatly alter traditional Sri Lankan social structure or power hierarchy⁷⁰. The penetration of Christianity deep into Tamil society did however significantly influence socio-cultural attitudes. In the first place, missionary research into the vernacular language had led to the discovery of the Dravidian family of languages and of Tamil classics. This had a considerable impact on the Tamils' self

⁶⁷ David Little, *Sri Lanka: The Invention of Enmity*, Washington D.C, United Institute of Peace Press, 1994, p. 30.

⁶⁸ Elizabeth Nissan, R. L. Stirrat, *The Generation of Communal Identities*, in *Sri Lanka: History and Roots of the Conflict*, Jonathan Spencer (ed.), London and New York, Routledge, 1990, p. 26 - 26.

⁶⁹ This issue touches on the interesting question of whether ethnicity is, in itself, a modern phenomenon, that is beyond the scope of this discussion. While the same issue has been theorized by "modernist" authors addressing nationalism such as Gellner (1997) and Anderson (1991), there has not been the parallel attention by anti-primordialist theories on ethnicity.

⁷⁰ Sinnappah Arasaratnam, *Sri Lanka's Tamils: Under Colonial Rule*, in C. Manogaran and B. Pfaffenberger (eds.), *The Sri Lankan Tamils: Ethnicity and Identity*, Boulder CO, Westview Press, 1994, p. 35.

perception of themselves because "now Tamil could be considered sacred on the basis of and indigenous and exogenous authority"⁷¹. Moreover education, first introduced by the missions and then seized by societal leaders, led to a high Tamil literacy rate. Combined with the explosion of the vernacular press, this resulted for the first time in the emergence of Tamil speaking "imagined communities", as Anderson has theorized⁷². As Arasaratnam argues, "this spread of ideas through mass media, more than anything else, contributed to welding together the scattered Sri Lankan Tamil communities"⁷³

At the same time, European ideas were influencing indigenous academia significantly. Perhaps most significant was the influence of Western Darwinian notions of race and their relative superiority. Writers such as Max Muller had enthusiastically taken up and "scientifically proven" the philological theories linking Sinhalese to the Aryan family of languages that had emerged in the 1820s, thereby providing the Sinhalese with a "prestigious pedigree"⁷⁴. The effect on indigenous academia was significant: by the 1920s, philological research had turned into "polarized assertions about the origin and relative development of the Sinhalese and Tamil languages were linked with the relative status of 'races'"⁷⁵.

Finally, in line with intellectual thinking of the day, the British colonial authorities in the nineteenth century recognized a large number of distinct "races" on the island that were

⁷¹ Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam, *Ethnicity and nationalism. The Sri Lanka Tamils in the late nineteenth century: Some theoretical questions*, in D. Weidemann (ed.), *Nationalism Ethnicity and Political Development: South Asian Perspectives*, New Delhi, Manohar, 1991, pp. 31 & 33.

⁷² Although Anderson's theory relates to the concept of the nation, it also appears to be highly applicable here, see Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities*, London and New York, Verso, 1991.

⁷³ Sinnappah Arasaratnam, *Sri Lanka's Tamils: Under Colonial Rule*, in C. Manogaran and B. Pfaffenberger, *The Sri Lankan Tamils: Ethnicity and Identity*, Boulder CO, Westview Press, 1994, p. 52.

⁷⁴ R. A. L. H. Gunawardana, *The People of The Lion: The Sinhala Identity and Ideology in History and Historiography*, in C. Manogaran and B. Pfaffenberger (eds.), *The Sri Lankan Tamils: Ethnicity and Identity*, Boulder CO, Westview Press, 1994, p. 72 - 73.

⁷⁵ K. Stokke, A. K. Rynvtiet, *The Struggle for Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka*, Growth and Change, Vol. 31 (Spring 2000), p. 290.

administratively and politically institutionalized. On the one side, administrative divisions were drawn up on the basis of language and schools taught in the local vernacular. On the other, race was made a basis for political representation from the time of the first Legislative and Executive Councils in 1833 until the 1931 constitution introduced territorial electorates. More than the influence of pre-modern ties, it is these factors that stimulated a renewed interest in the past and encouraged Tamils to view themselves as an ethnic group. Tamil ethnicity is not, as it may appear, a fixed and unchangeable primordial identity handed down through generations. It is a socially constructed product of the colonial period, relative and contextual and therefore dynamic and changeable.

In sum, this chapter has aimed to provide a conceptualization of Tamil ethnicity that will provide the basis for analysis that will follow in this paper. Ethnicity, it has been argued, is a socially constructed cognitive phenomenon, which is pliable, relative and contextual. While Tamil ethnicity masquerades as a largely fixed, permanent and primordial phenomenon, it is actually a recent social construction with its roots firmly in the colonial period. It was then that natural differences were given meaning and transformed into boundaries - which in turn shifted and warped according to conscious and subconscious interests - until they settled on the markers that are dominant today. To borrow Baumann's analogy, if nature instituted cultural and linguistic differences in pre-modern times, it was only in the nineteenth century that the process of "fermentation" began. As such, Tamil ethnicity is an essentially dynamic and changeable phenomenon: just as much likely to be influenced by nationalism and political violence as it contributes to them. Based on this understanding, the following chapter will show how the nature and meaning of Tamil ethnicity has been transformed with the conflict in Sri Lanka and provide a theoretical understanding for the processes through which this occurred.

2 The Reification of Tamil Ethnicity



Since the middle of twentieth century, Tamil ethnicity has appeared as a central dimension in the nationalisms and political violence that have gripped the Sri Lankan island. Having conceptualised Tamil ethnicity as a dynamic and changeable phenomenon, the aim of this chapter is twofold: first, to show how the nature and meaning of Tamil ethnic identity has been transformed in relation to the conflict in Sri Lanka, and second to suggest a theoretical understanding of the processes through which this transformation has occurred. The first part of this chapter therefore examines the changes in Tamil ethnic identity, comparing its nature and meaning prior to the conflict with that of the present day. It suggests that Tamil ethnicity has been *reified*, or transformed from a relative, socially pliable and subjective phenomenon to seemingly natural, objective and autonomous one. The second part of the chapter examines theories of identity formation and suggests that the process of reification, through which this transformation has occurred, can be understood as one of changing dominant discourses. This theoretical framework will be used to analyse the process of reification in the remaining two chapters.

2.1 Conflict and the Reification of Tamil Ethnicity

Sri Lanka has been the stage of multiple and overlapping conflicts since it was given independence from British colonial rule in 1948⁷⁶. By far the most internationally renowned, and the focus of this study, is the half-century old complex and multi-causal conflict between members of the Tamil minority and the Sinhalese majority. This “complex political emergency,”⁷⁷ originated in the mid-1950s with increasing antagonisms between members

⁷⁶ Jonathan Goodhand with Philippa Atkinson, *Sri Lanka, Conflict and Aid: Enhancing the Peacebuilding Impact of International Engagement*, London, International Alert, 2001, pp. 23 - 24.

⁷⁷ Idem, p. 24.

of these communities and two competing nationalist movements. Increasing political violence in the late 1970s escalated into a violent conflict in 1983, in which militant Tamil separatist groups have been fighting the Sinhalese dominated Sri Lankan government ever since in a bid to win a separate Tamil state in the north and east of the island. This separatist war, which can now be described as being led by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), has killed more than 65,000 people and displaced, injured or otherwise devastated upwards of two million others⁷⁸. Although the signing of a Norwegian brokered cease-fire in 2002 has provided a much-needed respite from war, stalled peace talks presently show no obvious sign of progress.

Representing the paradigm of ethno-nationalist conflicts - conflicts in which a minority group fights for the creation of its own ethnically defined nation state - the Sri Lankan conflict provides a stark example of large-scale violence revolving around issues of ethnic identity. As a central dimension of this conflict, Tamil ethnicity today appears as a largely uniform, "singular form of identity, legitimate and all-encompassing"⁷⁹. It is, as for other Sri Lankans, the most salient form of identity, overriding all other feelings of collective belonging. Its boundaries are not only immemorial, they are loaded with seemingly objective meaning. It is an autonomous way of both ordering and explaining human behaviour. An enquiry into Tamil ethnic identity prior to the conflict, however, shows a very different phenomenon.

Far from being the most salient form of identity, ethnic consciousness upon independence was overshadowed by other forms of collective belonging. Since the colonial period,

⁷⁸ Alan Keenan, *Building a Democratic Middle Ground: Professional Civil Society and the Politics of Human Rights in Sri Lanka's Peace Process*, forthcoming in Mertus, J., Helsing J.W. (eds.), *Human Rights and Conflict: New Actors, Strategies and Ethical Dilemma*, United States Institute of Peace, 2004, p. 1.

⁷⁹ Jabri, Vivienne, *Discourses on Violence, Conflict Analysis Reconsidered*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1996, p. 140.

religious and class differences had taken precedence over ethnic divisions. Disturbances during this period had most commonly been along religious lines: "Sinhala Buddhists attacking Sinhala Catholics, Tamil Hindus attacking Tamil Catholics etc."⁸⁰ Significantly, the last major outbreak of violence before independence had been of Sinhala Buddhists attacking Muslims, in which many hundred had died in rioting and 'summary justice' meted out by the British⁸¹. At the same time, a strong class-consciousness was emerging, especially amongst the working class in the wake of plantation capitalism in the nineteenth century and common subjection to an oppressive system of low wages, long working hours and harsh conditions of work. Composed of all ethnic groups and religious affiliations of the Sri Lankan population, this working class displayed significant solidarity in a co-ordinated labour movement. This period of "remarkable" class solidarity during which "the workers were able to rise above class, religious and ethnic divisions in the struggle for economic demands and democratic rights" lasted approximately forty years, from the first strike in 1890 to the economic depression in the 1930s⁸².

The economic depression of the 1930s and consequent high unemployment amongst the working-class has been blamed for increased "ethnic tension" at this time. But while this period saw the Sinhalese working class for the first time involved in antagonistic confrontations with minority ethnic groups, this was directed almost exclusively at "foreign" traders and workers, seen as denying opportunities for trade and employment, and not against Tamils⁸³. So in the starkest example of ethnic antagonism, the boycott of migrant Malayalis workers, the Tamils were classed on the same side *with* the "Sinhala sons of the

⁸⁰ G. Frerks, M. van Leeuwen, *The Netherlands and Sri Lanka, Dutch Policies and Interventions with regard to the Conflict in Sri Lanka*, The Hague, Clingendael, 2000, p. 20.

⁸¹ Kumari Jayawardene, *Ethnic Consciousness in Sri Lanka: Continuity and Change*, in *Sri Lanka, The Ethnic Conflict: Myths, Realities and Perspectives*, Delhi, Committee for Rational Developments, 1984, p. 123 – 125.

⁸² Idem, p. 125.

⁸³ Idem, p. 161.

soil", and ethnic tensions between them were thus yet to develop⁸⁴.

As Stokke puts it, "both the real and imagined conflicts at the time of independence were primarily between opposing class forces rather than between ethnic groups"⁸⁵. Ethnicity, it is true, had become a central issue for a small number of Tamil elites⁸⁶. For the most part however, it played a small role in the political system which was polarized "between an assimilated and conservative dominant class and an equally assimilated and class conscious multi-ethnic urban working class"⁸⁷. Independence had seen power continue to reside in the small English-educated elite who dominated parliament and the bureaucracy. The United National Party (UNP), the first party to come into power after independence, had evolved from the Ceylon National Congress (CNC), originally founded in 1919 by conservative members of the national elite to represent all the country's different groups. When it came to power headed by D. S. Senanayake after independence, the UNP continued with this policy of pluralism, functioning as a party for national union. A period of "responsive co-operation" between Tamil and Sinhalese English-speaking elites ensued, and Sri Lanka was viewed as a model of pluralism.

Thus, for the majority of Sri Lankan Tamils, class took precedence over ethnicity well into the 1950s⁸⁸. As Le Vine suggests, ethnic identity can be conceptualized as existing on a continuum "with (at the one end) those individuals, for whom ethnicity is the primary identifier, and at the other, those who emphasize other bases for identity (such as

⁸⁴ Idem, p. 136.

⁸⁵ K. Stokke, A. K. Rynvtiet, *The Struggle for Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka*, in <<Growth and Change>>, vol. 31, 2000, p. 294.

⁸⁶ Elizabeth Nissan, *Sri Lanka: A Bitter Harvest*, UK: Minority Rights Group, 1996, p. 10.

⁸⁷ Uyangoda cited in K. Stokke, A. K. Rynvtiet, *The Struggle for Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka*, in <<Growth and Change>>, vol. 31, 2000, p. 294.

⁸⁸ Kumari Jayawardene, *Ethnic Consciousness in Sri Lanka: Continuity and Change*, in *Sri Lanka, The Ethnic Conflict: Myths, Realities and Perspectives*, Delhi, Committee for Rational Developments, 1984, p. 125.

organizational affiliation, ideology, occupation, profession, nationality etc.)”⁸⁹. Tamil ethnicity can therefore be viewed as having moved along this continuum toward the end of primary identifier: from a relative form of belonging to an absolute means of self-definition. Furthermore, the alternative bases for identity at the time of independence were not confined to external sources. There were also important subgroups within “Tamilness” that competed with the overarching ethnic identity.

The paradox of the colonial experience had been that while it had greatly influenced the emergence of Tamil ethnic consciousness, it had also revealed and even entrenched internal divisions, of which the most important were regional and caste differences. Although the unifying Tamil ethno-histories “rediscovered” during the nineteenth century centred on the kingdom of Jaffna, the Tamil ethnic group extended to include Tamil-speaking people in the eastern Batticaloa region as well as those residing in Colombo. Colonialism had not brought about urbanization or industrialization that would significantly restructure society, and for many Tamils it had conversely encouraged an “innate conservatism” that was expressed in a deep attachment to the natal village⁹⁰. At the academic level, research into the unifying Tamil past had simultaneously brought into light regional differences between different Tamil groups. While they had been previously known as differences in caste, these differences were “thrown into sharp relief” by the discovery of different regional cultural practices and traditions⁹¹.

⁸⁹ Victor T. Le Vine, *Conceptualizing "Ethnicity" and "Ethnic Conflict": A Controversy Revisited*, in <<Studies in Comparative International Development>>, vol. 31, no. 2, 1997, p. 55.

⁹⁰ Sinnappah Arasaratnam, *Sri Lanka's Tamils: Under Colonial Rule*, in C. Manogaran and B. Pfaffenberger (eds.), *The Sri Lankan Tamils: Ethnicity and Identity*, Boulder CO, Westview Press, 1994.

⁹¹ Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam, *Ethnicity and nationalism. The Sri Lanka Tamils in the late nineteenth century: Some theoretical questions*, in D. Weidemann (ed.), *Nationalism Ethnicity and Political Development: South Asian Perspectives*, New Delhi, Manohar, 1991, p. 37.

In particular, the region of Batticaloa had evolved largely independently of Jaffna, because of lack of infrastructure connecting the towns in the two provinces due to the British policy to concentrate on building roads from the capital to the periphery⁹². Thus although a significant number of its inhabitants had come from Jaffna, communities in the Batticaloa region developed marked differences in caste, marriage and kinship structures. These regional identities were further augmented during the last years of colonial rule and the last two phases of constitutional reform leading up to independence leading up to independence⁹³. During this period, the political life of the "Batticaloa Tamils" from the eastern province evolved as largely independent. Significantly, their representatives showed no support for the campaign spearheaded by the representatives for the Jaffna region for "fifty-fifty" representation between the Sinhalese majority and minorities. After independence, they pursued independent policies, preferring to build up constituencies by participating in the governments of 1947 – 1956 than with the Jaffna Tamils who had devised their own strategy⁹⁴.

The colonial experience had also entrenched and even distorted traditional caste structures, so that by independence they had become fractious, at their extreme to the point of explosion. Of the most rigid was the Jaffna caste system, according to which a single large dominant caste, the Vellalars, dominated commercial affairs and maintained a monopoly on professional, administrative and political roles. Pfaffenberger explains that while the Dutch colonial rulers had "preserved" indigenous caste customs, consolidating the Vellalars' position of domination, the British had removed the legal basis for caste discrimination⁹⁵.

⁹² A. Jeyaratnam Wilson, *The Colombo Man, the Jaffna Man and the Batticaloa Man: Regional Identities and the Rise of the Federal Party*, in C. Manogaran and B. Pfaffenberger (eds.), *The Sri Lankan Tamils: Ethnicity and Identity*, Boulder CO, Westview Press, 1994, p. 127.

⁹³ Idem, pp. 127 - 131.

⁹⁴ Idem, pp. 128 - 130.

⁹⁵ Bryan Pfaffenberger, *The Political Construction of Defensive Nationalism: The 1968 Temple Entry Crisis in Sri Lanka*, in C. Manogaran and B. Pfaffenberger (eds.), *The Sri Lankan Tamils: Ethnicity*

With this development, members of the Vellalar caste attempted to preserve their domination through divisive boundary maintenance mechanisms. Extralegal social controls, naked force and ritual stigmatisation were used to sustain the belief that lower castes were non-Tamil, "aboriginal" people of despicably low status⁹⁶. These devices of boundary maintenance had significant influence on the self-perceptions of lower caste members, many believing that they were not to be included in the overarching Tamil identity⁹⁷. This internal caste discrimination was brought to the fore in 1968 as violent confrontations between lower castes and the Vellalars at the gates of Jaffna's most orthodox shrine looked on the verge of an "all out war between castes"⁹⁸.

The substantially unified, singular "Tamilness" that is dominant today is thus in stark contrast to the sharply divided and fragmented Tamil ethnic group of the past. Although caste differences do still persist, and regional identities periodically threaten to re-emerge⁹⁹, their role as a source of identification has been substantially reduced - and in many cases even eradicated. By the beginning of the 1970s, the perception of Vellalars as the only "real" Tamils had almost disappeared¹⁰⁰, and by the end of the same decade the identity of Jaffna and Batticaloa Tamils had merged¹⁰¹. On Le Vine's continuum, Tamil ethnicity today is

and Identity, Boulder CO, Westview Press, 1994, p. 143.

⁹⁶ Idem, p. 143.

⁹⁷ Bryan Pfaffenberger, *Introduction: The Sri Lankan Tamils*, in C. Manogaran and B. Pfaffenberger, *The Sri Lankan Tamils: Ethnicity and Identity*, Boulder CO, Westview Press, 1994.

⁹⁸ Bryan Pfaffenberger, *The Political Construction of Defensive Nationalism: The 1968 Temple Entry Crisis in Sri Lanka*, in C. Manogaran and B. Pfaffenberger, *The Sri Lankan Tamils: Ethnicity and Identity*, Boulder CO, Westview Press, 1994, p. 143.

⁹⁹ A notable example has been the recent break-away of the The Batticaloa – Amparai Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (BA-LTTE) led by the commander Colonel Karuna from the Vanni –based Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), see Asia Tribune, *An Appeal to the Batticaloa – Amparai Public, Dos and Don'ts by Colonel Karuna*, 2 May 2004, http://www.asiantribune.com/show_news.php?id=9394 (last visited 28 June 2004).

¹⁰⁰ Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam, *Ethnicity and nationalism. The Sri Lanka Tamils in the late nineteenth century: Some theoretical questions*, in D. Weidemann (ed.), *Nationalism Ethnicity and Political Development: South Asian Perspectives*, New Delhi, Manohar, 1991, p. 47.

¹⁰¹ A. Jeyaratnam Wilson, *The Colombo Man, the Jaffna Man and the Batticaloa Man: Regional*

substantially nearer the end of primary identifier than it was upon independence. It has evolved from a relative form of belonging, to an absolute and largely unqualified means of self-definition.

It is not only in terms of relativity that Tamil ethnicity has been transformed until today. As Barth may have predicted, the borders of Tamil ethnicity upon independence displayed a degree of permeability, allowing individuals cross them to assume an alternative ethnic identity. In particular, it is likely that a traditional process of assimilation of South Indian people into the Sinhalese culture was continuing with people moving across the Tamil-Sinhalese border. Pfaffenberger points out that this is evidenced by the changing proportions of those who have identified themselves as Tamil and Sinhalese to census interviewers during the past century:

From 1871 to 1981, the proportion of Tamils (Indian and Sri Lankan) in the population fell from 24.9 to 18.2 percent, while the proportion of Sinhalese rose from 66.9 to 74 percent. To be sure, these trends are partially explained by differential rates of reproduction and the repatriation of some Indian Tamils to India. Yet it is likely that the old tradition by which South Indian peoples became assimilated into the Sinhalese culture still continues today.¹⁰²

This phenomenon is captured by Silva in her analysis of MacIntyre's *Rasanayagam's Last Riot* (1993), a play set during the ethnic riots of 1983 featuring a middle class Tamil woman Sita, and her Sinhalese husband Philip¹⁰³. After her marriage, Sita subsumes her ethnic

Identities and the Rise of the Federal Party, in C. Manogaran and B. Pfaffenberger (eds.), *The Sri Lankan Tamils: Ethnicity and Identity*, Boulder CO, Westview Press, 1994, p. 138.

¹⁰² Pfaffenberger, B., *Ethnic Conflict and Youth Insurgency in Sri Lanka: The Social Origins of Tamil Separatism*, in J. V. Montville (ed.), *Conflict and Peacemaking in Multiethnic Societies*, USA, Lexington Books, 1990, p. 247.

¹⁰³ Neluka Silva, 'Mothers, Daughters and "Whores" of the Nation': nationalism and female stereotypes in post-colonial Sri Lankan drama in English, in <<Journal of Gender Studies>>, vol. 6, no. 3, 1997, p. 272.

identity and has no difficulty appropriating the Sinhalese identity for herself. Indeed, "as a Tamil married into the majority Sinhalese community and the mother of Sinhalese children, it was initially convenient for her to embrace that identity"¹⁰⁴. In conceptual terms, this ability to cross the Tamil-Sinhalese boundary can be interpreted the Sita's awareness of the subjective and constructed nature of Tamil ethnicity. It is only with the perception of ethnicity as a non-primordial phenomenon that individuals have freedom to assume an alternative ethnic identity not acquired at birth. The real significance of Sita's story however, is that with the advent of the ethnic riots of 1983 she is forced to come to terms with her "natural" Tamil identity¹⁰⁵. This scene, in which Tamil ethnicity acquires seemingly natural and objective meaning, points to the central transformation to affect Tamil ethnic consciousness.

Consider the cognitive processes that led, in 1983, to systematic violence against Tamils and their property, killing hundreds of people and destroying thousands of homes. What self-perceptions accompanied thousands of people's decision to put their own lives at risk in the fight for a separate Tamil state? Modern Tamil ethnicity has taken on objective meaning. It has become an autonomous and natural means of ordering and explaining human behaviour. It appears as if it is about "absolute and natural differences, instead of relative and cultural choices"¹⁰⁶. But this seemingly natural objectivity appears in stark contrast to the relativity, social pliability and subjectivity that it has been argued characterised Tamil ethnicity upon independence.

As mentioned above, Berger and Luckmann coined the term *reification* to describe this process, by which "the apprehension of human phenomena as if they were things, that

¹⁰⁴ Idem, p. 272.

¹⁰⁵ Idem, p. 272.

¹⁰⁶ Gerd Baumann., *Ethnicity: Blood or Wine?*, in *The Multicultural Riddle*, London & New York, 1999, p. 64.

is...the apprehension of the products of human activity as if they were something other than human products-such as facts of nature"¹⁰⁷. John Comaroff applies this concept to ethnicity: "In systems where 'ascribed' cultural differences rationalise structures of inequality, ethnicity takes on a cogent existent reality...It is the process of reification...that gives it the [false] appearance of being an autonomous factor in ordering the social world"¹⁰⁸. Ethnicity, as the previous chapter argued, is a socially constructed cognitive phenomenon, which is pliable, relative and contextual. It is *reified* when it takes on the appearance of a "thing": of a fixed, unchangeable and absolute form of belonging that is the only basis for collective action.

In this way, the transformation of Tamil ethnicity with the conflict in Sri Lanka can be seen as one of reification. As a central dimension in the present violent conflict, it appears as an objective and absolute basis for collective action, but this is in stark contrast to the nature of Tamil ethnicity upon independence. With the period of conflict, its relativity in relation to alternative identities and internal fragmentations has been overridden by its appearance as the only "true" means of self-definition. It has evolved from a relative form of identification to an autonomous and natural way of both ordering and explaining human behaviour. Its subjectivity has been replaced with an apparent objective existence. Tamil ethnicity has been *reified*: transformed from a relative, pliable and subjective phenomenon, to an apparently natural, objective and absolute form of belonging.

Having established that with the conflict in Sri Lanka Tamil ethnicity has been reified, we may now ask what the *processes* are through which this transformation occurred. This enquiry requires an understanding of the processes that constitute an individual's identity, which will be discussed next.

¹⁰⁷ Peter L. Berger, Thomas Luckmann. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, New York, Anchor Books, 1967, p. 106.

¹⁰⁸ John Comaroff, Jean Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination*, Colorado, Westview Press, 1992, pp. 61 - 62.

2.2 Identity Formation and Discourse Theory

What makes the nature and meaning of ethnic identity evolve? In the first chapter, it was argued that ethnicity is, like other forms of identity, a socially constructed, cognitive phenomenon. This section looks at theories of identity formation to understand the processes that constitute this identity. It aims to provide a theoretical understanding of the processes through which Tamil ethnicity has been reified with the conflict in Sri Lanka, by asking what the processes are through which an individual's identity is constituted and transformed. This theoretical framework will then be used to analyse the process of reification in the remaining two chapters.

The problem with many theories on the nature of identity employed in analyses of collective action and conflict is that they aim to explain identity based behaviour, rather than the processes of identity formation *per se*. Jabri suggests that these theories can be located on a continuum between the human needs approach and sociological approaches, and this criticism is to some extent applicable to both these approaches¹⁰⁹.

The human needs approach views individuals as biologically programmed to enter into social relationships. Human beings therefore have an innate desire to belong, and it is in the absence of such feelings of collective belonging that destructive inhuman behaviour occurs¹¹⁰. Primarily a model for explaining identity based behaviour however, this approach offers little insight into the processes of identity constitution or change. Displaying similarities to the biological ethnic primordialism of Van den Bergh, it portrays identity as a singular and static phenomenon. As Jabri points out, the ahistorical and acontextual nature of this approach suggests that it is unhelpful in understanding the relationship between the

¹⁰⁹ Vivienne Jabri, *Discourses on Violence, Conflict Analysis Reconsidered*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1996, p. 121.

continuities of social interaction, the construction of identity and its dynamic nature¹¹¹.

At the other end of the scale, social context is central to the sociological approaches based on Durkheim's notion of the "collective conscience"¹¹². Recognising the constitutive effects of the cross-generational social norms deeply embedded in society, these approaches attribute mass mobilisation to common sentiments situated in societies that cannot be reduced to the individual's innate need for identity¹¹³. The implications for understanding identity formation are twofold. On the one hand, sociological approaches provide a useful insight into forces of external ascription that constrain internal identification. On the other hand, like the human needs approach, sociological approaches do not explain the individual cognitive processes involved in identity construction. How do individuals process the societal norms and what room is given to individual volition? A third, social psychological approach provides an insight into cognitive processes involved in identity formation.

Social identity theory in social psychological literature adopts a cognitive understanding of social identity by defining it as self-perception as a group member¹¹⁴. Individuals are said to have a natural tendency to partition the world into comprehensible units and a deep need for positive self-evaluation.¹¹⁵ Identity is therefore constructed through self-categorisation as individuals seek to preserve a positive and coherent self-image through in-group and out-group discrimination. The social identity theory has been particularly influential in the literature on processes of group behaviour and the emergence of collective violence.

¹¹⁰ Idem, p. 122.

¹¹¹ Idem, pp. 123 - 124.

¹¹² Idem, p. 123.

¹¹³ Idem, p. 123.

¹¹⁴ Dominic Abrams, Michael Hogg, *An Introduction to Social Identity Approach*, in Dominic Abrams, Michael Hogg (eds.), *Social Identity Theory: Constructive and Critical Advances*, London, Harvester and Wheatsheaf, 1990, p. 3.

¹¹⁵ Idem, p. 3.

In terms of identity formation, the social identity approach accounts well for the cognitive and dynamic nature of ethnicity as one of plural and overlapping identities. Identities are dynamic and changeable because "an individual will tend to remain member of a group or seek membership of new groups if these groups have some contribution to make to the positive aspects of his social identity"¹¹⁶. But by privileging the voluntaristic freedom of the agent, the social identity approach fails to account for the influence of external factors on identity formation. Its focus on cognitive processes assumes, like much psychological research that "people operate like Rodin's famous statue 'Le Penseur', sitting and processing in solitary contemplation our beliefs, our line, our emotions, from the sensory impressions and beliefs with which we are constantly bombarded"¹¹⁷. It is true that 'Le Penseur' may be alone in his thoughts but, as Billig explains, those thoughts bear the marks of social contexts, cultural, social and communal resources¹¹⁸. Thus by ignoring external influences, this approach does not recognise that categories carry *meanings* and fails to explain how those meaning can change¹¹⁹. Furthermore, as Jabri argues, it ignores the fact that identity is often a function of categorisations reproduced in the social and institutional continuities implicated in power structures.¹²⁰

Social identity theory and sociological approaches highlight important elements of identity formation. However, they fall short of offering a useful understanding of the processes of identity formation by failing to provide a theoretical link between social context and cognitive processes. Their shortfall is the fact that they ignore the significance of *language*.

¹¹⁶ H. Tajfel cited in Vivienne Jabri, *Discourses on Violence, Conflict Analysis Reconsidered*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1996, p. 124.

¹¹⁷ Michael Billig, *Discursive, Rhetorical and Ideological Messages*, in Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor, Simeon J. Yates (eds.), *Discourse Theory and Practice: A Reader*, London, Sage Publications, 2001, p. 219.

¹¹⁸ Idem, p. 219.

¹¹⁹ Michael Billig, *Discursive, Rhetorical and Ideological Messages*, in Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor, Simeon J. Yates (eds.), *Discourse Theory and Practice: A Reader*, London, Sage Publications, 2001, p. 219.

¹²⁰ Vivienne Jabri, *Discourses on Violence, Conflict Analysis Reconsidered*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1996, p. 127.

Language, it is assumed, is simply a means of conveying to the mind of the listener what is in the mind of the speaker. Discourse theory takes apart this every day assumption that talk is the "best sense or best efforts expression of the internal thinking of the individual"¹²¹. And by challenging this view, it bridges the analytical gap. It relies on two central assumptions: that reality is constituted by language and that dominant discourses fix meaning.

Discourse theory argues that language - or discourse - does not reflect reality, but is constitutive of it. The term "discourse" is used in to signify more than its conventional meaning of "verbal expression in speech or writing"¹²². It is understood as "systems of signification" by which meaning is produced, and therefore includes both linguistic and non-linguistic elements such as "actions, thought and beliefs"¹²³. The crucial factor that defines discourse is that it is active and constructive. As such, discourses are not flat like descriptions, but dynamic and sophisticated systems of truths that present a version of things, a story about the reality. As Parker explains, we find discourses at work in *texts*, or "delimited tissues of meaning reproduced in any form that can be given an interpretative gloss"¹²⁴. Potter and Wetherell have captured the underlying assumption of discourse analysis: "social texts do not merely *mirror or reflect* objects, events and categories pre-existing in the social or natural world. Rather they actively *construct* a version of things. They do not describe things, they do things"¹²⁵.

Discourses are constructive of reality because social actors involved in communication draw

¹²¹ Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor, Simeon J. Yates (eds.), *Discourse Theory and Practice: A Reader*, London, Sage Publications, 2001, p. 187.

¹²² English dictionary at www.dictionary.com

¹²³ B. Sayyid, L. Zac, *Political Analysis in a World Without Foundations*, in E. Scarbrough, E. Tannebaum (eds.), *Research Strategies in Social Sciences: a Guide to New Approaches*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998.

¹²⁴ Ian Parker, *Discourse Analysis - Psychological Aspects*, London, Routledge, 1992, p. 8.

¹²⁵ Potter and Wetherell, cited in Vivienne Jabri, *Discourses on Violence, Conflict Analysis Reconsidered*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1996, p. 95.

upon systems of signification available to them to create meaning. It is not that language describes reality, but that we come to know experience because of the language available to us to interpret it. Individuals do not create their own language, but they use terms which are culturally, historically and ideologically available¹²⁶. As Parker explains, "discourse constructs 'representations' of the world which have a reality almost as coercive as gravity"¹²⁷. The thoughts of 'Le Penseur' not only bear the marks the social context, they are drawn from a repertoire of understanding - made up of multiple and overlapping discourses - from which he makes sense of the world. Discourses therefore have a dual function: they both enable the creation of meaning and, by presenting one version of the world, they constrain the interpretations available for the construction of social reality.

Discourse *theory* contends that there is no true essence of things except that that is fabricated by language. Discourse *analysis* applies this assumption in seeking to understand socio-political phenomena by "the way in which actors, objects and meanings are constructed within a discourse"¹²⁸. As such, it offers a mode of analysis that has been applied in fields of research as varied as political science, sociology, psychology and anthropology. Its application is equally relevant to the study of identity formation, and it proves singularly able to both explain the nature of ethnic identity and provide a tool for analysing its dynamism. As Sayyid and Zac explain, if discourses produce meaning, they also construct identities.

If meaning is a construction and there is no pre-existing signified (objective

¹²⁶ Michael Billig, *Discursive, Rhetorical and Ideological Messages*, in Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor, Simeon J. Yates (eds.), *Discourse Theory and Practice: A Reader*, London, Sage Publications, 2001, p. 217.

¹²⁷ Ian Parker, *Discourse Analysis - Psychological Aspects*, London, Routledge, 1992, p. 6.

¹²⁸ B. Sayyid, L. Zac, *Political Analysis in a World Without Foundations*, in E. Scarbrough, E. Tannebaum (eds.), *Research Strategies in Social Sciences: a Guide to New Approaches*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 257.

reality) before signification, then there are no pre-given identities as such-before meaning. All of them are constructions. In other words, if all signification is constructed, then so are the identities and the relations between them.¹²⁹

Thus identities and their boundaries are constructed by discourses or *narratives*. As they go on to explain:

The discursive approach focuses on the way in which communities construct their limits; their relationship to that which they are not and that which threatens them, and the narratives which produce the founding past of a community, its identity and its projections of the future¹³⁰.

Discourse theory sees identities as constructed and inherently changeable. Identities are constituted by the way social agents are inserted into a given discourse, and the position they occupy in relation to it as a whole. At any one time an individual may be faced with a plurality of overlapping discourses providing different implications for identity: discourses that not only provide categorisations, but also give them meaning. It is the self-perceptions drawn from this "fund of interpretative possibilities" which constitute the individual's social identity at any one time¹³¹. But because discourses are themselves inherently unstable, identities are, according to discourse analysis, also fluid and changeable. Discourse analysis allows assumptions to be made concerning the ways in which individuals interpret their notions of self through an analysis of the discourses available to and reproduced by them. But if individuals have plural discourses available to them at any one time, how can it be known which will be drawn upon by them in order to construct an understanding of

¹²⁹ Idem, p. 258.

¹³⁰ Idem, p. 261.

¹³¹ Nancy Fraser cited in Vivienne Jabri, *Discourses on Violence: conflict analysis reconsidered*, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 1996, p. 133.

selfhood? The answer lies in the second assumption of discourse analysis, that dominant discourses can fix meaning.

Dominant discourses are those that are widely drawn upon, legitimised and reproduced by individuals in a given society or section of it. At the extreme, the term hegemony is used to describe dominant discourses that are accepted and reproduced to an extent that they succeed in creating a new "common sense". Because discourses are inter-linked and even contradictory, this hegemony is most strong when a discourse's proposed logic not only becomes natural to a community, but also deactivates other discursive projects against which it is struggling¹³². Thus by limiting the scope for change in subjectivities, hegemony allows discourses to fix meaning within a specific context. But how is this achieved?

The dominance or hegemony of discourses is often linked with "*power elites*": those that hold a privileged position regarding discourse, those that are "literally the ones to have most say".¹³³ But as Van Dijk suggests, hegemony does not always imply a clear picture of discursive villains and surrendering victims: forms of dominance are usually *organized* and *institutionalised*¹³⁴. He goes on to explain:

The dominance of groups is thus not merely enacted individually, by its group members...it may also be supported or condoned by other group members, sanctioned by the courts, legitimated by laws, enforced by the police, and ideologically sustained and reproduced by the media or textbooks¹³⁵.

¹³² B. Sayyid, L. Zac, *Political Analysis in a World Without Foundations*, in E. Scarbrough, E. Tannebaum (eds.), *Research Strategies in Social Sciences: a Guide to New Approaches*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 261.

¹³³ T. A. Van Dijk, *Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis*, in <<Discourse and Society>>, vol. 4, p. 253.

¹³⁴ Idem, p. 253.

Discursive dominance is therefore implied by structures of power and institutionalisation. First, as Jabri puts it, "identity is always a point of both selection and contestation and it is through structures of domination and control that dominant discourses on identity emerge"¹³⁶. So in the Former Yugoslavia, the hegemony of Serb nationalist discourses was strongly linked to the Serb nationalist power elite's access to television broadcasting¹³⁷. Second, discourses appear most natural when they are institutionalised. Their systematic articulation through institutional processes, so that they out-survive the individuals who often unknowingly reproduce them, gives them uncompromising hegemony through the naturalisation of their meaning. In Britain for example, the hegemony of the racist discourses institutionalised in the metropolitan police service has proved thus far impossible to challenge¹³⁸.

This section began by asking what the processes are through which identity is constituted and transformed. Discourse theory suggests that identities are not simply a matter of human need, social context or voluntaristic self-categorisation. Instead, identities are understood as being formed by individuals interpreting their notion of self through the language of discourses that are available to them. This implies the active selection of the stories about reality, but active selection is not free selection¹³⁹. Our freedom to construct identity is limited by the dominant discourses implied in structures of power and discursive privilege. The nature and meaning of identity is therefore transformed as individuals interpret their notion of self through shifting prevailing stories about reality with different constructions of self-hood: through *changing dominant discourses*.

¹³⁵ Idem, p. 253.

¹³⁶ Vivienne Jabri, *Discourses on Violence: conflict analysis reconsidered*, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 1996, p. 133.

¹³⁷ BBC Documentary, *The Death of Yugoslavia*, 1995.

¹³⁸ *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry: Report of an Inquiry by Sir William Macpherson of Cluny*, Cm 4262, London: The Stationery Office, 1999.

¹³⁹ Jolle Demmers, *Nationalism and Discourse*, lecture at Centre for Conflict Studies, University of Utrecht, March 26, 2004.

The aim of this section has been to provide a theoretical understanding of the processes through which Tamil ethnicity has been reified. Discourse theory suggests that this process of reification should be understood as one of *changing dominant discourses*. An analysis of the process of reification of Tamil ethnicity will therefore involve studying prevailing stories about reality, their constructions of Tamil ethnicity and their ability to fix meaning. On the one hand, this means looking at "how people tell stories about themselves and how they present themselves in talk"¹⁴⁰. On the other, it means examining the dominance of these stories and their implication in structures of dominance and discursive privilege.

In sum, this aim of this chapter has been twofold: first to show the way in which the nature and meaning of Tamil ethnicity has been transformed in relation to the conflict in Sri Lanka, and second provide a theoretical understanding of the processes through which this transformation has taken place. In the first part of the chapter, it was argued that with the conflict, Tamil ethnicity has been *reified*, or transformed from a relative, pliable and subjective form of identity, to an apparently natural, objective and absolute way of ordering behaviour. Examining theories of identity formation, the second part of the chapter argued that identity is formed through language, and in particular the active selection of dominant discourses. The process of reification was therefore presented as one of *changing dominant discourses*, through which identities are transformed as individuals interpret their notion of self through shifting prevailing narrative constructions of self-hood. It was suggested that an analysis of this process of reification would therefore involve studying prevailing stories about reality and their implication in structures of power and discursive privilege. Applying this theoretical framework, the next chapter analyses the process of reification of Tamil ethnicity during the period of rising parliamentary nationalisms from the mid-1950s till the

¹⁴⁰ Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor, Simeon J. Yates (eds.), *Discourse Theory and Practice: A Reader*, London, Sage Publications, 2001, p. 186.

late 1970s.

3 Rising Nationalisms and the Institutionalisation of Difference

The previous chapter showed that with the conflict in Sri Lanka, Tamil ethnicity has been transformed from a relative, pliable and subjective form of identity, to an apparently natural, objective and absolute way of ordering behaviour. It went on to suggest that the process of reification, through which this transformation occurred, was one of changing dominant discourses. Employing this theoretical framework, the remainder of this paper makes an analysis of the process of reification of Tamil ethnicity. It seeks to provide an understanding of this process by examining the changing dominant discourses during the period of conflict in Sri Lanka, their constructions of Tamil ethnicity and their implication in structures of domination and discursive privilege.

This chapter analyses the process of reification of Tamil ethnicity during the period of rising Sinhalese and Tamil parliamentary nationalisms from the mid-1950s to the late 1970s. It examines the increasingly dominant discourses of Sinhalese and Tamil nationalisms, and shows that a central element of the process of reification was the "institutionalisation of difference": the institutionalisation of exclusionist narratives that constituted Tamil ethnicity as a singular and uniform form of belonging. Before taking a closer look at these discourses, it is necessary to briefly clarify the notions of nationalism, nationalist discourse and their relationship to ethnicity.

3.1 Nationalism, Nationalist Discourse and Ethnicity

What is nationalism? Gellner, perhaps the most influential theorist in the study of nationalism, has defined it to mean "primarily a principle which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent"¹⁴¹. For Gellner, this national unit is a cultural one - or

¹⁴¹ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1983, p. 1.

a population that is relatively culturally homogenous. Nationalism therefore is a principle that links political power - or the state - to culture, holding that their boundaries should not cross. For Anderson, the nation is "an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign"¹⁴². It is a *community*, manifesting itself in a form of "deep horizontal comradeship" but is *imagined* by its members who will never actually know most of their fellow members, meet them or even hear of them. Thus the nation is primarily a cognitive phenomenon, a feeling of collective belonging that can be imagined on the basis of diverse criteria but is distinguished from other collectivities by the fact that it is imagined as *political*.

Nationalist *movements* therefore seek to "forge a link between (self-defined) cultural group and state"¹⁴³. This may be within an existing state - Sinhalese nationalism - or aspiring to create a new one - separatist Tamil nationalism. It is important to recognize however that although nationalism appears to emerge from the nation that pre-exists it, the imagined community is actually a product of nationalism. As Gellner puts it: "Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness; it invents nations where they do not exist"¹⁴⁴. Nationalist *discourses* are the stories about reality that construct the nation "as a totality, built upon an imagined distinctive history and culture"¹⁴⁵. They are the complex systems of truths that make nationalism work. Nationalist discourses are therefore invariably imbued with a historically particular logic, reflecting "the ways in which nation-states have been created in the past two hundred years"¹⁴⁶. Their particular logic naturalizes the division of

¹⁴² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London and New York, Verso, 1991, p. 1.

¹⁴³ Thomas H. Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*, London, Pluto Press, 1993, p. 100.

¹⁴⁴ Ernest Gellner, cited in Thomas H. Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*, London, Pluto Press, 1993, p. 97.

¹⁴⁵ Vivienne Jabri, *Discourses on Violence: conflict analysis reconsidered*, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 1996, p. 134.

¹⁴⁶ Michael Billig, *Discursive, Rhetorical and Ideological Messages*, in Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor, Simeon J. Yates (eds.), *Discourse Theory and Practice: A Reader*, London Sage Publications, 2001, p. 219.

humanity into territorially linked, bounded entities that legitimize inclusion and exclusion in polity. As Jabri points out, the nation is therefore "the location of discursive and institutional practices that at one and the same time generate legitimation and exclusion"¹⁴⁷. This chapter looks at the way in which the increasing dominance of nationalist discourses, with their particular logic, has contributed to the reification of Tamil ethnicity. What then is the relationship between the product that is the nation and the pre-existing ethnic group?

Empirically they are clearly related phenomena, as most nationalisms today are, like Sinhalese and Tamil nationalist movements, ethnic in nature; they build their imagined communities on already existing markers of ethnic collective belonging. In terms of definition, the nation is distinguished from the ethnic group by its special relationship to the state. As Danforth explains, "nations are large, politicised ethnic groups associated with specific territories over which they seek a degree of autonomy. Nations, as opposed to ethnic groups, in other words, are people who exercise, or hope one day to exercise, sovereignty over a given territory"¹⁴⁸. The basic distinction is clear, while the ethnic group is not necessarily political the nation by definition makes a political claim to certain territory. The following sections demonstrate that as the discourses of Sinhalese and Tamil nationalisms forged nations out of pre-existing ethnic groups, their particular logic would be transformative of the nature and meaning of Tamil ethnicity.

While the discourse of Sinhalese nationalism had first emerged during the Buddhist revivalist movement of the nineteenth century, it was not however until the mid-1950s that it would achieve unprecedented dominance by its articulation through, and institutionalisation in, the state apparatus. In many ways Tamil nationalist discourse was

¹⁴⁷ Vivienne Jabri, *Discourses on Violence: conflict analysis reconsidered*, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 1996, p. 137.

¹⁴⁸ Loring Danforth, *The Macedonian Conflict: Ethnic Nationalism in a Transnational World*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1995, p. 14.

articulated as a response to that of Sinhalese nationalism, and it is therefore convenient to discuss the former after the latter.

3.2 The Discourse of Sinhalese Nationalism: Coercive Exclusionism

Sinhalese nationalism entered the domain of electoral politics in 1956, eight years after the Sri Lanka was given independence. Pursuing an ideology of Sinhalese-Buddhist hegemony, this movement seeks to forge a link between the Sinhalese ethnic identity and the Sri Lankan state. Its discourse – its story about reality that supports its claims – centres on an identity that is defined by unity of race, language, religion and territory. As Nissan and Stirrat observe, this discourse contains three central truths¹⁴⁹. First, the Sinhalese are a biological community, of whom two salient manifestations are the sharing of the common Sinhalese language and the Buddhist religion. Second, the Sinhalese race is the "chosen people" of the island of Sri Lanka, for whom the entirety of its territory is seen as a divine preserve. Third, faced with threatening foreign elements, this unity of race, language, religion and territory should be defended, if necessary, by force.

The picture of the world presented by this discourse strongly draws upon on and reproduces academic discourses of the nineteenth century Buddhist revivalist movement against Christianity the colonial rule. Imbuing reinterpretations and reconstructions of indigenous Buddhist myths with Western notions of race and history, the Sinhalese were presented as a biologically community who were the original and rightful inhabitants of the Sri Lankan island. Anagarika Dharmapala, undoubtedly the most influential writer of the Buddhist revival movement, effectively laid the foundations for modern Sinhalese nationalism:

Two thousand four hundred and forty six years a go a colony of Aryans from

¹⁴⁹ Elizabeth Nissan, R. L. Stirrat, *The Generation of Communal Identities*, in Jonathan Spencer (ed.), *Sri Lanka: History and Roots of the Conflict*, London and New York, Routledge, 1990, pp. 30 - 31.

the city of Sinhapura in Bengal...sailed in a vessel in search of fresh pastures...The descendents of the Aryan colonists were called Sinhala after the city, Sinhapura, which was founded by Sinhabbahu, the lion armed king, the lion armed descendants are the present Sinhalese, in whose veins no savage blood is found. Ethnologically, the Sinhalese are a unique race in as much as they can boast that they have no slave blood in them, and were never conquered by either pagan Tamils or European vandals who for three centuries have devastated this land, destroyed ancient temples burnt valuable libraries, and nearly annihilated the historic race...This bright, beautiful island was made into a Paradise by the Aryan Sinhalese before its destruction was brought about by the barbaric vandals¹⁵⁰.

The systems of truths that support this story about reality are largely drawn from the reinterpretation of Buddhist myths contained in the *Pali chronicles*, mythical documents documenting some two thousand years of Sri Lankan history. The doctrine of the "chosen people" reproduces the first sacred history of the *Pali chronicles*, according to which Buddha himself chose the Sinhalese people to be the island's rightful inhabitants. Buddha, it is said, visited the island and decided to make it a "fit dwelling place for men "where his doctrine could "thereafter shine in glory"¹⁵¹. To achieve this, he rid the island of its subhuman inhabitants thereby making room for Vijaya, an immigrant from north India who became the founding hero and first king of Sri Lanka. Half human half lion, Vijaya determined the identity of his descendents as Sinhala, or "people of the lion" and cemented the connection between them and Buddhism¹⁵². Thus, the tie between the Sri Lankan island,

¹⁵⁰ Anagarika Dharmapala cited in W. Schwarz, *The Tamils of Sri Lanka*, UK: Minority Rights Group, 1975, p. 9.

¹⁵¹ The *Mahavamsa* cited in David Little, *Sri Lanka: The Invention of Enmity*, Washington D.C, United Institute of Peace Press, 1994, p. 26.

¹⁵² David Little, *Sri Lanka: The Invention of Enmity*, Washington D.C, United Institute of Peace Press, 1994, p. 24.

the Sinhalese people, and the Buddhist religion is firmly drawn.

Myths of the *Pali chronicles* also provide the basis for advocating the forceful protection of the unity of Sinhalese identity from the threat of foreign elements. This tradition, it is said, was initiated by Buddha himself in clearing Sri Lanka for the Sinhalese people, and should be continued in the "methods adopted in ancient days by the good kings of old"¹⁵³. Thus the notion of differentiated "Other" is thus central to Sinhalese nationalist narratives, which, in the re-appropriation of Buddhist myths bring the threat of evil to the fore. Kapferer has described this as a hierarchical "cosmic logic", according to which the enemy within is not only excluded, but incorporated or annihilated¹⁵⁴. Significantly, in the latter half of the twentieth century, this dangerous "Other" was identified within this discourse as the Tamil people¹⁵⁵. In 1955, before sweeping to victory in parliamentary elections on a Sinhalese nationalist platform, leader of the SLFP, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, stated to the House of Representatives:

The fact that in the towns and villages, in business houses and in boutiques most of the work is in the hands of the Tamil speaking people will inevitably result in a fear, and I do not think an unjustified fear, of the inexorable shrinking of the Sinhalese language¹⁵⁶.

Imbued with the particularities of nationalist logic, the discourse of Sinhalese nationalism is supremely identity centric. The world is ordered by the categorization of individuals, and

¹⁵³ Anagarika Dharmapala cited in W. Schwarz, *The Tamils of Sri Lanka*, UK, Minority Rights Group, 1975, p. 9.

¹⁵⁴ B. Kapferer, *Remythologizing Discourses: State and Insurrectionary Violence in Sri Lanka*, in David E. Apter (ed.), *The Legitimization of Violence*, New York, New York University Press, 1997.

¹⁵⁵ Elizabeth Nissan, R. L. Stirrat, *The Generation of Communal Identities, in Sri Lanka: History and Roots of the Conflict*, Jonathan Spencer (ed.), London and New York, Routledge, 1990, pp. 30 - 31.

¹⁵⁶ S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, House of Representatives, October 1955, quoted in W. Schwarz, *The Tamils of Sri Lanka*, UK: Minority Rights Group, 1975, p.9.

meaning is given by their positioning within or outside of the national group. At the heart of discourse analysis is the understanding that language is constitutive of group categories. As Parker points out, language brings into being phenomena and "the simple use of a noun comes to give that object a reality"¹⁵⁷. It is the discourse that allows people to think of them in terms of "Sinhalese", not their reality that is reflected by it. This does not however occur in discursive isolation: "discourses are located in time, in history, for the objects they refer to are objects constituted in the past by...related discourses"¹⁵⁸. The discourse of Sinhalese nationalism draws on nineteenth century discourses of collective belonging, and by re-articulating the labels they coined reconfirms the objective reality of ethnic categories. It also adds meaning to their boundaries.

As Billig observes that "categories carry meanings and not all categories - certainly not all group categories - carry identical meanings"¹⁵⁹. By giving individuals the language to interpret experience, these meanings - what it implies to describe a group as an "ethnic" group - are also constituted within discourse. Reflecting the logic of nationalism, Sinhalese nationalist discourse links ethnicity to the state, loading it with political and territorial meaning. This has two important implications. On the one hand, it uncompromisingly draws and maintains boundaries. Clear division becomes central, as legitimacy and entitlements flow from national belonging. Identity is unambiguously defined in terms of the multiple and congruent criteria of race, language, religion and territory. On the other, to give meaning to unity and cement the link between people and soil, it reproduces symbols, myths and "ethno-histories"¹⁶⁰ of past kingdoms and heroic ancestors. Ethnicity thus emerges as a singularly primordial relationship of common descent, timeless cultural

¹⁵⁷ Ian Parker, *Discourse Analysis - Psychological Aspects*, London, Routledge, 1992, p. 8.

¹⁵⁸ Idem, p. 16.

¹⁵⁹ Michael Billig, *Discursive, Rhetorical and Ideological Messages*, in Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor, Simeon J. Yates (eds.), *Discourse Theory and Practice: A Reader*, London Sage Publications, 2001, p. 219.

¹⁶⁰ Anthony D. Smith, *Nations and Nationalism In a Global Era*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1995, p.

distinctness and purity of race. The picture of the world portrayed by this discourse is one in which ethnic identity is about unambiguous, objective, and primordial belonging. And confined to the realm of biology, ethnic identity is propelled from a product of human activity to a natural reality: it is ultimately reified.

As well as constructing the inclusiveness of the "Sinhalese" category, its clear-cut boundaries of belonging simultaneously classify the excluded. Following the logic of nationalism, this category is denied legitimacy and political entitlements. It is an exclusionist discourse: a discourse that "politically legitimates and reproduces a categorization based on those who are defined as legitimately within, against all external others who are variously the targets of direct violence and/or institutionalized discrimination"¹⁶¹. And its exclusionist force is multiplied, as cumulative and congruent criteria repeatedly confirm each other, each time reiterating the unequivocal lines of exclusion. But Sinhalese nationalist discourse goes further: it dehumanizes this "Other", relegating it to the status of barbarians, "not more to be esteemed than beasts"¹⁶². And because of its hierarchical logic, the discourse propagates an innate "fear of extinction"¹⁶³, so that the "Other" is not only excluded, it is deeply feared as a threat to the integrity of Sinhalese identity. As a result, exclusion is linked with violence, incorporation and annihilation.

What are the implications of Sinhalese nationalist discourse for identity formation and in particular for Tamil ethnicity? Discourse analysis holds that the identity of a subject is

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¹⁶¹ Vivienne Jabri, *Discourses on Violence: conflict analysis reconsidered*, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 1996, p. 138.

¹⁶² The story of the warrior king Duttagamani in the *Mahavamsa* chronicle, see David Little, *Sri Lanka: The Invention of Enmity*, Washington D.C, United Institute of Peace Press, 1994, p. 29.

¹⁶³ S. I. Keethaponcalan, *Social Cubism: A Comprehensive Look at the Causes of Conflict in Sri Lanka*, in <<ILSA Journal of International and Comparative Law>>, vol. 8, no. 3, Summer 2002, p. 938.

given by its insertion within a discourse. The central question is how individuals give meaning to self-perception, how they interpret experience, how they use the discourse to tell stories about themselves. Sinhalese nationalist discourse offers only one criterion for self-understanding: inclusion or exclusion in the Sinhalese nation. Ethnicity becomes the primary identifier as individuals understand their position within the discourse in relation to the unity of Sinhalese identity. Objectively constructed with unambiguous boundaries, this ethnic identity segments the diversity of individuals according to bounded exclusionist categories. It is a *singular* identity because it denies a plurality of identities, appearing as unique in the ordering of the world. It is also a *uniform* identity because it precludes a diversity of experience, offering flat and all-encompassing categories of inclusion and exclusion. In this way, ethnicity is reified as a form of self-hood, so far from the relativity and social pliability of original ethnic belonging. And as the primordial language of ethno-histories and timeless distinction is used to give meaning to group identity, ethnic boundaries are transformed into *unambiguous, objective and immemorial* lines of distinction.

Specifically identified within the category of dangerous other, an essential asymmetry of power is instituted for Tamil ethnic identity by Sinhalese nationalist discourse. Brought into being as an objectified group, the identification of "the Tamils" simultaneously denies them the right to define themselves within the discourse. Again, this does not happen in discursive isolation, the discourse refers to "the Tamils" as defined in previous discourses of collective belonging, but with one important difference. This is an external categorization that carries exclusionist, discriminatory, oppressive meaning. As Parker suggests, discursive power relations are about people that stand to lose and gain out of the employment of discourse, and discursive power is about *coerciveness of meaning*¹⁶⁴.

¹⁶⁴ Ian Parker, *Discourse Analysis - Psychological Aspects*, London, Routledge, 1992, p. 18.

Within Sinhalese nationalist discourse, an asymmetry of power is instituted by the coercive imposition of dominant meaning on the on the excluded Tamil category.

In this way, the discourse of Sinhalese nationalism imposed a singular, uniform and objectified identity on the Tamil people through the articulation of coercive exclusionism. From 1956 onward, it would benefit from an unprecedented position of discursive dominance that would enable it to fix this meaning.

3.3 The Institutionalisation of Sinhalese Nationalist Discourse

By the mid-twentieth century, the truths of Sinhalese nationalist discourse had become widely accepted by a large section of the Sinhalese population¹⁶⁵. But it was during the period under consideration that the success of its nationalist movement in electoral politics gave it unprecedented discursive dominance though it's articulation by, and institutionalisation in, the structures of state power. This "institutionalisation of difference" was a central aspect of the process of reification, which both fixed its particular understanding of Tamil ethnicity and provoked a reactionary discourse, in its own way constitutive of identity.

From 1956 onwards, the electoral success of Sinhalese nationalism led successive Sri Lankan governments to institute programmes firmly linking the identity of the state with that of the majority community. Legislation, constitutional change and public policies all articulated an ideology of Sinhalese-Buddhist hegemony. The most renowned of these policies is the "Sinhala Only Act" of 1956, which made Sinhalese the only official language of the island. This was followed in 1972 by a republican constitution which, as well as confirming the status of Sinhalese as the official language, gave Buddhism the "foremost

¹⁶⁵ Elizabeth Nissan, R. L. Stirrat, *The Generation of Communal Identities*, in Jonathan Spencer (ed.), *Sri Lanka: History and Roots of the Conflict*, London and New York, Routledge, 1990, p. 34.

position" within the new Sri Lankan state and concentrated power in the Sinhala dominated legislature. The early 1970s also saw the altering of the university entrance system to a "district quota system" which, aimed at broadening access to education for the Sinhalese, resulted in the "drastic reduction of Tamil students entering university"¹⁶⁶.

While these policies are often thought of as being *legitimized* by the discourse of Sinhalese nationalism, it is important to recognize that within discourse theory language as consists of any mode of signification, including actions as well as words. Crucially, in terms of discourse analysis, the successive policies of Sinhalese-Buddhist hegemony should be seen as *articulating* Sinhalese nationalist discourse, legitimating its assumptions and reproducing its logic through the power of the state machine. Put in another way, acts are not understood in isolation. They are interpreted within the larger discourses of which they form part, and in this process, the logic of these discourses is reproduced.

Perhaps the area of public policy most illustrative of its reproduction of the exclusionism of Sinhalese nationalist narratives is the field of development and schemes of "land colonization". Large-scale irrigation schemes, these aimed at resettling mostly peasant Sinhalese families in the dry zone of Sri Lanka, part of which is in traditionally Tamil-speaking areas. On an ideological level, the opening of dry zones through state intervention was equated with the restoration of "glorious ancient Sinhala civilisations"¹⁶⁷. Politicians heading such schemes were often known to compare themselves to the heroic kings who had built ancient irrigation schemes,¹⁶⁸ while discourses of Sinhalese-Buddhist

¹⁶⁶ Sunil Bastian, *The Failure of State Formation, Identity, Conflict and Civil Society Responses: The Case of Sri Lanka*, Paper No. 4, Peace Building in Complex Political Emergencies, Manchester, Institute for Development and Policy Management, University of Manchester, 1999, p. 10.

¹⁶⁷ Jonathan Goodhand with Philippa Atkinson, *Sri Lanka, Conflict and Aid: Enhancing the Peacebuilding Impact of International Engagement*, London, International Alert, 2001, p. 31.

¹⁶⁸ Sunil Bastian, *The Failure of State Formation, Identity, Conflict and Civil Society Responses: The Case of Sri Lanka*, Paper No. 4, Peace Building in Complex Political Emergencies, Manchester, Institute for Development and Policy Management, University of Manchester, 1999, p. 11.

hegemony were reproduced through Buddhist symbolism interwoven into their opening ceremonies¹⁶⁹. Finally, the demographic changes brought about land colonization schemes had the effect of carving out new electorates dominated by the Sinhalese and altering the power balance in the east of the island¹⁷⁰.

From the perspective of discourses analysis, the structures of power that enable state policies and institutions to permeate innumerable aspects of social and individual life represents a unique position of discursive dominance. Significantly, as well as being articulated through specific government policies, the discourse of Sinhalese nationalism became substantially bureaucratised, its logic and meaning permeating the very fabric of the Sri Lankan state apparatus. The Buddhist symbolism interwoven into opening ceremonies mentioned above is illustrative of the general prominence given to Sinhalese Buddhist symbols and cultural practices in state functions. Chanting by Buddhist monks has almost become an accepted practice within state institutions on special occasions¹⁷¹. Moreover, many have shrine rooms with Buddha statues within their premises, and some have become very active during Buddhist festivals. Similarly, the ethno-histories of Sinhalese nationalist discourse have been institutionalized through symbolism. Perhaps the most glaring example is that of the armed forces, the very symbol of the power of the state machine. After the Sinhala Only Act and the adoption of Sinhalese as the language of command, various regiments were named after Sinhalese kings who were known to have defeated Tamil invaders. The armed forces also began to play an active role during Buddhist festivals¹⁷².

¹⁶⁹ S. Tennekoon, *Rituals of Development: The Accelerated Mahaweli Development Program of Sri Lanka*, in <<American Anthropologist>>, vol. 15, 1988.

¹⁷⁰ Jonathan Goodhand with Philippa Atkinson, *Sri Lanka, Conflict and Aid: Enhancing the Peacebuilding Impact of International Engagement*, London, International Alert, 2001, p. 31.

¹⁷¹ Sunil Bastian, *The Failure of State Formation, Identity, Conflict and Civil Society Responses: The Case of Sri Lanka*, Paper No. 4, Peace Building in Complex Political Emergencies, Manchester, Institute for Development and Policy Management, University of Manchester, 1999, p. 11.

¹⁷² Idem, pp. 12 - 13.

As with the armed forces, the Sinhala Only Act represented, in many ways, the beginning of the institutionalisation of Sinhalese nationalist discourse in the state machine. The making of Sinhalese the only official language had resulted in a sharp drop in Tamils in the public services and with it the dominant belief that the public sector was to serve the Sinhalese majority. As Wilson has observed, there was a "high communal feeling" amongst public servants during this time¹⁷³. The experience recalled by former Supreme Court judge, V. Manicavasagar, is illustrative:

I went to the office of the Government Agent in Colombo in July 1973. In order to find my way to the officer whom I wanted to meet, I saw a board in Sinhala only. I inquired in English from the clerk who was seated behind the counter as to what it said. His reply in Sinhala was 'don't you know how to read Sinhala?' I replied in English that I cannot understand what he said. He said in Sinhala 'Go and learn Sinhala and come back.'¹⁷⁴

Articulating the exclusionist logic of Sinhalese nationalism, the response of the clerk illustrates the power of bureaucracies to produce dominant discourses. As Jabri suggests, identities are formed within "discursive and institutional continuities"¹⁷⁵. It is when discourses achieve systematic articulation, reproduction and legitimation through institutionalisation that they acquire a natural common sense. As Sinhalese nationalist discourse permeated state institutions, reproduced by the faceless bureaucrats of the state machine, its logic would acquire the potential of becoming pervasive within society so as to

¹⁷³ A. Jeyaratnam Wilson, *Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism: Its Origins and Development in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, London, C. Hurst & Company, 2000.

¹⁷⁴ V. Manicavasagar quoted in document by C.I.N.T.A. for the I.C.J., 1974, cited in W. Schwarz, *The Tamils of Sri Lanka*, UK: Minority Rights Group, 1975, p. 9.

¹⁷⁵ Vivienne Jabri, *Discourses on Violence: conflict analysis reconsidered*, Manchester University

fix permanence and meaning. This was the "institutionalisation of difference": the institutionalisation of a coercive exclusionism that would compel Tamil people to view themselves within this objectified category, as excluded, oppressed and threatened. As the Ceylon Institute for National and Tamil Affairs observed in 1974:

From all this it would appear that the policy of the Government, although not expressly stated, is the relegation of the Tamils to the status of second class citizens, and the eventual liquidation of the Tamils as a racial minority, and their absorption into the Sinhalese community¹⁷⁶.

With the institutionalisation of this exclusionist discourse, Tamil ethnicity would begin to emerge as a singular dominant identity, with unambiguous, objectified and immemorial boundaries. Crucially however, coercive discourses are always subject to resistance, to the refusal of dominant meaning¹⁷⁷. This is so too, with the dominant identities constructed within them. As Jabri points out, "identity is always a point of both selection and contestation" and "discursive hegemony does not, therefore, produce automata, willing citizenry absorbing pronouncements of identity as these are exuded from discursively privileged leadership"¹⁷⁸. Indeed the increasing dominance of Sinhalese nationalist narratives led to the emergence of a resistive discourse of Tamil nationalism that would in its own way be constitutive of a reified Tamil ethnic identity.

3.4 The Discourse of Tamil Nationalism: Resisting Exclusionism with Exclusionism

Press, Manchester and New York, 1996, p. 131.

¹⁷⁶ Document for the International Commission of Jurists, prepared by the Ceylon Institute of National and Tamil Affairs, 1974, cited in Walter Schwarz, *The Tamils of Sri Lanka*, UK: Minority Rights Group, 1975, p. 5.

¹⁷⁷ Ian Parker, *Discourse Analysis - Psychological Aspects*, London, Routledge, 1992, p. 18.

¹⁷⁸ Vivienne Jabri, *Discourses on Violence, Conflict Analysis Reconsidered*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1996, p. 133.

From the start, Tamil nationalist discourse was articulated as a response to the sense of grievance and political oppression instituted through the institutionalised discourse of Sinhalese nationalism. Centring on language and economic rights, it was therefore strongly “developmental” and “democratic”¹⁷⁹. In particular, the discourse was vocalized as a defence against the exclusionism of successive nationalist policies instituting Sinhalese-Buddhist hegemony. Published in 1960, the Federal Party manifesto read:

It has been the experience of the Tamil-speaking people of Ceylon that whenever their political, economic and cultural interests have been at variance or in conflict with those of the Sinhalese nation, they have inevitably suffered, grievously in fact, by being deprived of their fundamental rights and privileges¹⁸⁰.

Similarly, the Vaddukoddai Resolution, the inaugural document of the Tamil United Liberation Front adopted in 1976, called for the correction of numerous wrongs that Sinhalese governments were perceived to have instituted in their use of political power in oppression of the Tamil people¹⁸¹.

In addition to responding to the institutionalisation of the discourse of Sinhalese nationalism however, Tamil nationalist discourse also resisted the coercive imposition of its exclusionist, oppressive meaning. It defied exclusion by creating its own system of truths that constituted the Tamil people as a nation, with its own right to political autonomy

¹⁷⁹ Radhika Coomaraswamy, *Myths Without a Conscience: Tamil and Sinhalese Nationalist Writings of the 1980s*, in C. Abeysekera and N. Gunasinghe (eds.) *Facets of Ethnicity in Sri Lanka*, Colombo, Sri Lanka, Social Scientists Association of Sri Lanka, 1987, p. 74.

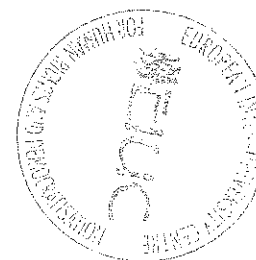
¹⁸⁰ The Federal Party Manifesto as reproduced in Ceylon Daily News Parliaments of Ceylon 1960, cited in A. Jeyaratnam Wilson, *Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism: Its Origins and Development in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, London, Hurst and Company, 2000, p. 91.

¹⁸¹ The Vaddukoddai Resolution, <http://www.eelam.com/introduction/vaddukoddai.html> (last visited 24 May 2004).

on part of the Sri Lankan island. It was a *resistive discourse*¹⁸² that refused dominant meaning by challenging the validity of Sinhalese hegemony. Two central elements of this resistive discourse can be identified as the concepts of “unity of Tamil-speaking people” and the Tamil “traditional homelands”¹⁸³.

The nation was conceptualized by this resistive discourse as the “unity of the Tamil-speaking people”. First developed by the Federal Party, this formula includes not just the Jaffna Tamils of the Northern region, but also the Tamil speaking people in the Eastern Province¹⁸⁴. In an effort to numerically increase the force of the Tamil nation, the formula displayed complete disregard for the separate identity claimed by the Sri Lankan Moors and the Up Country Tamils. The claim had been made at the first national convention of the Federal Party in 1951:

The Tamil-speaking people in Sri Lanka constituted a nation distinct from that of the Sinhalese in every fundamental test of nationhood.¹⁸⁵



Crucially however, reflecting the logic of nationalism, the discourse linked this unity of language with territory. The Tamil “traditional homelands” were born as the historic habitations of the Tamil-speaking people, carrying with them the right to political autonomy on their territory. Although the boundaries of the “homelands” were initially unclear, the concept was based on the separate historical past of Tamils and a continuous

¹⁸² Ian Parker, *Discourse Analysis - Psychological Aspects*, London, Routledge, 1992, p. 18.

¹⁸³ Kristian Stokke, Anne Kirsti Ryntviet, *The Struggle for Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka*, in <<Growth and Change>>, vol. 31, 2000, pp. 296.

¹⁸⁴ A. Jeyaratnam Wilson, *The Colombo Man, the Jaffna Man and the Batticaloa Man: Regional Identities and the Rise of the Federal Party*, in C. Manogaran and B. Pfaffenberger (eds.), *The Sri Lankan Tamils: Ethnicity and Identity*, Boulder CO, Westview Press, 1994, p. 134.

¹⁸⁵ K. M. de Silva, *Separatism and Political Violence in Sri Lanka*, in K. M. de Silva (ed.), *Conflicts and Violence in South Asia*, Kandy, International Centre for Ethnic Studies/Clingendael Institute, 2000, p. 383.

tradition of independent statehood in the north and north-eastern provinces of the island¹⁸⁶.

Claims to the separate historical past of the Tamil speaking-people centred on the assertion that Jaffna had been an autonomous and powerful Tamil kingdom for five centuries. This was based on the largely mythical chronicle, *Yalppana Vaipava Malai*, and the spate of "Histories of Jaffna" that were published following its translation into Tamil in 1878 that, as explained in chapter one, had been so instrumental in the development of Tamil consciousness in the nineteenth century¹⁸⁷. But the boundaries of the "traditional homelands" extended far beyond the northern kingdom of Jaffna to included both the Northern and Eastern provinces. So, in the mid-1950s, the historical permanence of these boundaries was asserted by relying on one piece of "historical evidence", a short extract from the memorandum of the first Colonial Secretary of Ceylon, Hugh Cleghorn – or the "Cleghorn Minute" as it has come to be known:

Two different nations, from the very ancient period have divided between them the possession of the island: First the Cinhalese, inhabiting the interior of the country in its southern end and western parts of Wallouve to Chilow, and secondly the Malabars [Tamils], who possess the northern and eastern districts.

These two nations differ entirely in their religion, language and manners¹⁸⁸.

This short and historically doubtful piece¹⁸⁹ has since "gained the status of scriptural

¹⁸⁶ Idem, p. 383.

¹⁸⁷ Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam, *Ethnicity and nationalism. The Sri Lanka Tamils in the late nineteenth century: Some theoretical questions*, in D. Weidemann (ed.), *Nationalism Ethnicity and Political Development: South Asian Perspectives*, New Delhi, Manohar, 1991, p.33.

¹⁸⁸ Cited in K. M. de Silva, *Separatism and Political Violence in Sri Lanka*, in K. M. de Silva (ed.), *Conflicts and Violence in South Asia*, Kandy, International Centre for Ethnic Studies/Clingendael Institute, 2000, p. 384.

¹⁸⁹ See chapter one of this paper, pp. 21 – 23.

sanctity" in separatist nationalist discourses¹⁹⁰. Indeed, in its call for a separate Tamil state the Vaddukkodai Resolution (1976) clearly draws on the Cleghorn Minute, albeit without reference:

Whereas throughout the centuries from the dawn of history, the Sinhalese and Tamil nations have divided between them the possession of Ceylon, the Sinhalese inhabiting the interior parts of the country in its southern and western parts from the river Walawe to that of Chilaw and the Tamils possessing the northern and the eastern districts..."¹⁹¹

On the surface, this resistive discourse of Tamil nationalism, with its developmental, unity and traditional homelands based claims, directly challenges the logic of Sinhalese Buddhist hegemony. These two competing nationalist discourses seem to represent irreconcilable systems of truths that justify respective claims to political autonomy on overlapping territories. They construct what is termed in discourse analysis as *social antagonisms*: frontiers of negativity in social relations that reveal the points in which social meaning is contested and cannot be stabilized¹⁹². A closer look at their underlying common sense however reveals remarkable congruence. By pitching its resistance on the platform of ethnic nationalism, Tamil nationalist discourse adopts the same underlying picture of the world as that of Sinhalese nationalism, confirming its particular nationalist logic. The world's population, it confirms, is divided into clear-cut timeless categories. Ethnicity is a singular and uniform form of belonging from which political legitimation and exclusion flow. The discourse resists exclusionism with exclusionism; what is notable is the

¹⁹⁰ Idem, p. 392.

¹⁹¹ The Vaddoukoddai Resolution, <http://www.eelam.com/introduction/vaddukoddai.html> (last visited May 24, 2004).

¹⁹² David Howarth, Yannis Stavrakakis, *Introducing Discourse Theory and Political Analysis*, in David Howarth, Yannis Stavrakakis (eds.), *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis: Identities, Hegemonies and Social Change*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000, p. 9.

conspicuous lack of antagonism.

Crucially, by articulating resistance on behalf of the Tamil speaking-people, the discourse inadvertently confirms its objective existence of this ethnic group. In effect, it agrees that Tamil ethnicity is about "absolute and natural differences, instead of relative and cultural choices"¹⁹³. This reveals the potential paradox in resistive discourses aimed at challenging discrimination. As the Comaroffs explain,

Any activity aimed at the reversal of "ascribed" inequalities may reinforce the primacy of ethnicity as a principle of social differentiation: the very fact that such activity is conducted by and for groupings marked by their cultural identities confirms the perception that these identities do provide the only available basis for collective self-definition¹⁹⁴.

In this way, Tamil nationalist discourse reifies Tamil ethnicity as the only objective means for self-definition. Furthermore, by defining the nation in ethnic terms, it constructs ethnic identity in the image of the nation, with two important transformative consequences.

First, the "unity of Tamil speaking people" and the "traditional homelands" are new terms, coined by the discourse and brought into being by it. The use of new language makes it possible for people to think "unity" and "homelands", adding new facets to Tamil ethnicity. On the one hand, the "unity of the Tamil speaking people" stresses commonality in a way that surpasses pre-existing Tamil ethnic consciousness. This "unity" creates a new singular and uniform identity that precludes a variety of legitimate individual self-perceptions. It

¹⁹³ G. Baumann, *Ethnicity: Blood or Wine?*, in *The Multicultural Riddle*, London & New York, 1999, p. 62.

¹⁹⁴ John Comaroff, Jean Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination*, Colorado, Westview Press, 1992, p. 62.

assumes a "unity of human experience which denies a pluralism of identities"¹⁹⁵, at the same time creating novel unambiguous bounded exclusionist categories. On the other hand, the notion of the Tamil "traditional homelands" introduces a link with territory that further entrenches historical distinctiveness. While the nineteenth century discourses of Tamil ethnicity were based on common histories of the independent kingdom of Jaffna, the concept of Tamil "homelands" seeks to draw borders of physical separateness and difference. Through the systematic utilization of the Cleghorn Minute, the Tamils become an entity that has moved through time, distinct and self-contained. Time-less physical separateness gives boundaries a new unambiguous, objective and immemorial meaning.

Second, and perhaps more significantly, as the Tamils become a nation, ethnic identity becomes political. The discourse of nationalism crosses the crucial line between a group that is defined by its belonging and a collectivity from which entitlements, autonomy and hegemony flow. Crucially, it also assumes that the political consequences of the nation form the natural foundation for legitimate human behaviour: entitlements are to be claimed, autonomy is to be fought for, hegemony is to be defended. As the Vaddukoddai Resolution (1976) announced:

And this Convention calls upon the Tamil Nation in general and the Tamil youth in particular to come forward to throw themselves fully in the sacred fight for freedom and to flinch not till the goal of a sovereign state of TAMIL EELAM is reached.

Reification is at its extreme when products of human activity not only come to appear objective and natural, but when they come to form the basis for social action. Nothing

¹⁹⁵ Vivienne Jabri, *Discourses on Violence, Conflict Analysis Reconsidered*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1996, p. 140.

provides better confirmation of the objectivity Tamil ethnicity than the reality that it provides the foundation for organizing human behaviour.

In these ways, the discourse of Tamil nationalism transformed Tamil ethnicity from a relative, pliable and subjective identity to a singular and uniform form of belonging with its own unambiguous and immemorial exclusionist boundaries. It was given objective meaning as an autonomous means for ordering human behaviour. And as the discourse increased in popularity, drawn on to interpret experience by a growing proportion of the Tamil population, its transformative logic would take on constitutive effect.

3.5 The Increasing Dominance of Tamil Nationalist Discourse

Although Tamil nationalist discourse was not articulated through the power structures of state policies and institutions, its increasing acceptance was evidenced by its success in parliamentary politics, which in turn gave it a position of discursive dominance over growing support bases.

From 1956, nationalist parties dominated Tamil politics until they lost political legitimacy to militant separatist youth groups in the late 1970s. After sweeping to victory in the general election of 1956, the Federal Party - the originator of Tamil nationalist discourse - maintained a majority in Tamil-speaking areas until it evolved into the Tamil United Front (TUF) sixteen years later. Joining forces with other mainstream Tamil parties, and embracing separatism as the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) in 1976, it went on to win all the seats in Tamil majority areas in 1977 elections. The success of Tamil nationalist discourse was in a large part due to its ability to interpret the coercive exclusionism of the institutionalised discourse of Sinhalese nationalism. In particular, the acceptance of this discourse noticeably increased with each major articulation of Sinhalese hegemony. As

Stokke has observed, the legitimacy of the Federal Party grew sharply with the institution of Sinhala as the only language. Similarly, the passing of the republican constitution in 1972 was instrumental in the formation of the Tamil United Front. As Kapferer suggests, contemporary events can progressively deepen the apparent relevance of discourse, giving it a self-perpetuating power that gives it increasing constitutive effect¹⁹⁶.

As well as indicating the acceptance of its discourse, the political success of Tamil nationalism effectively gave it a position of discursive privilege. In its own way, it was institutionalised in increasingly popular political parties with literally "more say"¹⁹⁷. In addition to parliamentary means, the Federal Party articulated its discourse of Tamil nationalism through extra-parliamentary non-violent protests. While the support base for the Federal Party was predominantly that of middle classes of Colombo and Jaffna, its policy of peaceful civil disobedience was effective in articulating its discourse to a far wider audience. Wilson observes that its campaigns were successful in both raising Tamil national consciousness and having their impact on the outside world¹⁹⁸. Particularly successful on this front was a gathering in 1961 in front of government buildings in which the vast crowd, despite "considerable provocation from armed forces and police personnel...remained calm and impassive"¹⁹⁹. When the Tamil United Front was formed, the support base of nationalism widened. The All Ceylon Tamil Congress and the Ceylon Workers Congress both had particular support bases, the first in the Northern regions of the Jaffna peninsular, and the second amongst the Up Country Tamils, that gave it a greater

¹⁹⁶ Bruce Kapferer, *Remythologizing Discourses: State and Insurrectionary Violence in Sri Lanka*, in David E. Apter (ed.), *The Legitimation of Violence*, New York, New York University Press, 1997, 174 – 175.

¹⁹⁷ T. A. Van Dijk, *Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis*, in <<Discourse and Society>>, vol. 4, p. 253.

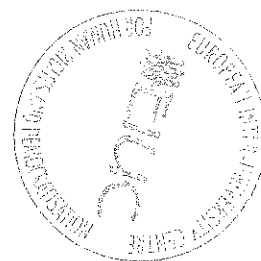
¹⁹⁸ A. Jeyaratnam Wilson, *Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism: Its Origins and Development in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, London, C. Hurst & Company, 2000, p. 95.

¹⁹⁹ Idem, p. 95.

position of discursive privilege. And as the language of Tamil nationalist narratives proliferated, their constitutive effect would transform Tamil ethnic identity with its particular reifying logic.

In sum, this chapter has analysed the process of reification of Tamil ethnicity during the period of rising Sinhalese and Tamil parliamentary nationalisms from the mid-1950s to the late 1970s. It has been shown that during the period under consideration, the process of reification took the form of the "institutionalisation of difference": the institutionalisation of exclusionist nationalist discourses that constituted Tamil ethnicity as a singular and uniform form of belonging with unambiguous, objective and immemorial boundaries. From 1956 onward, the exclusionist narratives of Sinhalese nationalism were articulated by and institutionalised in the state apparatus to give it an unprecedented position of dominance. By resisting this discourse's coercive exclusion on the platform of ethnic nationalism, the discourse of Tamil nationalism confirmed its underlying nationalist logic. In doing so, it reified Tamil ethnicity as an objective means for self-definition and autonomous way of organising human behaviour. As these two seemingly antagonistic, but actually congruent discourses increased in dominance, their underlying reifying logic would start to take hold. This process would be cemented from the late 1970s by the onset of political violence, which will be analysed in the following chapter.

4 Political Violence and Discursive Hegemony



The previous chapter analysed the process of reification of Tamil ethnicity in Sri Lanka during the period of rising parliamentary nationalisms from the mid-1950s till the late 1970s. This chapter follows this transformation, to provide an analysis of the processes through which, with the increasing political violence from the late 1970s till present, Tamil ethnicity has been reified as a seemingly natural, objective and autonomous way of ordering human behaviour. Continuing to employ the theoretical framework presented in chapter two, its central focus of analysis is the effect of political violence on changing stories about reality and their implication in structures of domination and discursive privilege.

Since the early 1980s, everyday experience in Sri Lanka has centred on violence, destruction and moral commitment to enmity. Uyangoda has described “an overbearing sense of uncertainty and anxiety that translates into violence as well as fear of violence. Sri Lanka”, he goes on, “is not a normal society; it is a shell shocked society where reason and considered judgement in ethnic politics have given way to the politics of anxiety”²⁰⁰. This violence has in a large part been implicated in the war between the LTTE and the government of Sri Lanka. Civilians have been the overwhelming victims of this violence, which has killed an estimated 65,000 people and displaced, injured or otherwise devastated upwards of two million others²⁰¹. The proliferation of violence has not however been limited to the LTTE – Sri Lankan government war. Violence has become the key arbiter of social grievance in Sri Lanka²⁰². Thus Keenan suggests that “the particular forms the violence has

²⁰⁰ Uyangoda cited in Goodhand, Jonathan with Atkinson, Philippa, *Sri Lanka, Conflict and Aid: Enhancing the Peacebuilding Impact of International Engagement*, London, International Alert, 2001, p. 39.

²⁰¹ Alan Keenan, *Building a Democratic Middle Ground: Professional Civil Society and the Politics of Human Rights in Sri Lanka's Peace Process*, forthcoming in Mertus, J., Helsing J.W. (eds.), *Human Rights and Conflict: New Actors, Strategies and Ethical Dilemma*, United States Institute of Peace, 2004.

²⁰² Goodhand, Jonathan with Atkinson, Philippa, *Sri Lanka, Conflict and Aid: Enhancing the*

taken have also meant that there are no innocent political groups or actors...the violence, discrimination, human rights violations, and anti-democratic repression have come from self-proclaimed "representatives of all major communities"²⁰³.

For analytical purposes, four major interrelated forms of violence can be identified in Sri Lanka over the past three decades that are relevant to the constitution of Tamil identity. First, the anti-Tamil riots and state sponsored coercion against the Tamil population that became a prominent feature of social life in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Second, the vicious fighting among competing militant Tamil secessionist groups of the 1980s. Third, the separatist war fought since 1983, first by various militant groups, and then the LTTE against the Sri Lankan government. Finally, the modes violent repression employed by the LTTE to maintain its control and political hegemony amongst the Tamil people²⁰⁴.

This chapter argues that the proliferation of political violence in Sri Lanka led to new kinds of discourses and structures of discursive dominance that had the constitutive effect of reifying Tamil ethnicity. In particular, the early violence against Tamil people led to the reduction of discourses and room for alternative identifications. It also instituted a shift in positions of discursive dominance to militant secessionist groups, which was consolidated by one group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The success of this group in achieving discursive hegemony has been instrumental in reifying Tamil ethnic identity. These arguments will be discussed in turn.

4.1 Early Anti-Tamil Violence and the Reduction of Discursive Alternatives

Peacebuilding Impact of International Engagement, London, International Alert, 2001, p. 39.

²⁰³ Alan Keenan, *Building a Democratic Middle Ground: Professional Civil Society and the Politics of Human Rights in Sri Lanka's Peace Process*, forthcoming in Mertus, J., Helsing J.W. (eds.), *Human Rights and Conflict: New Actors, Strategies and Ethical Dilemma*, United States Institute of Peace, 2004.

²⁰⁴ Idem, p. 5.

Early violence against the Tamil population took the form of state sponsored “ethnic-riots” or pogroms in which Tamil people were physically attacked and their property destroyed. In 1983, the escalation of tensions culminated in riots of an unprecedented scale. Although estimates vary, hundreds of Tamils were killed, thousands of homes burnt, and over 100,000 people displaced by the violence. These riots, often referred to as marking the beginning of the present civil war, have been described as the watershed in the fixing of politicized Tamil ethnicity²⁰⁵. It is widely recognized that with the increase of ethnically motivated violence, ethnic identities become salient and hardened²⁰⁶. Focusing on discourses, this may be explained as the inherent power for narratives articulated through violence to “have their say”. By taking away the luxury to ignore the discourse’s imposed logic, violence has the effect of reducing discursive alternatives in a way that takes away the room for alternative identifications.

Like the discourse of Sinhalese nationalism that legitimised it, early anti-Tamil violence embraced a logic of exclusionist, singular and uniform identities. Individuals were identified, drawn out, attacked and killed, on the singular criterion of ethnic labels. This violence did not discriminate; there was no room for mitigating circumstances. Uniformity of experience was taken to the extreme as the diversity of individuals was subjected to the same inhumane and degrading treatment on the basis of Tamil identity. In a stark example, MacIntyre has captured how Tamils were distinguished as the “Other” by Sinhalese mobs by being accosting and made to speak the Sinhalese word “bucket”: the person’s fate thus depended on the correct utterance of the word “baldiya”²⁰⁷. Like the nationalist discourse that preceded it, the violence clearly coercively imposed reified identities on powerless individuals. But articulation of the discourse through violence represented a crucial

²⁰⁵ Neluka Silva, Rasanayagam’s Last Riot,

<http://www.litencyc.com/php/sworcs.php?rec=true&UID=12386> (last visited June 23, 2004)

²⁰⁶ Ted Robert Gurr, *Minorities at Risk*, Washington, United States Institute of Peace, 1993, p. 126

²⁰⁷ Neluka Silva, Rasanayagam’s Last Riot,

difference. The coercive effect of this violence was to take away the luxury of alternative identifications, giving the discourse of Sinhalese nationalism an inherent power to have its say. With violence, the imposition of meaning was transformed into an essential position of discursive dominance. To understand this influence of violence, it is convenient to return to the experience of Sita, the main character in *Rasanayagam's Last Riot*, the play discussed in chapter two.

It will be recalled that Sita, a middle class Tamil woman married to a Sinhalese man, Philip subsumes her ethnic identity and has no difficulty appropriating the Sinhalese identity for herself²⁰⁸. Sita's chosen ethnic identity illustrates well the permeability of ethnic boundaries and the social pliability of their content. Significantly, despite the increasingly dominant discourses of Sinhalese and Tamil nationalism, Sita maintains her chosen identity, even though it defies the increasingly singular, uniform and primordial understanding of ethnicity. Indeed, it is initially convenient for her to do so because she can avoid the growing discrimination against Tamils at the hands of the Sinhalese²⁰⁹. Here, Sita's position shows that even in the context of increasingly dominant discourses, identity remains a matter of contestation. In particular, the dominance of Tamil nationalism was concentrated in certain socio-spatial areas, especially amongst the middle class in the Jaffna region²¹⁰. For some individuals like Sita therefore, other alternative identifications remained discursively available. This would change with the onset of ethnic riots in 1983.

Centring on the effects of ethnic violence on Sita's sense of self, *Rasanayagam's Last Riot*

<http://www.litencyc.com/php/sworcs.php?rec=true&UID=12386> (last visited June 23, 2004)

²⁰⁸ Neluka Silva, 'Mothers, Daughters and "Whores" of the Nation': nationalism and female stereotypes in post-colonial Sri Lankan drama in English, in <<Journal of Gender Studies>>, vol. 6, no. 3, 1997, p. 272.

²⁰⁹ Idem, p. 272.

²¹⁰ Kristian Stokke, Anne Kirsti Ryntviet, *The Struggle for Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka*, in <<Growth and Change>>, vol. 31, 2000, pp. 296.

captures the inherent discursive power of violence. With the advent of the ethnic riots of 1983 she is forced to come to terms with her "natural" Tamil identity. She realizes that she has been straddling contradicting understandings of self-hood and feels that she can no longer evade the connotations of her true ethnic background. It is revealing that central to this realization is her own vulnerability, and in particular the fact that "all Tamils are now at risk and ethnicity is ingrained in people's notion of identity"²¹¹. John Chipman has noted that "one of the great cruelties of ethnic conflict is that everyone is automatically labelled a combatant"²¹². Here we may add the severity of ethnic violence that everyone is potentially a victim, to reveal the intrinsic power for ethnically motivated violence to impose identities. By threatening physical integrity, violence exposes individuals to a vulnerability that compels them to understand their position within it. Through their own potential victimization, individuals are involuntarily propelled into the midst of its meaning. They are, in effect, robbed of the luxury for alternative identifications. The potency of ethnic violence is, then, the fact that by forcing to hear the logic of its discourse, it reduces discursive alternatives to that of the violence and those that challenge it. Alternative truths fall to the periphery as the threat of violence and the stories about reality that surround it become increasingly commanding.

In this way, the influence of the widespread anti-Tamil violence and ethnic-riots of 1983 was to reduce the room for identification to the identity imposing discourse of Sinhalese nationalism and the narratives of Tamil nationalism that challenged it. But as the previous chapter showed, the paradox of the language of Tamil nationalism had been its confirmation of the objective and natural existence of Tamil ethnicity as the only means for

²¹¹ Neluka Silva, Rasanayagam's Last Riot,

<http://www.litencyc.com/php/sworcs.php?rec=true&UID=12386> (last visited June 23, 2004).

²¹² John Chipman, cited in David A. Lake, Donald S. Rothchild, *Spreading Fear: The Genesis of Transnational Ethnic Conflict*, in David A. Lake, Donald S. Rothchild (eds.), *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict: Fear, Diffusion, and Escalation*, Princetown, Princetown University Press, 1998, p. 6.

self-definition. In this discursive desert, understandings of self-hood were limited to the singular, uniform and primordial form of Tamil ethnic identity. As for Sita, this identity would come to appear as the only "natural" and "true" form of self in a way that is fundamentally reifying of Tamil ethnicity.

In the years that would follow, this reifying influence of the early ethnic violence would be cemented by shifting positions of discursive dominance and new hegemonies of identity formative discourses, which will be discussed next.

4.2 Militancy, Violent Conflict and Shifting Positions of Discursive Dominance.

While the early political violence against the Tamil people had the effect of reducing the room for alternative identifications, it also led to new forms of discursive dominance that would be consolidated and maintained throughout the period of violent conflict that would ensue.

The first shift in positions of discursive privilege came with the increasing violence against the Tamil population in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As well as the ethnic-riots, Tamil people were coming under increasing state-sponsored coercion, especially in the north and eastern regions. In response to the rise in militant separatists, the government had enacted in 1979, the Protection of Terrorism Act extending police and security force power. In face of the inability to defeat the militants however, this power was used in frequent reprisals against and harassment of civilians including the arrests, detention and torture. In this context of vulnerability to physical violence, support shifted from the traditional political elite advocating pacifist nationalism to youth groups calling for militant separatism. Parliamentary nationalism was thus marginalised, as the radical political violence of these

groups gained increasing political legitimacy²¹³. By the early 1980s, the leading Tamil nationalist party, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), was compelled to cede to them primary leadership to the separatist struggle, with support increasing exponentially with anti-Tamil violence of 1983²¹⁴. The month after the riots, the TULF was effectively thrown out of parliament, when a constitutional amendment was passed banning even the peaceful advocacy of separatism²¹⁵. Refusing to take the oath required under the amendment, the TULF forfeited their parliamentary seats, continuing only in an "artificial existence", with no real significant support base²¹⁶.

After the riots of 1983, the number of armed militant groups proliferated and recruitment to these organizations increased dramatically. But while they had initially numbered no fewer than thirty, one, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), quickly emerged as the most powerful²¹⁷. The LTTE has been described as an authoritative, highly disciplined group, standing apart in its internal cohesion and military skill. Its success has been attributed to its ability to engage in the two fronts of violence that would ensue: against the government security forces and in the internecine warfare between rival separatist organizations²¹⁸. On the one hand, the riots had marked the beginning of a period of large-scale violence, as security forces had moved into the north and east of the country to drive out militant groups.

²¹³ Kristian Stokke, Anne Kirsti Ryntviet, *The Struggle for Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka*, in <<Growth and Change>>, vol. 31, 2000, p. 297.

²¹⁴ de Silva, K. M., *Separatism and Political Violence in Sri Lanka*, in K. M. de Silva (ed.), *Conflicts and Violence in South Asia*, Kandy, International Centre for Ethnic Studies/Clingendael Institute, 2000, p. 406.

²¹⁵ Nissan, E., *Sri Lanka: A Bitter Harvest*, UK, Minority Rights Group, 1996, p. 16.

²¹⁶ de Silva, K. M., *Separatism and Political Violence in Sri Lanka*, in K. M. de Silva (ed.), *Conflicts and Violence in South Asia*, Kandy, International Centre for Ethnic Studies/Clingendael Institute, 2000, p. 406.

²¹⁷ Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam, *The "Groups" and the Rise of Militant Secessionism*, in C. Manogaran and B. Pfaffenberger (eds.), *The Sri Lankan Tamils: Ethnicity and Identity*, Boulder CO, Westview Press, 1994, p. 169.

²¹⁸ de Silva, K. M., *Separatism and Political Violence in Sri Lanka*, in K. M. de Silva (ed.), *Conflicts and Violence in South Asia*, Kandy, International Centre for Ethnic Studies/Clingendael Institute, 2000, pp. 407 - 408.

On the other, the initial optimism of militant separatism had given way to "harsh repression and internal warfare between different separatist groups"²¹⁹. The LTTE's advantage, as de Silva suggests, was that,

...unlike the other rag tag force of other separatist activist groups, the LTTE was a well-trained, highly disciplined guerrilla force, with a degree of commitment to its cause that its rivals among the Tamil separatist forces never matched.²²⁰

Numbering 1,5000 to 3,000 by 1984 - 1986, it was thus able to pose a serious challenge to the 20,000 force of the Sri Lankan armed services²²¹. Its military adeptness also meant that it was able to systematically eliminate all rival militant groups, culminating, in 1986, in the brutal massacre of the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO) group. Much has been written of the ascendancy of the LTTE, but what is important for this study is that the rise in political violence created, in the north east of Sri Lanka, new positions of control and dominance decided by military strength and ability. By 1986, the LTTE had emerged as the most powerful, largest and most influential group in the Tamil community²²².

The period after the 1983 riots saw rapid militarization of the conflict, with increasing human rights violations by military and paramilitary forces. It marked the start of a long period of violent conflict, which would devastate the Tamil majority areas of the northeast and see thousands killed and disappeared in custody. In this context of the immense

²¹⁹ Kristian Stokke, Anne Kirsti Ryntviet, *The Struggle for Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka*, in <<Growth and Change>>, vol. 31, 2000, p. 297.

²²⁰ de Silva, K. M., *Separatism and Political Violence in Sri Lanka*, in K. M. de Silva (ed.), *Conflicts and Violence in South Asia*, Kandy, International Centre for Ethnic Studies/Clingendael Institute, 2000, p. 409.

²²¹ Idem, p. 409.

²²² Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam, *The "Groups" and the Rise of Militant Secessionism*, in C. Manogaran and B. Pfaffenberger, *The Sri Lankan Tamils: Ethnicity and Identity*, Boulder CO, Westview Press, 1994, p. 171.

insecurity, the LTTE was accorded widespread support, as the only organization capable of fighting the armed forces. While authors disagree on the nature and extent of this support, most agree that it is substantial. Stokke, for example, has argued that it is a sort of "negative support", because as an interviewee commented, in the face of an oppressive state, "if the LTTE is gone, we won't have anything at all"²²³. Hellmann-Rajanayagam on the other argues that the LTTE has emerged as a "traditional Tami heroic band of warriors" which enjoys sympathy, understanding and is widely accepted by the population"²²⁴.

As well as being accorded widespread support, the LTTE has been in de facto control of much of the area of the north and east of the island for the past two decades. In fighting with the Sri Lankan military, it had, by 1985, gained control of the city of Jaffna which it maintained throughout the presence of the Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF) from 1987 to 1990. When the IPKF withdrew in 1990, the LTTE was able to take control of all areas vacated by the troops, consolidating its presence in large parts of the north and east of the island. Despite periods of heavy fighting, it has been able to sustain its hold on much of this territory ever since, and most recently in the context of the present ceasefire, consolidating its position of dominance. With this position of control and widespread support, the LTTE has been able to achieve an unprecedented discursive hegemony in a way that has been singularly influential for the reification of Tamil ethnicity. The following sections examine the central features of the LTTE's discourse of separatism, and show how this hegemony has been achieved.

4.3 The Discourse of the LTTE: Continuity and Change

²²³ Kristian Stokke, Anne Kirsti Ryntviet, *The Struggle for Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka*, in <<Growth and Change>>, vol. 31, 2000, p. 297.

²²⁴ Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam, *The "Groups" and the Rise of Militant Secessionism*, in C. Manogaran and B. Pfaffenberger (eds.), *The Sri Lankan Tamils: Ethnicity and Identity*, Boulder CO, Westview Press, 1994, p. 173.

Calling for a separate state for the Tamil people, the LTTE's discourse is largely based on the language of Tamil nationalism developed by the Federal Party during its period of parliamentary success from the 1950s to the 1970s. The LTTE expressly refers to former Federal Party leader S.J.V. Chevanayakam as "Thantai Selva", Father Selva, the founder and inspiration of the Tamil Eelam freedom struggle²²⁵. As such, its narratives represent a discursive continuity of much of the original Tamil nationalist language reviewed in the previous chapter. In particular, it reproduces assertions of Sinhalese oppression, unity of the Tamil speaking people and "traditional homelands" to support its employment of political violence in the struggle for freedom.

Like the discourses of Parliamentary nationalism that preceded it, the LTTE's concept of the Tamil nation is based on the historical distinctness of the Tamil people, evidenced by the myths of the independent kingdom of Jaffna in the *Yalppana Vaipava Malai* chronicles. Again, the Cleghorn Minute, the short extract from the memorandum of the first colonial secretary of Ceylon, maintains primary position in supporting the boundaries of the traditional homelands and the historical link of the Tamil people to this territory²²⁶. The essence of the LTTE's discourse of nationalism is captured on the first page of its website:

The Tamil people of the island of Ceylon (now called Sri Lanka) constitute a distinct nation. They form a social entity, with their own history, traditions, culture, language and traditional homeland. The Tamil people call their nation Tamil Eelam²²⁷.

The difference between the LTTE's discourse of nationalism and that of parliamentary

²²⁵ Idem, p. 170.

²²⁶ LTTE, *Tamil Eelam – A Reversion to Sovereignty*, <http://eelam.com/introduction/reversion.html> (last visited 20 June 2004).

²²⁷ Tamil Eelam Homepage, <http://eelam.com> (last visited June 20, 2004)

movements that preceded it lies, however, in its legitimisation of and mobilisation for large-scale political violence. As Apter points out, people commit political violence because they can talk themselves into it²²⁸. While pre-existing nationalist narratives form the basis for the LTTE's struggle for freedom, the exigencies of legitimising and mobilising support for its war have led to new facets of its discourse.

First, in the legitimisation of its separatist war, the LTTE has developed arguments of legality in international law, centring on the United Nations language of the right to national self-determination and cases of international tribunals. In addition, it has forwarded the important claim that it is the "sole representative" of the Tamil people, representing their collective will in the fight for freedom. It is notable that the justifications for the fight for Tamil separatism mirror the language of many secessionist movements world wide. As Jabri has pointed out, the legitimisation of war is "situated in discursive and institutional continuities"²²⁹. The language used to legitimise violence is, in effect, drawn from deeply institutionalised understandings of when war may be just. Claims of national distinctiveness, superior rights over territory and international legal norms are all reproduced in response to these dominant norms. In this context, the significance of the LTTE's claim to be "sole representatives" is that it allows grievances and aspirations to be portrayed as applicable to the entirety of the community. Thus, it enables the use of violence to be justified as the expression of collective will:

The LTTE's objective in fighting for political independence of the Tamil nation is not an arbitrary decision on the part of the organisation but rather the expression and articulation of the collective will and aspiration of the Tamil people.

²²⁸ David E. Apter, *Political Violence in Analytical Perspective*, in David E. Apter (ed.), *The Legitimization of Violence*, New York, New York University Press, 1997, p. 3.

²²⁹ Vivienne Jabri, *Discourses on Violence, Conflict Analysis Reconsidered*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1996.

Second, and more importantly for the present study, the mustering of psychological, physical and economic support has been crucial for the LTTE's war project. Significantly, the creation of dominant, uniform Tamil identity has been central in this mobilisation, and this is reflected in a discourse that constructs a bounded Tamil entity through the language of Tamil Eelam and defence against the diabolical Sinhalese enemy. As Jabri points out, identity is, in effect, the medium through which the individual is related to collective violence²³⁰. Conflict requires dominant desirable identities to be mobilised, and discourses of violence therefore construct singular, reified entities through the language of exclusionist protectionism²³¹. Naturalising the singular and uniform existence of the Tamil people, the narrative of the Tamil nation has therefore been central in the LTTE's mobilising discourse. With its "sole representative" claim however, it has gone further to constitute conformity within the unified Tamil entity. This claim, in effect, represents a wider narrative that transforms the Tamil nation into a "movement" of collective will, speaking with one voice and one mind. As the UTHR-J have observed,

From 1986, the LTTE has tried to impress on the people that their duty is to obey "the movement" without question and in effect to be cogs in its military machine. They will be assigned roles in the Orwellian world of Eelam, as fighters, bearers or fighters, publicists, demagogues, bureaucrats, or even human rights activists who are blind to what happens within²³².

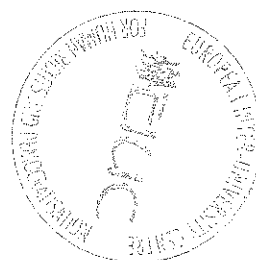
The reifying influence of the Tamil Eelam "movement" narrative is evident: it not only

²³⁰ Idem, p. 121.

²³¹ Idem, pp. 132 & 134.

²³² UTHR-J, *Special Report 17*, October 7, 2004,

<http://www.uthr.org/SpecialReports/spreport17.htm> (last visited June 21, 2004).



creates singular, uniform categorisations with objective and absolute boundaries. It also constructs a Tamil identity that implies identical experience, synonymous interest and unified thought. With means of individual expression denied by imposed representation, the identity of the individual is consumed by the overarching existence of Tamil Eelam. Free individuality is submerged by an identity that is nothing without the movement of which it forms an integral part. The discourse is an identity mobilising narrative that creates a natural link between the individual and collective violence through the construction of a reified collective Tamil identity.

In its legitimisation and mobilisation for conflict, an important feature of the LTTE's discourse is its aim to create a dominant and accepted story about reality. It is the paradigm of a *hegemonic project*, a discursive project whose purpose is to legitimise and mobilise through the "construction of a new common sense"²³³. The use of propaganda to influence thought and muster support during times of conflict is a familiar one, and the importance for the LTTE of the external proliferation of its discourse is evidenced by its network of fifty-four foreign information centres that regularly publish and disseminate a variety of materials on the Tamil Eelam movement. Within the Tamil nation, its hegemonic project has been no less accomplished. As we have seen, the rise in political violence in Sri Lanka had led to shifting positions of dominance through which the LTTE gained a position of direct control over certain areas in the north and east of the island. Its control in these areas has given it a position of discursive privilege that has allowed it to achieve almost complete hegemony of its identity mobilising narrative.

As Sayyid and Zac have suggested, hegemony – or the ability to create a new "common sense" – is most strong when a discourse's proposed logic not only becomes natural to a

²³³ David Howarth, Yannis Stavrakakis, *Introducing Discourse Theory and Political Analysis*, in David Howarth, Yannis Stavrakakis (eds.), *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis: Identities*,

community, but also deactivates other discursive projects against which it is struggling²³⁴. This hegemony has been achieved by the LTTE on the one hand through the institutionalisation of its logic in a de facto parallel regime and on the other through the control and elimination of alternative discourses, which will be discussed in turn.

4.4 The Parallel System of Governance and Institutionalisation of LTTE Discourse

The institutional voids created by large scale violence, and support accorded to the LTTE by the Tamil population have meant that in areas under its control, it has been able to set up a parallel regional regime that resembles a semi-independent state. In particular, it has established and maintains complete control of a significant parallel administration that has allowed it to institutionalise its identity mobilising discourse in a way that naturalises its logic and makes it pervasive.

The creation of an LTTE parallel administration had begun as early as the mid 1980s, before the Indian intervention in the north-eastern region of the island. By 1985, the LTTE had virtually taken over the administration in Jaffna "down to petty justice and traffic regulations"²³⁵. The scale of these institutions was widened further when the LTTE increased the areas under its control with the withdrawal of Indian troops. As Hellmann-Rajanayagam comments, wherever the LTTE was in control, it "set up people's committees, people's law courts, etc. and the grassroots infrastructure that it established is alive and efficient"²³⁶. This parallel administration was not only eminently successful, it

Hegemonies and Social Change, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000.

²³⁴ B. Sayyid, L. Zac, *Political Analysis in a World Without Foundations*, in E. Scarbrough, E. Tannebaum (eds.), *Research Strategies in Social Sciences: a Guide to New Approaches*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 261.

²³⁵ Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam, *The "Groups" and the Rise of Militant Secessionism*, in C. Manogaran and B. Pfaffenberger (eds.), *The Sri Lankan Tamils: Ethnicity and Identity*, Boulder CO, Westview Press, 1994, p. 182.

²³⁶ Idem, p. 182.

was also clearly supported by the population²³⁷. While heavy fighting in 1990 had led to the devastation of Jaffna city and forced most people to flee,²³⁸ the LTTE remained in control of much of the north, and the years following saw the creation of many of institutions that remain functioning until today.

Today, LTTE's comprehensive systems of administration resemble a de facto dual regime. The "capital" of this regime is Kilinochichi, a town that "sports its own schools, hospitals, court house, police force, tax authorities and the Bank of Tamil Eelam, the financial centre of the rebel administration"²³⁹. As Uyangoda has commented, "all these institutions have been set up as a parallel administration, a parallel regional regime" through control of which the LTTE has emerged as a parallel government²⁴⁰. The most well-known of the LTTE institutions are the Tamil Eelam police, the Tamil Eelam judiciary and the Tamil Eelam bank. A recent International Legal Consortium delegation to Sri Lanka found that these institutions "function with ostensible support and confidence of the people and appear to operate effectively, efficiently and with minimum cost"²⁴¹.

The Tamil Eelam judicial system is illustrative of the scale and significance of the LTTE parallel institutions. Established in 1991, the court system now comprises six district courts, covering Jaffna, Kilinochichi, Vavuniya, Mannar, Mullaithivu, Trincomalee and Batticaloa²⁴². These are supported by two high courts and a "Special Bench" to hear cases rejected by the Appeal Court. The courts have heard over 24,000 cases and delivered

²³⁷ Idem, p. 182.

²³⁸ Nissan, E., *Sri Lanka: A Bitter Harvest*, UK, Minority Rights Group, 1996, p. 19.

²³⁹ Reuters, *Tamileelam Bank*, 16 March 2004,

<http://www.sangam.org/articles/view/?id=260> (last visited 20 June 2004).

²⁴⁰ Cited in idem.

²⁴¹ International Legal Assistance Consortium and Australian Legal Resources International, *Report of a Mission to Sri Lanka, March 2003*, www.ilacinternational.org/mission/SriLankaMission.pdf (last visited 20 June 2004).

²⁴² Tamil Net, *Tamil Eelam judiciary said a basis for rebuilding north east*, 30 October 2003,

judgments on 20,000, since they were established²⁴³. The LTTE have enacted their own Tamil Eelam Penal Code, identifying 439 types of crimes,²⁴⁴ and the Tamil Eelam Civil Code largely based on traditional and customary law²⁴⁵. The LTTE trains lawyers in Tamil Eelam Law College, established in 1991 and recently described by Mr. Pararajasingham, head of the LTTE's judicial division, as a milestone in the creation of the judicial system²⁴⁶. While these courts have been criticized as unconstitutional and illegal²⁴⁷, the delegation of the International Legal Consortium to Sri Lanka recently found that they were in fact "functioning reasonably fairly, albeit with limited resources"²⁴⁸.

The LTTE's control of this system of parallel institutions gives it an unprecedented position of discursive privilege. The previous chapter illustrated with regard to the discourse of Sinhalese nationalism, that the institutionalisation of narratives has the power to elevate their logic to a natural and pervasive way of understanding. For the LTTE, unconstrained by democratic political structures, the opportunity to proliferate its reifying discourse through its structures of administration is increased manifold. As de Silva points out, the LTTE maintains an "authoritarian control that resembles a one party dictatorship"²⁴⁹. In 1986, Prabhakaran, leader of the LTTE, made his ideas on modes of governance clear:

<http://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=79&artid=10277> (last visited 20 June 2004).

²⁴³ Idem.

²⁴⁴ Idem.

²⁴⁵ International Legal Assistance Consortium and Australian Legal Resources International, *Report of a Mission to Sri Lanka, March 2003*, www.ilacinternational.org/mission/SriLankaMission.pdf (last visited 20 June 2004).

²⁴⁶ Tamil Net, *Tamil Eelam judiciary said a basis for rebuilding north east*, 30 October 2003, <http://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=79&artid=10277> (last visited 20 June 2004).

²⁴⁷ Opposition spokesman, Dr. Sarath Amunugama, has accused the said Tamil Eelam Police and Tamil Eelam Judiciary of being illegal, see Asia Tribune, *Tamil Eelam Administration: The Police Service*, 8 October 2002,

http://www.asiantribune.com/show_news.php?id=829 (last visited June 20 2004).

²⁴⁸ International Legal Assistance Consortium and Australian Legal Resources International, *Report of a Mission to Sri Lanka, March 2003*, www.ilacinternational.org/mission/SriLankaMission.pdf (last visited 20 June 2004).

²⁴⁹ de Silva, K. M., *Separatism and Political Violence in Sri Lanka*, in K. M. de Silva (ed.), *Conflicts and Violence in South Asia*, Kandy, International Centre for Ethnic Studies/Clingendael Institute,

The government of independent Illam will be a socialist government, there will be only one party supported by the people; I do not want a multi party democracy²⁵⁰.

Reflecting this one party ideology, parallel institutions are directly administered by members of the LTTE. Head of the judiciary, Mr. Pararajasingham, and Police Chief P. Nadesan are both high ranking cadres of the LTTE organization. The Tamil Eelam bank too is controlled by the LTTE "like the Sri Lanka central bank controls other banks"²⁵¹. This complete control of parallel structures of administration has allowed the LTTE to reproduce its identity mobilising narratives throughout its institutions both through the language of their establishment and influence over the individuals that maintain their functioning.

"Tamil Eelam", the suffix given to each of the institutions, is perhaps the most illustrative example of how they are imbued with the reifying language of LTTE discourse. There is no better reminder of the distinct, singular and uniform identity of the Tamil people. And as Tamil Eelam becomes part of everyday life, a name on the high street as individuals go about their daily business, the logic of uniformity achieves a background presence that gives it a natural permanence. The courts too are commonly referred to as the "Peoples Court"²⁵², an ever-present symbol that the LTTE's institutions form part of a wider movement that is powered by the collective will of its members.

2000, p. 420.

²⁵⁰ Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam, *The "Groups" and the Rise of Militant Secessionism*, in C. Manogaran and B. Pfaffenberger, *The Sri Lankan Tamils: Ethnicity and Identity*, Boulder CO, Westview Press, 1994, p. 183.

²⁵¹ Reuters, *Tamileelam Bank*, 16 March 2004,

<http://www.sangam.org/articles/view/?id=260> (last visited June 20, 2004).

²⁵² International Legal Assistance Consortium and Australian Legal Resources International, *Report of a Mission to Sri Lanka, March 2003*, www.ilacinternational.org/mission/SriLankaMission.pdf

The LTTE's discursive influence also extends to the bureaucrats and professionals that keep these institutions functioning on a day-to-day basis. The recruitment and training of these "cogs" of the parallel regime, is carried out directly by the LTTE in a way that gives it enormous discursive privilege. New recruits for the police service, for example, are recruited by the LTTE through open competitions on the radio and in newspapers and undergo a six month training programme²⁵³. Similarly the Law College of Tamil Eelam is an LTTE run institution that allows the LTTE to imbue its legal service with its own particular narratives. It is illustrative that on January 25 2004, the fourth batch of graduating attorneys was awarded their certificates of completion by head of LTTE Political Wing, S.P. Tamilselvan²⁵⁴. The following excerpts of his address to the graduating lawyers on that occasion demonstrate the LTTE's utilisation of its position of discursive dominance over newly trained recruits:

Tamil Eelam judiciary is now ten years old. *Our leader* had a cherished vision when the idea of a judiciary and police force for the Tamil Eelam was mooted. That was a time when the Tamil people had already lost confidence in the Sri Lankan police and judiciary...On the one hand the police force was a pan-Sinhalese and racial in all their dealings with the people and the judiciary on the other hand failed to deliver justice to those who sought it.

Our national leader had this as the motivating factor to institutionalize a judiciary and a law college. You are passing out today as attorneys with a commitment to serve the society which, you are aware, has faced the ravages of

(last visited 20 June 2004).

²⁵³ The Sunday Leader, *Three more police stations in a month - LTTE Police Chief*, 23 May 2004, <http://www.tamilcanadian.com/pageview.php?ID=2385&SID=299> (last visited June 20 2004).

²⁵⁴ LTTE Peace Secretariat, "Law and judiciary must be accessible to ordinary people" LTTE Political Head tells passing out attorneys, 25 January 2004,

civil war for two decades. *Your service is to a nation of people*, most of them refugees eking out an existence in welfare centres or with friends.

This war-ravaged nation has in spite of the destruction and criminal injustice meted out survived the travail and is still resilient enough to uphold the traditional social values and despise crime. Maintain your integrity and make people feel that the judiciary and the community of attorneys a part of their society and therefore *the theme "it is ours" should be maintained at any cost*²⁵⁵.

The language of this speech is revealing of the way in which the LTTE's position of dominance is employed to institutionalise its identity mobilising discourse in the parallel structures of administration that it controls. Clearly reproducing its logic of separatist nationalism, references to Sinhalese oppression form the backdrop for the narrative of which the nation, as a unified movement, and its leader form centre stage. It represents the LTTE's own "institutionalisation of difference," that naturalises an underlying reasoning separating individuals into unambiguous, singular and uniform categories of belonging. The Tamil nation, it is clear, is about conformity and oneness. About "us," "our" and "ours". Plural identities pale against the importance of society, against the duty to the nation that is synonymous with the movement for freedom. Reiterating the uniformity an overriding importance of the Tamil nation, it is illustrative of the LTTE's use of collective identity as "the medium through which the individual is related to collective violence"²⁵⁶.

In this way, the LTTE has used its control over institutional structures of domination to forward its hegemonic discursive project within the Tamil nation it constructs. The

<http://www.lttepeacesecretariat.com/mainpages/n25014.htm> (last visited 20 June 2004).

²⁵⁵ Idem.

²⁵⁶ Vivienne Jabri, *Discourses on Violence, Conflict Analysis Reconsidered*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1996, p. 139.

dominance of this reifying, identity mobilising discourse is implied in its permeation of social norms with significant implications for the constitution of Tamil ethnicity. Identity, it has been argued, is constituted through language: a matter of active selection, it is nevertheless limited by dominant norms. Thus with the dominance of the LTTE's discourse, the understandings of self-hood for Tamil people becomes limited to its unambiguous, singular and uniform portrayal of ethnic identity: an identity that is not only reified but is given meaning and expression solely by national movement of which it forms an integral part.

But identity is always a matter of contestation and hegemonies are never complete. The permanence and impenetrability of this dominant Tamil identity has only been achieved through the LTTE's willingness to maintain its discursive hegemony through the control and elimination alternative discourses, which will be discussed next.

4.5 The Elimination of Dissent and the Completion of LTTE Discursive Hegemony

The flip-side to the LTTE's institutionalisation of its narrative of nationalism has been its elimination of any social and political space for alternative discourses. As Jabri suggests, the ability to wage war requires a high degree of control through which "the whole is held together, and dissent is prevented or even punished"²⁵⁷. The legacy of large scale legitimised violence, especially in the north and east of the island, has created a void that has allowed the LTTE to complete its discursive hegemony through a "politics of physical annihilation of deviation from its perspective"²⁵⁸.

The LTTE's ability to impose and maintain a high degree of disciplinary power has been

²⁵⁷ Vivienne Jabri, *Discourses on Violence, Conflict Analysis Reconsidered*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1996, p. 132.

²⁵⁸ UTHR-J, *Special Report 17*, October 7, 2004,

<http://www.uthr.org/SpecialReports/spreport17.htm> (last visited 21 June 2004).

demonstrated from the start by its own internal structures of tight control. While other organizations were trying to maintain some democratic norms, the LTTE concentrated on a destructive military approach that emphasized a military structure and complete commitment to its cause. It has thus been described as "keeping its cadres under blind faith, and by the nature of its tightly-knit organizational structure, annihilating all dissent physically from the start"²⁵⁹. This method of control would also be implemented in its politics towards the wider section of society.

The LTTE has constantly displayed a willingness to eliminate opposition through physical annihilation. It has become renowned for its assassination of political opponents, and has in fact murdered more Tamil politicians than Sinhalese. Its first assassination in 1975 was of Alfred Duraiappa, the Tamil mayor of Jaffna and supporter of Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike²⁶⁰. Later, it became notorious for the "lamppost deaths" and in 1984 three TULF members met their fate in this way²⁶¹. As the LTTE gained control of areas of the north and east of the island, it went on to implement control of public discourses amongst the citizenry with the same ruthless commitment.

The generation of support through conformity with its Tamil Eelam "movement" has been the prime aim of the LTTE's discursive project within the Tamil nation. Reflecting the picture of the world in which the Tamil people are an entity with only one voice of expression, the LTTE has therefore implemented what has been called "a fascist ideology...that denies independent thought, compassion and tolerance"²⁶². An article in the

²⁵⁹ Idem.

²⁶⁰ Nissan, E., *Sri Lanka: A Bitter Harvest*, UK, Minority Rights Group, 1996, p. 15.

²⁶¹ Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam, *The "Groups" and the Rise of Militant Secessionism*, in C. Manogaran and B. Pfaffenberger (eds.), *The Sri Lankan Tamils: Ethnicity and Identity*, Boulder CO, Westview Press, 1994, p. 182.

²⁶² UTHR-J, *Special Report 17*, 7 October 2004, <http://www.uthr.org/SpecialReports/spreport17.htm> (last visited 21 June 2004)

New York Times in 1995 captured this “rule of terror”, as one in which those that have criticized the regime have been “picked up, tortured and executed; others have been held for years in dungeons, half-starved, hauled out periodically for battering by their guards”²⁶³. The LTTE has continued to systematically assassinate, abduct and “disappear” democratic opponents and their families²⁶⁴. But these political killings are also used to install a climate of insecurity in which alternative voices amongst the citizenry are easily intimidated. The University Teachers for Human Rights – Jaffna (UTHR-J), a small group of activists who have been almost alone in the north east in criticising the LTTE’s regime, recently reported an incident in which an intellectual who had been attending seminars in Colombo, in the context of the peace process, had been accosted by four young men:

They told him “Annai, you mustn’t go to these seminars”. The man replied, “Why, I only sit and listen, I don’t say anything”. One of the young men shot back, “But you might speak to them afterwards in private!”²⁶⁵

As the organization recognized, in the climate of legitimised and institutionalised political violence, this type of intimidation of citizens is extremely effective in eliminating alternative truths and stories about reality. Not surprisingly, even amongst those who criticize the LTTE’s actions in private, few within Sri Lanka are willing to do so publicly²⁶⁶. This general

²⁶³ The New York Times, 29 May 1995, cited in de Silva, K. M., *Separatism and Political Violence in Sri Lanka*, in K. M. de Silva (ed.), *Conflicts and Violence in South Asia*, Kandy, International Centre for Ethnic Studies/Clingendael Institute, 2000, p. 414.

²⁶⁴ Alan Keenan, *Building a Democratic Middle Ground: Professional Civil Society and the Politics of Human Rights in Sri Lanka's Peace Process*, forthcoming in Mertus, J. and Helsing J.W. (eds.), *Human Rights and Conflict: New Actors, Strategies and Ethical Dilemma*, United States Institute of Peace, 2004.

²⁶⁵ UTHR-J, *Special Report 17*, October 7, 2004,
<http://www.uthr.org/SpecialReports/spreport17.htm> (last visited 21 June 2004)

²⁶⁶ With the exception of the University Teachers for Human Rights – Jaffna (UTHR-J), who, since the 1980s, have produced regular reports on the human rights violations committed by the LTTE. See

climate of fear has led to the smothering of traditional sources of discursive alternatives. Keenan's recent research on civil society in the north east has revealed that there is an almost complete reluctance to criticize the actions of the LTTE²⁶⁷. Similarly, the scope for independent press has been eliminated, as reporters are repeatedly threatened and harassed. An incident recently reported by Reporters Without Borders, the international NGO defending press freedom, in which some fifty armed LTTE activists torched 5,000 copies of the Tamil-language weekly *Thinamurasu* is illustrative²⁶⁸. As Managing Editor T. Baskaran commented, "we must pay the price of our independence because the LTTE expects all the Tamil news media to say nothing about its violence. Those who don't obey are harassed"²⁶⁹

As Keenan has observed, the cumulative effect of these actions has been "the marked shrinking of any space for dissent, democratic politics in the north and east of the island and within Tamil society in general, virtually all of which is now under effective control – through threats and intimidation – of the LTTE"²⁷⁰. This suppression of all difference compliments the institutionalisation of the LTTE's discourses in the realization of its discursive hegemony over the society under its control. The elimination of antagonistic truths means that the LTTE's identity mobilising narrative is not only pervasive, it is the only way of knowing. In its hegemony, it has achieved a new common sense so that experience, understanding and self-hood are all interpreted through the underlying language of the Tamil Eelam movement. For Tamil ethnicity, this has meant the constitution of an identity that is

Alan Keenan, *Building a Democratic Middle Ground: Professional Civil Society and the Politics of Human Rights in Sri Lanka's Peace Process*, forthcoming in J. Mertus, J.W. Helsing (eds.), *Human Rights and Conflict: New Actors, Strategies and Ethical Dilemma*, United States Institute of Peace, 2004.

²⁶⁷ Idem.

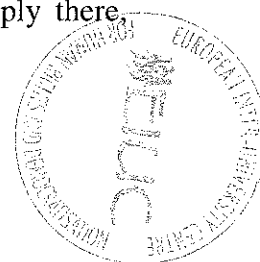
²⁶⁸ Reporters Without Borders, *Sri Lanka – Country Report 2004*, http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=10223&Valider=OK (last visited June 22, 2004).

²⁶⁹ Idem.

²⁷⁰ Alan Keenan, *Building a Democratic Middle Ground: Professional Civil Society and the Politics of Human Rights in Sri Lanka's Peace Process*, forthcoming in J. Mertus, J.W. Helsing (eds.), *Human Rights and Conflict: New Actors, Strategies and Ethical Dilemma*, United States Institute of Peace,

not only singular, uniform and primordial. It is an identity that is only given meaning by the nationalist movement of which it forms part. In this way, the LTTE's discursive hegemony has instituted a seemingly natural, objective and absolute Tamil ethnicity as the only "true" means of self-definition.

As Jabri has suggested, the construction of a reified collective Tamil identity has provided the essential link for the LTTE in mobilising the individual for its project of collective violence. Perhaps the starkest examples of this mobilisation have been the LTTE "Black Tiger" suicide force, the cyanide pills worn by all LTTE cadres on cords around their necks and the sacrificing of young children by families for the separatist fight. The UTHR-J capture the centrality of identity reifying discursive hegemony for this mobilisation: "once such a regime is in force, there is no need to abduct children. They are simply there, conditioned and ripe for picking"²⁷¹.



This chapter has aimed to provide an understanding of the process of reification of Tamil ethnicity during the period of increasing political violence in Sri Lanka from the late 1970s till present. It was shown that early violence against Tamil people reduced discursive alternatives to the language of Sinhalese and Tamil nationalism, excluding multiple identities as individuals were forced to accept a singular and uniform understanding of Tamilness. This reifying process was cemented as violence against Tamil people shifted positions of discursive dominance from the movement of parliamentary nationalism to militant separatist youth groups. In the inter-group fighting and violent separatist war that would ensue, one group, the LTTE gained a level of control over much of the north and east of the island that gave it an unprecedented position of dominance. The LTTE's

2004.

²⁷¹ UTHR-J, *Special Report 17*, October 7, 2004,

“institutionalisation of difference” in its parallel system of governance has been central in its hegemonic project within the Tamil nation. Reinforced with the coercive elimination of alternative truths, this institutionalisation of its identity mobilising narratives has given it almost complete discursive hegemony over areas under its control. It has thus fixed its particular reified understanding of Tamil identity as the “true” and only available means of self-definition: a singular and uniform mode of belonging that is only given meaning by the Tamil Eelam movement of which it forms an integral part. In this way, Tamil ethnicity has been transformed into a reified as an autonomous, objective and natural way of ordering human behaviour.

Conclusion

While ethnicity represents a salient dimension in contemporary conflicts, the relationship between ethnicity and conflict remains unclear. In particular, emphasis in conflict research on the causes of conflict has meant that little is known about the way in which ethnic identity is influenced by conflict. Taking Tamil ethnicity in Sri Lanka as a case study, this paper has therefore sought to come closer to an understanding of the role of ethnic identity in conflict through an approach that focuses on the nature of ethnic identity, its formative processes and the way it is influenced by conflict. Based on an understanding of Tamil ethnicity as a socially constructed dynamic phenomenon, formed through the active selection of dominant discourses, it has analysed how Tamil ethnicity has been transformed with rising nationalisms and political violence in Sri Lanka.

This approach has shown that with the conflict in Sri Lanka, Tamil ethnicity has been transformed by a process of reification from a relative, pliable and subjective phenomenon to a seemingly natural, objective and autonomous way of ordering human behaviour. An analysis of this process revealed that the dominant discourses of the conflict in Sri Lanka have been exclusionist narratives that construct Tamil ethnicity as a singular, uniform and absolute form of belonging. With the periods of rising nationalisms and political violence, these discourses became implicated in changing structures of domination and discursive privilege so that their logic acquired the potential to fix meaning. The nature of Tamil ethnic identity has thus been transformed as individuals interpret their notion of self through the reifying language of these dominant reconstructions of reality.

Central to the emergence of a reified Tamil ethnic identity was the institutionalisation of the exclusionist discourse of Sinhalese nationalism. Reflecting the particular logic of

nationalism, this discourse both objectified Tamil ethnicity as a singular form of belonging and simultaneously excluded it with discriminatory and oppressive meaning. The institutionalisation of this discourse in the state apparatus gave it an unprecedented position of dominance. On the one hand, legislation, public policy and constitutional change all articulated its exclusionary logic. On the other, its meaning became substantially bureaucratised, permeating the fabric of the state apparatus. This "institutionalisation of difference" meant that the coercive exclusionism of the discourse was systematically articulated, reproduced and legitimated so as to become pervasive within society. As such it was instrumental in the reification of Tamil ethnic identity, both by compelling the Tamil people to view themselves within this objectified category and in provoking a resistive discourse of Tamil nationalism, in its own way constitutive of Tamil identity.

The discourse of Tamil nationalism was primarily articulated as a response to the "institutionalisation of difference" in the Sri Lankan state apparatus. But by resisting coercive exclusionism on the platform of ethnic nationalism, it inadvertently confirmed the underlying logic of Sinhalese nationalist discourse, reifying Tamil ethnicity as the only means for self-definition. In constructing the Tamil ethnic group in the image of the nation, it also transformed it into an unambiguously distinct entity and an autonomous way of ordering human behaviour. The ability of this discourse to interpret the "institutionalisation of difference" gave it increasing acceptance and success in electoral politics. Benefiting from a position of discursive privilege over growing support bases, its reifying logic would begin to take hold.

This process of reification was cemented with the onset of interrelated and mutually reinforcing facets of political violence. Violence, it was seen, has the inherent power to compel individuals to hear the logic of its discourse. Early violence against Tamil people

therefore reduced discursive alternatives to the language of Sinhalese and Tamil nationalism, excluding multiple identities as individuals were forced to accept a singular and uniform understanding of Tamilness as the "natural" form of belonging. At the same time, this violence had the effect of shifting positions of discursive dominance from the movement of parliamentary nationalism to militant separatist youth groups. Most importantly, in the inter-group fighting and violent separatist war that would ensue, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) emerged with a level of control over much of the north and east of the island that gave it an unprecedented position of discursive dominance.

The exigencies of mobilising support for its separatist war have meant that the LTTE's discourse represents a hegemonic project within the Tamil nation. A reified collective Tamil identity has been central in relating individuals to the cause of collective violence. Thus while its discourse represents a continuity of the language of Tamil nationalism, it contains new identity mobilising narratives that construct Tamil identity as an integral part of a Tamil Eelam "movement" without which it has no meaning. As with the discourse of Sinhalese nationalism, the institutionalisation of the LTTE's discourse has proven to be a crucial means of making its logic pervasive so as to fix meaning.

In the institutional void created by large scale violence, the LTTE has established a parallel system of governance that has given it a unique position of discursive privilege. Unconstrained by democratic principles, it has used its control over institutional structures of domination to forward its hegemonic project. The bank, the legal system, the police service: all its institutions are imbued with the language of Tamil Eelam. The training of new recruits is used to permeate its narratives throughout its administration. The systematic reproduction of the LTTE's discourse through its system of governance has naturalised its story about reality within the Tamil nation. Complimented with the coercive elimination of

alternative truths, the LTTE's own "institutionalisation of difference" has given it a discursive hegemony that fixes its identity mobilising understanding of Tamil ethnicity as the only available and "true" means of self-definition.

In this way, the conflict in Sri Lanka has represented an identity transformative process, through which multiple understandings of self have fallen to the periphery as the process of reification has limited the room for identification to a reified understanding of Tamil ethnic identity. Central to this transformation has been the institutionalisation of exclusionist reifying discourses so that their logic is systematically articulated, reproduced and legitimised by bureaucracies and systems of governance. This "institutionalisation of difference," first in the Sri Lankan state apparatus, and then in the LTTE's parallel system of governance, has been pivotal in limiting prevailing understandings of ethnic belonging to those of bounded entities with singular and uniform meaning. In this way, it has been instrumental in the emergence and fixing of a Tamil ethnic identity as an apparently objective and absolute form of belonging.

By revealing the identity formative processes of the conflict in Sri Lanka, the analysis undertaken in this paper represents a complimentary approach to the main body of conflict research that has focused on the causes and life-cycles of conflict. In particular, it adds to structuralist and instrumentalist theories of conflict, which have not been able to provide an explanation for why, if ethnicity is not a cause of political violence, it appears as such a prominent feature of contemporary conflicts. It has clearly demonstrated that the prominence of Tamil ethnicity in the Sri Lankan conflict is the result of the process of reification - and in particular the "institutionalisation of difference" - which has transformed Tamil ethnic identity into a seemingly natural, objective and autonomous way of ordering behaviour. By showing that ethnic identity can be a product of conflict - just as much

influenced by nationalism and political violence as it contributes to them - this approach provides a new way of looking at the role of ethnic identity in contemporary conflict. In this way, it is hoped to have contributed to an understanding of the relationship between these two phenomena.

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