

UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER

Butterfly networks: how can women religious and community leaders transcend their ethnic large-group identities in post-conflict Sri Lanka and become social transformers in the process?

Olivia Fuchs

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ABSTRACT

Butterfly networks: how can women religious and community leaders transcend their ethnic large-group identities in post-conflict Sri Lanka and become social transformers in the process?

Olivia Fuchs

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‘Women have potential to create change ...’<sup>1</sup> Research on the gendered aspects of peacebuilding elucidates how women are mostly marginalised in peace negotiations and excluded from post-conflict decision-making. The societal structures that lead to violent conflict are often based on forms of patriarchy in which women are marginalised and limited to playing traditional roles of wives and mothers, with particular reference to South East Asia. This study explores the potential of women peacebuilders in Sri Lanka to create social transformation by transcending their ethnic large-group identities, which have contributed to violent conflict. It elucidates the predominant societal expectations, the cultural negotiations of femininity, and the views women hold of themselves. Empirical research through interviews with participants of the Centre for Peace Building and Reconciliation’s (CPBR) initiative “*Geheniya*” (Woman), a Female Interfaith Initiative, provides a case study and is situated within a wider discourse of gendered peace. Social identity theory is brought into engagement with religious peacebuilding theories, and cross-fertilized with literature on women’s roles in conflict and peacebuilding. The study argues that despite and **because** of gendered roles, the *Geheniya* women are contributing to peace as social transformers by reframing their ethnic identities through an understanding of their personal multiple identities and their shared group identity as women.

Key words: ‘religious peacebuilding’, ‘social identity’, ‘gendered peace’, ‘social transformer’, ‘women’

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<sup>1</sup> Dahlerup, 2001, p.105

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## **INTRODUCTION**

‘Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.’<sup>2</sup>

The above quote encompasses the dual aspects investigated in this study: what happens in the minds of human beings, what are their worldviews and perceptions that lead to wars and violent conflict? And why only men, what about women?

There has been much research on the gendered aspects of peacebuilding elucidating how women are mostly marginalised in peace negotiations and excluded from post-conflict decision-making, and that it is important to redress this inequality as the inclusion of women is thought to lead to more sustainable peace.<sup>3</sup> It has been argued that the societal structures that lead to violent conflict are often based on forms of patriarchy in which women are marginalised and limited to playing traditional roles of wives and mothers with particular reference to South East Asia.<sup>4</sup> This study will explore the potential for women peacebuilders in Sri Lanka to create social transformation by transcending their ethnic large-group identities, which have contributed to violent conflict. Can they in the process transform their social identities and create networks of engaged women who can positively affect the ‘structural violence’, which underpinned the thirty-year civil war, and if so how? The concept of ‘structural violence’ was coined by Johan Galtung to explain underlying political and structural inequalities that drive conflict and impede peace.<sup>5</sup> By investigating the question of how women can contribute to peace and reconciliation as social transformers I will bring social identity theory into engagement with religious peacebuilding theories, and cross-fertilize literature on women’s roles in conflict and peacebuilding, including feminist approaches, with ideas on religious peacebuilding.

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<sup>2</sup> UNESCO, 1945

<sup>3</sup> Hayward and Marshall, 2015, p. 300

<sup>4</sup> Brewer, 2010, p.70

<sup>5</sup> Galtung, 1998 p. 197

This study will focus on women peace builders in Sri Lanka, in particular participants of the Centre for Peace Building and Reconciliation's (CPBR) project, "*Geheniya*" (Woman), a Female Interfaith Initiative. I draw on secondary and academic literature, which I bring into engagement with first-hand empirical research based on interviews with women religious and community leaders from different religions, ethnic backgrounds, and areas of the country. My fieldwork questions and supports my hypothesis of the women's individual and collective social transformation.

As a practicing Buddhist my interest in Sri Lanka is also a personal enquiry into how Buddhism has been used to drive conflict. Furthermore, as a woman I am curious to explore how women in their multiple roles are contributing, if at all, to both conflict and peace. I will critically reflect more fully on my methodology in the following chapter.

### Structure

This thesis is divided into four chapters. After an initial critical reflection on my methodology I will give a brief background to the history and conflict including the rise of Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka. An exploration of some of the root causes and drivers leading to the country's militarization and eventual armed conflict will help elucidate the specific context and problems facing women religious and community leaders in Sri Lanka.

In the second chapter I will draw on social identity theories by Tajfel and Volkan in order to analyse how large group social identities in Sri Lanka have been formed and are codified, contributing to ethno-political divisions. I will explore how Buddhism, which is generally perceived as a religion with an emphasis on non-violence, a non-exploitative approach to the natural world and a spirit of compassion, has been interpreted in Sri Lanka and has led to Buddhist nationalism. How was it used to drive conflict and justify violence? How did the Tamil resistance movement and the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of

Tamil Eelam) counter it, and what are the 'chosen glories' and 'chosen traumas' on both sides that led to violent conflict?

The third chapter will first briefly explore the roles women played during the civil war and then continue to investigate those they play now post-conflict with reference to Brewer's first three categories of women as 'victim/survivors', 'combatants', and 'healers/reconcilers'.<sup>6</sup> I will draw on interviews and observations, which helped me identify common themes, made me aware of new problems, and encouraged me to question my assumptions. I will be positioning my own research in the context of UN Resolution 1325, feminist literature on women and wars, and questions of essentialism in the perception of women's roles and identities, asking how women are perceived and how they perceive themselves in Sri Lanka?

Finally, a chapter dedicated to Brewer's fourth category of women as 'social transformers' will first investigate the different understandings of 'power' from the points of view of patriarchy and feminism, and then explore the contributions that religions and interfaith dialogue can make to realising social change. It will reflect on the attitudinal changes expressed by the women I interviewed, and the symbols and processes they are using to transform social identities with reference to the frameworks provided by Bennett's 'Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity' (DMIS) and Auerbach's 'Reconciliation Pyramid'. Within this context it will explore whether a reframing of identities due to an understanding of each individual's multiple identities can help dismantle enemy images and contribute to grassroots reconciliation.<sup>7</sup> I will critically evaluate the impact, both actual and potential, that the *Geheniya* project is having in making peace in Sri Lanka more sustainable and in empowering women in the process.

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<sup>6</sup> Brewer, 2010, pp.77-95

<sup>7</sup> Sen, 2006, p.4

## Concepts and framework

A brief overview of the recent discourse on religion and peacebuilding will provide a framework for this study and help define the concepts I am using.

Recent studies have begun to explore the peacebuilding capacity of religions evolving the term 'religious peacebuilding', which not only describes 'the range of activities performed by religious actors and institutions for the purpose of resolving and transforming deadly conflict' but also the qualities needed to create 'positive peace', build creative human relationships and change violent, oppressive structures and interaction.<sup>8</sup> The latter part of the definition, in particular the emphasis on creating 'positive peace', a phrase coined by Galtung to identify peace not simply as the absence of war or direct violence, but as involving an attitudinal change and the overcoming of structural and cultural violence, will serve as the broad definition for the term 'peacebuilding' in this study.<sup>9</sup>

It has been widely acknowledged that religion is a double-edged sword regarding conflict and war, having both the potential to cause division as well as create peace. It is only since the end of the Cold War that religion has been seen as a serious subject matter for inclusion in the peacebuilding discourse. In 1994 Johnson and Sampson argued that, while 'religion may not be the primary catalyst' for many post-Cold War conflicts, 'it is clearly a complicating factor' and that it also 'creates opportunities for spiritually motivated peacemakers'.<sup>10</sup> Since then the importance and dangers of involving religion and religious actors for the purpose of creating peace have been explored, mainly from the Abrahamic faiths' perspectives, by Appleby, Gopin, Sampson and others.<sup>11</sup> Lederach and Schirch in addition emphasise the importance of indigenous

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<sup>8</sup> Coward & Smith, 2004, p.5

<sup>9</sup> Galtung, 1990, in Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall, 2011, p.11

<sup>10</sup> Johnson and Sampson, 2005, in Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall, 2011, p.339

<sup>11</sup> Gopin, 2000, pp.65-114 and Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall, 2011, p.339-342

peacebuilders, as the 'greatest resource for sustaining peace in the long term is always rooted in the local people and their culture'.<sup>12</sup> In addition Hayward and Marshall explore the 'ambivalence of invisibility and marginality' of women religious peacebuilders and explore the dangers of gender stereotyping in peacebuilding.<sup>13</sup> Therefore the focus of this study is on women indigenous peacebuilders in Sri Lanka, drawing from all four local faith traditions (Theravada Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and Christian) in an attempt to expand on the religious peacebuilding resources available.

There is a wealth of academic material investigating women's roles as peacebuilders, on the one hand asserting that women are no more peaceful than men, on the other that they possess inherent peacebuilding qualities.<sup>14</sup> The latter assertion can lead to essentialising women with the assumption that all women share the same inherent characteristics.<sup>15</sup> This view does not question 'identity as norm' or account for 'identity as flux', the fact that a person's identities are multiple and develop over time, ideas that explain the potential for social change.<sup>16</sup> Drawing on social identity theory this study will investigate whether women can transform their conflicting group identities and develop as social transformers, 'seeking to realize peace by the transformation of the social relations that provoke the conflict'.<sup>17</sup>

Cynthia Sampson suggests that religious actors can broadly be categorised as taking on four different conflict intervention roles: 'advocates' acting as catalysts for social change, 'intermediaries', 'educators' and 'observers'.<sup>18</sup> This study will mainly focus on the women religious leaders' roles as 'advocates' and catalysts for social change. It will explore the 'soft' aspects' of religion, which Hertog defines as 'the emotional,

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<sup>12</sup> Lederach, 1997, p.94

<sup>13</sup> Hayward and Marshall, 2015, pp.14-17

<sup>14</sup> Pankurst and Pearce, 1997, p.158; United States Institute of Peace, 2017; Brewer, 2010, pp.76/7; Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall, 2012, pp. 305-316

<sup>15</sup> Wong, 1999, p.275 and Hayward and Marshall, 2015, p.23

<sup>16</sup> Smith, 2001, pp.38-39

<sup>17</sup> Brewer, 2010, p. 78

<sup>18</sup> Sampson 1996, pp. 273-315

psychological, socio-psychological, and existential-spiritual issues involved in peacebuilding', expressed in people's ways of thinking and behaviour patterns.<sup>19</sup> It will also cross-fertilize investigations of the pro-social peacebuilding resources within religions with a feminist analysis of the structures that often impede these 'soft' aspects and sustainable peace. Before continuing to explore some of the root causes underlying the conflict in Sri Lanka, and the cultural, societal context women peacebuilders are situated in I will first critically reflect on my methodology.

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<sup>19</sup> Hertog, 2010, p.47

## CHAPTER 1

### METHODOLOGY

In the following chapters I bring first-hand empirical fieldwork in Sri Lanka into engagement with academic literature and secondary texts. My data were gathered through interviews with twenty-two participants of the *Geheniya* project (plus its director Dishani Jayaweera), which had been arranged by the CPBR office before my arrival. The resulting selection bias was partly due to the women's availability, their willingness to be interviewed and the time available during my trip. Importantly, none of the Hindu women, apart from three Brahma Kumaris, wanted to be interviewed, which to some extent warped my findings. The reason given was that they did not want to go on record, but preferred instead to operate under the radar remaining invisible. Hayward and Marshall explain religious women's invisibility and their marginalization from political, economic and social life as 'often grounded in particular religious teachings and understandings'.<sup>20</sup> They further expound on women in Hinduism remaining 'outside the scope of organized religion' and although technically Hindu women are not barred from pursuing religious life and leadership they do not hold positions of traditional leadership.<sup>21</sup> This aspect of Hinduism combined with the women's marginalization as Tamils may account for their refusal to meet. This subject-matter certainly warrants further research, which however will not be possible as part of this study. I will continue my investigation in the belief that the other interviews still shed much light on the current situation in Sri Lanka, but will bear the lack of Hindu women's voices in mind.

The fact that the interviewees were women and in many cases from minority religions and ethnicities means they are to some extent 'marginal' in society, a quality that

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<sup>20</sup> Hayward and Marshall, p.13

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, p.107

according to Davies makes them good 'informants' as they can be more 'aware of the assumptions and expectations of their society'.<sup>22</sup> Out of the 23 women I interviewed there were fifteen dedicated religious leaders: 7 Buddhist Bhikkhunis, one from the Tibetan tradition, 5 Catholic sisters from various orders, and three Brahma Kumaris. Many of them lived in remote areas and even the Bhikkhunis, ostensibly from the majority religion, lived almost exclusively in remote geographical areas on the fringes of society on very little money. There were seven lay women, of which four were Muslim for whom the distinction between religious and community leader cannot easily be made as they are married with families, yet often also teach the Qur'an. In all cases, however, I perceived a marginality, which the participants were mostly aware of and which contributed to their interest in peacebuilding.

During my fieldwork I became increasingly aware of the power dynamics and selection process in my questions and in the subsequent evaluation of my data.<sup>23</sup> Prior to my trip I had been interested in how women's roles have changed post-conflict. I was initially disappointed that many of the women, particularly those living in the South had not had much direct experience of the conflict themselves, yet I soon realised that they had all experienced, and were still experiencing, structural and cultural violence underpinning the conflict. For instance, they were all concerned with the continuing alienation of women, in the forms of economic deprivation, lack of education and systemic exclusion from public life, as well as increased instances of domestic and sexual violence.

By adopting a semi-structured interview technique recurring themes were allowed to emerge. According to Steier it is more productive 'to hear what our subjects are telling us, not by imposing categories on them, but by trying to see how our categories may not fit.'<sup>24</sup> I kept my questions more general in the attempt to let my interviewees lead my investigation. The subsequent life stories that emerged were at times powerful for me

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<sup>22</sup> Davies, 2008, p.90

<sup>23</sup> Coffey, 1999, p.144

<sup>24</sup> Steier, 1991, p.8

as the interviewer as well as for the narrator. Atkinson refers to Bruner's research as a cognitive psychologist illustrating that 'we actually construct personal meaning (and reality) during the making and telling of our narratives.'<sup>25</sup> I became aware that partaking in the interviews was a dynamic process for both me and the interviewees, as well as for our translator, serving not only my research purposes but also potentially helping elucidate the *Geheniya* participants' understanding of their own peacebuilding qualities and learning. My interviews were interventions of which I had to be conscious.

My position as researcher was that of an outside observer, yet I had a vested interest as a female religious peacebuilder that could be identified as a 'semi-insider' position. My desire is for the *Geheniya* project to have a huge impact on a grassroots level, eventually leading to systemic change. This could be seen as a bias, however Fisker-Nielsen refers to the researcher's interaction as being based on 'empathic understanding', which does not mean that it is 'always sympathetic or uncritical' and that the relationship between observer and observed does not necessarily become more objective the greater the distance between the two.<sup>26</sup> I was inspired by many of the women, but will continue to critically reflect on the wider-reaching impact of their work.

Language was a major issue and I was fully aware of my failure to speak the local languages<sup>27</sup>, although the difficulty of learning both Sinhala and Tamil, or the ensuing bias that would result from learning only one of the languages might have led to further complications. Some of the interviews, particularly those with the Catholic sister, were conducted in English, the rest mostly in Sinhala. The problems inherent in translation were exacerbated in Batticaloa where mainly Tamil is spoken. In one instance the interview went through a double translation, which hampered my ability to understand

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<sup>25</sup> Atkinson, 2002, p.125

<sup>26</sup> Fisker-Nielsen, 2012, pp.22/23

<sup>27</sup> Coffey, 1999, p.88

the Brahma Kumaris' experiences and concerns, further adding to the 'invisibility' of Tamil women.<sup>28</sup>

I was also conscious of the historical and contemporary cultural domination of the English language, and the ensuing power relation that potentially brings with it. However, English may now also be seen as the more neutral medium of communication in Sri Lanka, the difficulties of colonial times having been superseded by the rivalry between Sinhala and Tamil. Apart from two Catholic sisters and a couple of the Muslim women none of my interviewees and very few people in general seemed to speak both indigenous languages fluently. This language barrier between the two dominant ethnic communities was exacerbated by the 1956 government Sinhala-only policy (referred to later), and struck me as one of the main drivers of conflict, and a major obstacle to reconciliation.<sup>29</sup>

I am aware of the dangers in generalizing and drawing conclusions from my empirical research. Davies elucidates that ethnographic analysis is a 'creative tension' between the processes of generalizing and explaining, and ethnographic knowledge of real people' observed through fieldwork.<sup>30</sup> Bearing these tensions in mind I feel confident however, that using examples from these interviews will make a valuable contribution to existing scholarly research by illustrating and questioning recent peacebuilding theory.

#### BACKGROUND TO CONFLICT

A brief background of Sri Lanka's history from its colonisation to independence, will elucidate the emergence of Buddhist nationalism and the country's increasing militarisation culminating in almost thirty years of civil war (1983 to 2009). This will

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<sup>28</sup> Hayward and Marshall, 2015, pp.1-22

<sup>29</sup> De Mel, 2007, p.33

<sup>30</sup> Davies, 2008, pp.231/2

include a sketched assessment of the 'fault-lines' that led to the conflict with reference to Levinger's four-step assessment process, and mainly focus on the political, psychological and cultural dividers and drivers of the conflict.<sup>31</sup> Dividers are seen as potential sources of polarisation between groups, whereas connectors are potential sources of cohesion. However, dividers are not always intrinsically negative in the same way as connectors are not always intrinsically positive as explored in the following analysis. My research has been primarily desk-based supported by impressions from my recent visit to the country.

### Colonialisation

Because of its strategic position in the Indian Ocean Sri Lanka has been a trading hub for centuries with Arab traders settling in the coastal regions from the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. When the Portuguese arrived in 1505 the island consisted of three main kingdoms: the Tamil kingdom of Jaffna in the North, and two Sinhalese kingdoms in central Kandy, and western Kotte. The Portuguese made a deal with the king of Kotte and subjugated the fiercely resistant Jaffna by force. Only Kandy remained independent and from then on assumed its role as protector of the Buddhist faith, housing the most precious Buddhist symbol, the Relic of the Tooth. In 1602 the Dutch took over from Portugal, also failed to subjugate Kandy and eventually ceded Ceylon, as Sri Lanka was then known, to the British in 1796.<sup>32</sup> Already the distinctive histories and narratives of the defeated Northern Tamil kingdom and the kingdom of Kandy with its status as protector of the Buddhist faith emerge.

The British made Ceylon a colony and established a unified administration in 1815 when they took over Kandy, removed the lion flag of the Sinhala king replacing it with the British flag.<sup>33</sup> The Sinhalese believed that only the custodians of the Sacred Tooth had

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<sup>31</sup> Levinger, 2013, pp. 95-111

<sup>32</sup> De Silva, K., 1981, and Yogasundram, 2006

<sup>33</sup> Pieris, 2016

the right to rule the land, and in response they hid the tooth, securing the island's symbolic sovereignty for the Sinhala people. Some of the seeds for the future rise of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism are embedded in these symbolic acts.

In 1832 the British made English the official language, which on the surface functioned as a connector for the island's disparate ethnicities, promoting a centralised administration and economic growth. On the other hand it also oppressed the cultural identities of the Sinhala and Tamil populations of Sri Lanka. This cultural oppression was further exacerbated by making Christianity a prerequisite for being admitted to the political and economic elite.

An influx of British settlers and the import of Tamil labourers from Southern India to work on the tea plantations, profoundly altered the island's demographic mix.<sup>34</sup> Further demographic flux with Tamils from the North settling in Colombo and Sinhalese heading to Jaffna, due to economic necessity, complicated the ethnic divisions and identities leading to deep-rooted insecurity. These demographic shifts could have acted as connectors with Tamils and Sinhalese living in greater proximity but the divide-and-rule policy of the British administration favouring the Tamil minority created further divisions.<sup>35</sup> Their discrimination became another of the drivers towards the development of Sinhalese political nationalism.

Both Sinhala and Tamil nationalism grew under colonial rule in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the Ceylon National Congress was established in 1919 driven by nationalist missions of both communities. Until the 1920s there was a 'remarkable harmony between Sinhala and Tamil political leaders as they shared the common aim of ridding the country of British rule.'<sup>36</sup> Universal suffrage and a new constitution in 1931 provided some local participation in the decision-making process but neither the Sinhala nor

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<sup>34</sup> De Silva, 1981, pp.274/5

<sup>35</sup> McGilvray, 2008, p.4

<sup>36</sup> Yogasundram, 2006, p.240

Tamil political leaders endorsed this constitution foreshadowing future political problems. British colonial rule had oppressed and eroded the identities of both groups culminating in their call for independence. Although this call initially acted as a connector, colonialism had sown the seeds of division, with the rise of nationalism as a direct result.

### The Rise of (Buddhist) Nationalism

In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century the Sinhalese fuelled their nationalistic feelings by adopting 'a mytho-historic narrative as the script of national identity' which led 'to a fundamentalist positioning of this Buddhist culture'.<sup>37</sup> This narrative is articulated in the *Mahavamsa*, a Pali text used as the doctrinal foundation by Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhism. It expresses the mission of the Sinhala people as being the torchbearers for the *dhamma* and constructs an interdependency between the continuation of the Buddhist teaching, an ethnic group (Sinhalese) and the land the group occupies (Lanka). Simultaneously it erases the existence of other ethnic and religio-cultural communities thereby providing a rhetoric that can be employed to express ethno-religious fundamentalism. Relying 'on religion as a source for identity' and setting boundaries 'that determines who belongs and who does not' including 'dramatic eschatologies; and the dramatization and mythologization of enemies' helped Sinhala Buddhists strengthen their group identity and dignity under colonial rule.<sup>38</sup>

Instrumental to the revival of Sinhalese nationalism and the attempt at creating a unified 'Buddhism' were Colonel H.S. Olcott and more importantly his Sinhala protégé, Anagarika Dharmapala. Olcott was the organizer of the New York Theosophical society, became interested in Buddhism, travelled to Sri Lanka and was 'welcomed as political and cultural ally who could assist the Sinhalese in their struggle'.<sup>39</sup> He invented the

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<sup>37</sup> Neumaier, 2004, p.75

<sup>38</sup> Bartholomeusz and De Silva, 1998, p.2 quoting Marty and Appleby's Fundamentalism Project

<sup>39</sup> Gombrich and Obeyesekere, 1988, p. 204/5

Buddhist flag and formulated a Buddhist 'cathecism', wrongly believing that all Buddhists would assent to this. He was instrumental in trying to unify Buddhist practices under the banner of the newly coined concept of 'Buddhism', which until then had consisted of multifarious practices. He supported his young protégé Dharmapala in his mission as 'defender of the (Buddhist) doctrine'. Dharmapala was instrumental in developing Sinhala Buddhist nationalism through a rhetoric, which conflated ideas of religion (Theravada Buddhism), race (Aryan-Sinhalese), country (Sri Lanka), and language (Sinhala) that became a seedbed for a Buddhist revivalism feeding on an ideology of 'ethnoreligious chauvanism'.<sup>40</sup> He evolved an 'ethic of this-worldly asceticism' and in 1898 codified it as the *Gihī Vinaya* (The Daily Code for the Laity), a Sinhala pamphlet establishing 200 rules to guide lay conduct, 30 specifically for women.<sup>41</sup> When the nineteenth edition appeared in 1958 nearly fifty thousand copies had been sold, showing the wide-reaching influence his thought and codes had on the Sinhala consciousness, and on its gendered understanding of male and female roles. Although Dharmapala was exiled to Calcutta in 1915, his ideas became for many Sinhala Buddhists the foundational narrative on which their nationhood was built under colonialism.

### Independence

When Sri Lanka gained full Independence from British Rule on 4 February 1948 its first government was elected by a first-past-the-post electoral system, which mainly represented the Sinhalese majority. Under the British, Tamils had been overrepresented in universities and public-service jobs as they were good English speakers. However, in the post-independence governments Tamil and Muslim minorities were politically excluded, fermenting the already existing rivalries and acting as a political divider. This marginalisation increased when SWRD Bandaranaike, leader of

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<sup>40</sup> Neumaier, 2004, p.78

<sup>41</sup> Gombrich and Obeyesekere, 1988, p. 212 - 215

the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, came to power in 1955, basing his agenda on a mixture of socialism, Sinhala nationalism and Buddhism. He passed the Official Language Act making Sinhala the country's sole official language disenfranchising the Hindu and Muslim Tamil-speaking population who constituted 30% of the country. Through this Sinhala-only policy Tamil speakers lost their jobs, access to government services and education, leading to 'spatial and linguistic segregation', which acted as powerful drivers of the ethnic conflict.<sup>42</sup> Tamils were being politically excluded, economically disadvantaged and culturally silenced.

Protests led to the first island-wide anti-Tamil riot in 1958 leaving at least two hundred dead and displacing thousands of Tamils. To avoid further violence Bandaranaike started negotiations for a federation with Tamil leaders, however he was assassinated the following year by a Buddhist monk, indicating how factions of the Buddhist *sangha* condoned violence in the name of Buddhist nationalism.<sup>43</sup> In 1960 Bandaranaike's widow Sirimavo, with a mandate to carry on his Sinhala-only policies, became the first female prime minister in the world. Her traditional role as widow and mother coupled with her nationalist policies and the dynastic workings in Sri Lankan politics secured her three terms (1960–65, 1970–77 and 1994–2000). She pursued separationist policies, imposed a state of emergency on Tamil home regions, and in 1972 brought in a new constitution that declared Sinhala the official language and gave Buddhism the 'foremost place' among Sri Lanka's religions, as well as changing the country's name from Ceylon. As a direct response to these policies the LTTE advocating an independent Tamil state were born.

The political and cultural divisions between Tamils and Sinhalese, who had originally coexisted on the island in separate kingdoms, were exacerbated under colonial rule. Both peoples' identities were eroded leading to a rise in nationalism, which in the case

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<sup>42</sup> De Mel, 2007, p.35

<sup>43</sup> In 1985 Reverend Mahapallegama Dhammalankara declared that 'monks should march to the battlefield without practicing the monastic image of silence', *ibid*, p. 34

of the Sinhala Buddhists was conflated with a mytho-historic religious narrative leading to fundamentalist thinking.<sup>44</sup> After independence the Sinhalese attempted to redress perceived wrongs by strengthening their own group identity and oppressing the identities of the minority Tamil Hindus and Muslims. Dividers such as Sinhala-only language policies, attempts at ethnic cleansing and the declaration of Buddhist predominance exacerbated the already existing rivalries. Resentments became drivers that eventually led to ethnic conflict and war. In addition, religion was reinterpreted, and the classical Buddhist teachings were distorted by the Sinhalese in order to emphasise their Theravada entitlement as the keepers of Buddhism. In an attempt to impose an artificial homogeneity and erase all diversity, however, they negated one of the fundamental principles of Buddhism, the interdependence of all life. Many of their actions can be interpreted as ways of compensating for a fragile threatened social identity, which had been eroded under colonial rule. Under these circumstances the men and women of the dominant Sinhala group were 'united in their intention to advance the interests of their group against those of others' thereby suppressing their own multiple identities.<sup>45</sup> The process and reasons for forming and rigidifying ethnic social identities, leading to violent conflict, will be explored in the following chapter. As ethnicity and religion became the dominant signifiers, both men and women retracted into their group identities and gendered roles became more polarised in the process.

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<sup>44</sup> Neumaier, 2004, p.75

<sup>45</sup> Miller, 2001, p.91

## CHAPTER TWO

### SOCIAL IDENTITY

Drawing on social identity theories by Tajfel and Volkan the following chapter will analyse how large group social identities in Sri Lanka were formed, codified, and how 'cultural amplifiers', that 'stimulate, increase, or expand' a group's 'cultural values', contributed to ethno-political divisions.<sup>46</sup> I will continue to explore how Buddhism has been interpreted by the Sinhalese to justify conflict and how the LTTE have countered with their own narratives and actions. What are the 'chosen glories' and 'chosen traumas' on both sides that have led to violent conflict? What are some of the symbols and codifications of the two main large-group identities, and how do they express the dominant culture, and perceptions of masculinity and femininity?

#### Social Identity

Northrup defines identity as 'an abiding sense of selfhood that is the core of what makes life predictable', and which gives life meaning and purpose.<sup>47</sup> This takes place at multiple levels, providing a sense of security physically, socially, psychologically and also spiritually. According to Kelly individuals interpret reality through a process called 'construing,' which involves feelings, values, behaviour, and the creation of meaning. 'Core constructs' help us maintain a sense of identity and predictability. When they are threatened, however, they elicit powerful emotions and can easily lead to conflict. This is because 'core constructs' can give us the impression of having a 'singular identity', contributing to what Sen calls the reductionism of a 'singular affiliation'.<sup>48</sup> By elucidating a theory of 'the plurality of our identities' Sen makes us aware of the complex nature of our identities, suggesting that an understanding of our multiple identities is likely to help us be more collaborative and peaceful, and overcome both

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<sup>46</sup> Fish, 2001, p.244

<sup>47</sup> Northrup, 1989, pp.63/64

<sup>48</sup> Sen, 2006, pp.16-20

'identity disregard' and 'singular affiliation', which can lead to conflict.

In times of threat and insecurity people often seek the security of the group. Tajfel in his theory of social or group identity defined this as 'the individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of the group membership'.<sup>49</sup> As most people belong to multiple groups and hold plural identities the importance of one identity need not obliterate another. However, at any given time a person makes choices, implicitly or explicitly, about the relative importance of each identity. In some circumstances, particularly during times of stress, threat, discrimination or intergroup conflict, 'social identity may ... function almost to the exclusion of personal identity'.<sup>50</sup> At these times Tajfel suggests that people perceive themselves as belonging to an in-group as opposed to an out-group, or 'other'. The in-group will find ways of codifying its identity in institutions, traditions, myths, stories and symbols. An example of this is the foundational narrative on which the new Sinhala nationhood was built after independence: a myth in which the Sinhala people are destined to be the chosen ones, culminating in the 'war cry to turn present-day Sri Lanka into *dhammadipa*, the "island of righteousness' (embodied by Buddhism)', an attempt at recapturing an utopian vision of an idealized past.<sup>51</sup>

### LARGE GROUP IDENTITY

Volkan further expands on Tajfel's social identity theory by defining the term 'large-group identity' as 'the subjective experience of thousands or millions of people who are linked by a persistent sense of sameness while also sharing numerous characteristics with others in foreign groups'.<sup>52</sup> The emphasis is on a subjective, cultural experience, which is shared with many in a 'persistent sense of sameness'. Volkan identifies several

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<sup>49</sup> Tajfel in Northrup, 1989, p. 63

<sup>50</sup> Northrup, 1989, p.65

<sup>51</sup> Neumaier, 2006, p.78

<sup>52</sup> Volkan, 2008, p.2

elements that contribute to the formation of large group identity, including “We-ness” established in childhood, projections that define the out-group in terms of the ‘other’, ‘chosen glories’, ‘chosen traumas’ and symbols that come to life. ‘When one large group interacts with another, “We-ness”, whether it is described with reference to religious, ethnic, national, or racial affiliation, acts as an invisible force in the unfolding drama.<sup>53</sup> In the case of Sinhala Buddhists a strong cocktail of religious, ethnic, national and linguistic affiliations emphasised their “We-ness”, contained in the mytho-historic narrative developed by Dharmapala under colonial occupation. His definition of the ‘Sinhala nation’ erased all traces of their historic diversity and gave them a sense of entitlement.

Another characteristic of how “We-ness” is strengthened is by defining oneself in terms of the ‘other’, which can easily lead to discrimination against the ‘out-group’ and to the creation of enemy images and stereotypes. The revivalist Sinhala Buddhists ‘imposed an artificial (and unrealistic) homogeneity on the “other”’ including various groups of Tamils, Muslims, Hindus, and Christians, accusing them of being aliens who were threatening the Sinhalese and exploiting them economically.<sup>54</sup> This emphasis on the out-group as ‘enemy’, perceived as a threat to both individual and social identity, amplifies the importance of belonging, and emphasises the predominance of the individual’s large-group identity. Under threat large groups regress and define their social identities by continually reinforcing the group’s ‘origin myth’ and by re-emphasising group identity through an ideology of entitlement.<sup>55</sup> The out-group’s enemy image is often expressed through dehumanisation and hate speech, exemplified by Dharmapala castigating all non-Sinhala communities in Sri Lanka, referring to ‘filthy Tamils’ and to Muslims as ‘*hambayo*’, a rhetoric that was later continued during the escalation of the conflict in the 1980s.<sup>56</sup> Research has identified at least three different

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<sup>53</sup> Volkan, 1997, p.25

<sup>54</sup> Neumaier, 2006, p.77 & 79

<sup>55</sup> Agnew, 1998, p.47

<sup>56</sup> Grombich & Obeyesekere, 1988, p.213

types of enemies: imperials, barbarians and degenerates.<sup>57</sup> Sinhala Buddhists perceived the British as imperials or oppressors and the Tamils as barbarians as evidenced in the 1980s when monks used 'the ancient epithet of *mlecca* ("savage")' for Tamil guerrillas after they had attacked Buddhist temples and killed monks.<sup>58</sup>

Northrup identifies the four stages of how identity operates in the escalation and intractability of conflict as being 'threat', 'distortion', 'rigidification' and 'collusion'.<sup>59</sup> These dynamics were clearly at work during the years leading up to the outbreak of war. 'Threat' is when a party perceives invalidation of the group's core constructs. Fear sets in which can then lead to the construing of events as invalidating this core identity. In turn this 'distortion' can lead to acts of aggression.

Tamils felt their identity was seriously under attack from the early 1970s when a state of emergency was imposed on them. They experienced this as Sinhala oppression, as the majority of the Sri Lankan police force and army consisted of Sinhalese.<sup>60</sup> In addition, Sinhala-only' policies and the supremacy of Buddhism, formalised in the constitution, were perceived as threats to Tamil identity, and the government's Dry Zone colonolization policy that resettled Sinhala Buddhists from Kandy to the Tamil heartland of Anuradhapura and Polonaruwa were seen as territorial invasions on their homelands.<sup>61</sup> Tamils reacted to these threats and the perceived invalidation of their identity by forming the LTTE with the aim of establishing an independent Tamil state, by violent means if necessary.

'Distortion' is a psychological response to threat as the fear is projected onto the enemy and 'rigidification', a hardening of perceptions of both self and other, as intra-group differences are minimised and inter-group differences are exaggerated. Separation between the two groups increases and may lead to a process of 'dehumanization',

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<sup>57</sup> Gross Stein, 1996, p.98

<sup>58</sup> Tambiah, 1992, p.95

<sup>59</sup> Northrup, 1989, pp.68-76

<sup>60</sup> Fuchs and Sister Madeleine, 2015, and De Mel, 2007

<sup>61</sup> Tambiah, 1992, p.67/8

seeing the other as enemy, evil, animal. These processes can be observed to have escalated conflict on both sides during the 1970s and 80s with 'rigidification' leading to the justification of violence as Sri Lanka moved into a period of intolerance and injustice.<sup>62</sup>

The fourth stage of 'collusion' sets in when the groups' identities are based on maintaining the conflict itself, and according to Stein violent conflict becomes more likely when one group's 'identity is based on the refusal to recognize another identity'.<sup>63</sup> Collusion means that both groups' identities rely on the conflict itself to affirm their own identity, justifying the need for the annihilation of the enemy 'other'.

In 1981, in an effort to destroy the 'enemy's' identity Sinhalese rioters, possibly government forces, burnt down Jaffna's library, housing priceless and irreplaceable histories of the Tamil people, symbols of Tamil culture and learning. This action was an attempt to obliterate Tamil identity refusing to acknowledge their right to exist in Sri Lanka. In 1983 the LTTE retaliated with its biggest strike to date killing 13 soldiers in the Jaffna region on 23<sup>rd</sup> July, which led to Black July, a period of seven days of full scale anti-Tamil massacres when according to varying reports between 250 - 3000 Tamils were killed, many homes and businesses were looted, and whole areas such as the Tamil Pettah district in Colombo were raised to the ground. An estimated 10,000 Tamils became refugees moving to traditional Tamil areas in the North and East or leaving the country.<sup>64</sup> At the same time many Sinhalese living in the North and East moved south creating a more rigid geographical delineation between the two communities. The government was unable or unwilling to stop the violence, and counter reprisal upon counter reprisal led to the rigidification of large group identities and full-blown civil war.

These events became what Volkan calls 'chosen glories', victories and events that are commemorated reinforcing feelings of entitlement, and 'chosen traumas', traumatic

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<sup>62</sup> Yogasundram, 2006, p.321

<sup>63</sup> Gross Stein, 1996, p.93

<sup>64</sup> Yogasundram, 2006, p. 310

events that have not been resolved through mourning. These events affirm large-group identities and are used to validate the necessity for conflict. Once established in the collective memory 'chosen glories' and 'chosen traumas' are then passed on from one generation to the next through 'transgenerational transmission'. In the case of a chosen trauma the older generation unconsciously externalize their traumatised selves onto their developing children's personalities symbolically 'depositing' their grief and impelling them to reverse the humiliation on behalf of the whole group.<sup>65</sup> This transmission can cause future generations and particularly diaspora communities in exile to keep the conflict alive politically and economically, contributing to its intractability and entrenching the codified identities for generations. This is a huge field of potential research, yet in this instance I will focus on how Sinhalese and Tamils chose to codify their identities through chosen traumas, glories and symbols by exploring a couple of examples that encapsulate many of the issues.

#### Examples of 'Chosen Glories' and 'Chosen Traumas'

##### Tamil

For Tamils Black July was a trauma that is still remembered and that was kept alive through yearly commemorations throughout the war years. It is very close in date to 5 July, which is known as Black Tiger Day, the date of the first LTTE suicide mission in Jaffna in 1987. The two dates were conflated for the purposes of memorialisation blurring the distinction between Tamil identity and the LTTE as July became the time for all Tamils to remember those lost in the conflict. Together with *Maaveerar Naal*, the Great Heroes Day on 27 November, when the first LTTE cadre died in 1982, 5 July was commemorated yearly by the LTTE and is still remembered by many Tamils, particularly in their diaspora communities.<sup>66</sup> What were once the LTTE's 'chosen glories' have now become collective 'chosen traumas'. During the conflict these commemorations were

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<sup>65</sup> Volkan, 1998, p.6 & 1997, p.43

<sup>66</sup> De Mel, 2007, p.18

banned by the Sinhalese government, and Tamils are to this day not allowed to commemorate the LTTE dead. Research shows that if these traumas are left buried and not addressed they may well lead to more conflict in the future should the circumstances become conducive. This is possibly an important area for future research and intervention.

### Sinhala traumas and glories

The LTTE attack on 23 July 1983 leading to Black July was a trauma for the Sinhalese, a threat many still remember, and which has been passed onto the younger generation. This Sinhala 'chosen trauma' was, together with the bomb attack by the LTTE on the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy on 25 January 1998, upheld by Mahinda Rajapatsa's government as public trauma. Although the bomb did not damage the most precious Buddhist relic of Sri Lanka, it did ruin many wall paintings and it was seen as an attack on the heart and essence of Sinhala religion and culture, an attempt to destroy it, which in the end however strengthened their entitlement myth.<sup>67</sup>

As in this instance traumas can be chosen and used to strengthen large group identity, harden boundaries between ethnic communities and incite conflict as in the case of the Aranthalawa commemoration. On 2 June 1987 thirty-one Buddhist monks were killed by the LTTE in Aranthalawa and as a 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration the Nationalist president Rajapatsa organised events including a photo exhibition of various LTTE attacks in Colombo in 2007.<sup>68</sup> This commemoration greatly contributed to the Sinhalese public's support of the final war effort.

A 'chosen glory' of the Sinhala government is 18 May 2009, the day the war was officially won by the Sinhalese army, designated a national holiday and named 'Victory Day' by President Rajapatsa. This military victory supported the deep-rooted mytho-

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<sup>67</sup> Hewapathirane, Lankaweb, 2017

<sup>68</sup> Premaratna, 2016, p.2

religious belief of Sinhalese superiority, which had been constantly endorsed in the last years of the war.

Under Rajapatsa's rule Sinhala victory over the LTTE and the Tamil people was celebrated annually. This divisive act cannot have contributed to the healing of relations post-conflict and was not conducive to reconciliation. Aware of this President Maitwipala Sirisena, having won the election in 2015, renamed it 'Remembrance Day', although the LTTE's dead are still not permitted to be commemorated.<sup>69</sup>

Sri Lanka became increasingly militarised over the course of the civil war and, despite efforts to negotiate settlements and ceasefires, this contributed to escalating violence. The large-group ethnic identities became more polarised, fear and mistrust grew and gender roles were essentialised in the process. I will be investigating the reasons and effects of this in the following chapter but first will explore some of the cultural amplifiers that express deep-rooted unconscious belief systems that have strengthened group identity. This will help identify the belief systems that need transforming in order to establish lasting peace.

### Cultural Amplifiers

Cultural amplifiers are ways of codifying and amplifying culture through symbols, rituals, myths and stories. They emphasise certain values and belief systems held by large groups including how to deal with conflict, the justification of the use of violence and how to relate to 'the other'. In times of threat and stress they can become heightened and entrenched and they can also be used and manipulated by political or religious leaders to justify violent behaviour and rally their followers. In the case of Sri Lanka its increased militarization was driven and supported by both political and religious leaders, particularly from 2003 onwards. The Sinhala Buddhist ethno-religious myth was emphasized, ritual ceremonies were held by the *sangha* awarding the president and

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<sup>69</sup> BBC News, 16/05/2015

other high officials with honorary titles, and flag blessing became a common occurrence.<sup>70</sup> Both religion and politics supported continuing militarization, making group identities and their codification increasingly intractable. Group identities became rigidified and condensed in flags, which functioned both as territorial markers as well as conveying symbolic messages to both the in- and out-groups.

Schirch explains that symbols 'assist humans in creating, coding and decoding their meaning systems'.<sup>71</sup> They represent value systems, experiences and world-views, and express these to both in- and out-groups. Their meaning is not static, however, as they can communicate different things to different people, and vary according to context. Kertzer asserts how symbols function in three ways through condensation, multivocality and ambiguity.<sup>72</sup> Condensation expresses how a symbol can embody and merge diverse ideas into a single unified form thereby losing the complexity or diversity of its constituent parts. Flags are examples of uniting diverging ideas and disparate identities through symbols that communicate cultural and emotionally charged meanings, which can exacerbate the identity-driven aspects of conflict. In the case of the Sinhala Buddhists, ideas of territory, religion and ethnicity were conflated and embodied in their national flag, which the Tamils countered with the creation of their own flag. In order to understand the underlying meaning systems that affect both men and women of both large-group identities I will examine their chosen symbols, and also the prevalent use of the Buddhist flag.

### The Lion and the Tiger

The symbols of the lion and the tiger are central to Sinhalese and Tamil identities and their flags are an example of this. The golden lion represents Sinhalese ethnicity, merged with the Buddhist faith (gold representing Buddhism) and dates back to the last

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<sup>70</sup> Premaratna, 2016, p.3

<sup>71</sup> Schirch, 2005, p.81

<sup>72</sup> Kertzer, 1988. p.11

Sinhala king, Sri Wickrema Rjashinha who surrendered to the British in 1815.<sup>73</sup> On Independence Day in 1948 it was hoisted despite arguments that Sri Lanka needed a new flag to represent the multi-ethnic nature of the country and unify all communities by including the Nandi, bull of Shiva, and the crescent moon, Hindu and Muslim symbols. However, all other flags apart from the Union Jack were banned acting as a further cultural divider to a peaceful coexistence. All state buildings flew the flag of the golden lion together with the Union Jack apart from Jaffna where the Nandi bull was flown, expressing their dissent.<sup>74</sup>

In response and direct opposition to the Sinhala lion the Tamils adopted the tiger as their symbol in 1977. It was inspired by the emblem of the ancient Tamil kingdom of Chola from Southern India and adapted as a symbol of Tamil independence, expressing strength, bravery and aggression.<sup>75</sup> Both tiger and lion have become symbols of clashing cultures, nationalisms and religions in Sri Lanka, often with the express purpose of inspiring fear and superiority as I witnessed when passing a huge 5-metre roaring lion head above the gates of an army camp near Anuradhapura in the North of Sri Lanka. The animal imagery is deeply symbolic appealing to the essentialist views of both ethnicities showing both animals aggressively pitting themselves against each other in a mythic universal struggle. As symbols they condense many aspects of both large-group identities and represent these on their flags. In order to further understand some of the conflicting belief systems I will explore the multiple meanings of their flags.

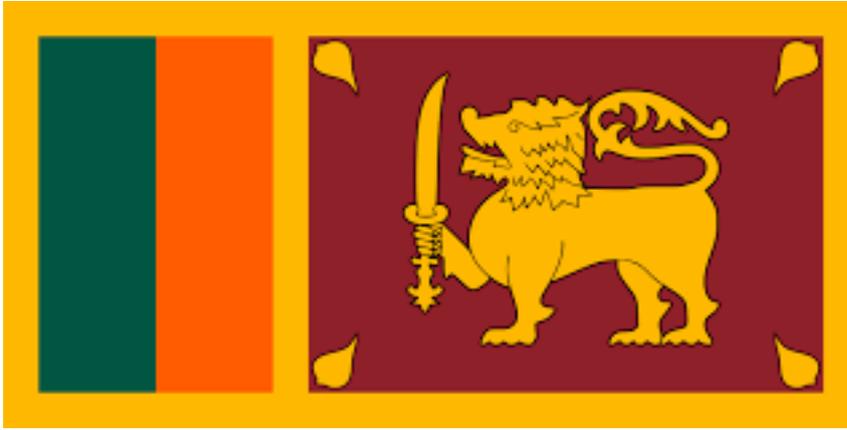
## FLAGS

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<sup>73</sup> Pieris, 2016

<sup>74</sup> Pieris 2016

<sup>75</sup> Matusitz, 2014, p.152



The national Sri Lankan flag has evolved since independence reflecting some of the changing perceptions and expressions of national identity. Originally it contained only the golden lion, symbol of the Sinhala nation (literally ‘people of the lion’, *sinha*) on a red background representing the Sinhalese majority contained by the golden border of Buddhism.<sup>76</sup> In 1951 after some negotiations two stripes representing the minority communities were added in proportions of 1:1:5: a green stripe signifying the Muslims and an orange stripe the Hindus. Only one of the committee members argued against the adoption of this flag saying that the stripes should not be outside of the lion flag as the minorities would feel subordinate.<sup>77</sup>

During the patriotic campaign of the 1980s the lion flag without the addition of the stripes was pronounced by the head monk of the important Amarapura Nikaya order as the “Sinhala Buddhist flag”, ‘the only flag which reminds people of their essence and identity as Sinhalese and Buddhists’, symbolising ‘unity’ and ‘sovereignty’.<sup>78</sup> This nationalistic thinking, supported by the *sangha*, promoted the idea that the Sinhalese were “sons to the soil” and heirs to the “motherland” (*mavbima*). Not surprisingly the Tamil Tigers invented their own flag in response.

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<sup>76</sup> McGilvray, 2008, p.7

<sup>77</sup> Pieris, 2016

<sup>78</sup> Tambiah, 1992, p.80 - 87



The LTTE explain their flag's symbolic meaning in a guidebook. Yellow signifies the Tamils' aspiration to freely govern themselves in their homeland, seen as a human right, and the righteousness of the Tamil struggle.<sup>79</sup> The roaring head and paws of the tiger express the dynamism and aggression of an animal ready to pounce whilst red represents egalitarianism, the abolition of caste and class, and gender equality, revolutionary changes necessary for social justice. Black reminds the Tamil people that its march towards freedom is fraught with dangers, death and destruction, keeping their 'chosen traumas' alive.<sup>80</sup> The circle of bullets and crossed rifles are seen to represent the Tigers' pledge to using violence on the one hand, and signify the oppression by the Sri Lankan government on the other. These varying interpretations exemplify the 'ambiguity' of the LTTE flag.

Due to their symbolic power flags, associated with large-group identity, can invoke strong emotions and lead to violence in intractable conflicts. The last few months of the war were fought with a vehemence symbolically reflected in lions and tigers fighting to the death. President Rajapaksa and much of the *sangha* justified the government's

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<sup>79</sup> tamilnews, 2009

<sup>80</sup> Matusitz, 2014, p.152

brutal attacks on the LTTE and Tamil civilians as an existential fight for survival, yet internationally they were condemned as war crimes.<sup>81</sup>



### Buddhist flag

In many areas of Sri Lanka the less ‘contentious’ Buddhist flag is more visible than the National flag. Every month during the period of the full moon there are *poya* celebrations at every Buddhist temple in Sri Lanka and the day is designated a public holiday. Temples as well as streets and the surrounding areas are decorated with Buddhist flags for days. The flag is a modern creation jointly designed by J.R. de Silva and Colonel Henry S. Olcott in 1880 to mark the revival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, and it was adopted as the international Buddhist flag in 1952.<sup>82</sup> For Sinhala Buddhists the colours symbolise universal truths, yet the flags are also markers of territory, expressions of power and superiority, and continual reminders of Sinhala Buddhist entitlement. They dominate the public landscape together with the plethora of white, stern, uniform Buddhas in meditation pose, which are positioned on most street corners

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<sup>81</sup> BBC, 2015

<sup>82</sup> It represents the six colours of the aura that shone around the head of the enlightened Buddha symbolising Universal Compassion, the Middle Way, Blessings, Purity and Wisdom, and their unification (Buddhanet, 2017)

in Southern Sri Lanka. The physical and symbolic domination of public spaces by flags and Buddha statues reaffirms the impression of a totalitarian national religion and represents a form of cultural violence, polarising ethnicities and religions even further. A polarisation of identities can also be perceived in gender divisions, essentialising male and female roles through near-mythical understandings.

### Symbols of masculinity and motherhood

Condensing mytho-religious narratives in the symbols of lion and tiger men, and in some cases women, were encouraged to fight for their 'motherland' against the enemy 'other'. Equating the land with the nurturing mother that needs protecting is not unique to Sri Lanka, but when combined with male Sri Lankans' experiences of emasculation under colonial rule, the 'motherland' takes on the dual function of symbolic 'birth-giver' affirming the large-group's identity and belonging, as well as a territorial perception of the country and land that need defending. Re-establishing their masculinity became of paramount importance for many Sinhalese men post-independence. In the subsequent years their 'crisis of masculinity' was further intensified by an economic downturn and 'masculinity' became increasingly polarised, distancing itself from traditional notions of 'femininity', leading to cultural notions that men are not supposed to have feelings as they are seen to be 'feminine'. This polarisation has led to an emphasis on hyper-masculine identities that are expressed through patriarchal structures.<sup>83</sup>

According to Skjelsbaek 'war can be regarded as the cornerstone of masculinity',<sup>84</sup> an idea endorsed by Seidler, who writes that 'traditionally it was through war that men affirmed their masculinities'.<sup>85</sup> In Sri Lanka many men from both ethnic groups established a dominant hetero-sexual masculinity, emphasised by taking up arms to

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<sup>83</sup> Pankhurst, 2008, pp.293-313 discusses the complexities of 'masculinity' in relation to patriarchy

<sup>84</sup> Skjelsbaek and Smith, 2001, p.61

<sup>85</sup> Seidler, 1997, p.8

fight for their ethnicity, beliefs and identity in order to 'protect' their women in an increasingly insecure and hostile environment, disempowering women in the process.<sup>86</sup>

If 'war is a cornerstone of masculinity' then motherhood is the 'central marker of the transition from girlhood to adult womanhood'.<sup>87</sup> These two extreme gender divisions and understandings of masculinity and femininity are also expressed in the rhetoric drawn from the mytho-religious *Mahamvsa* chronicle were the motherland (*mavbima*) was originally reunited by the glorified hero Dutthagamani, and more recently by Sinhala men, 'sons of the soil' (*bhumiputra*), an emotionally charged expression used as a claim of 'indigenous' people to their territory.<sup>88</sup> Sri Lanka is seen as the Mother, a notion expressed in the nationalistic MSV (Movement for the Protection of the **Motherland**) established in 1986 as an umbrella organisation consisting of both Buddhist laity and elements of the Buddhist *sangha*.<sup>89</sup> Idealising the country as Mother can be a sign of a regressed group that often emphasises a leader as an idealized, nurturing mother.<sup>90</sup> This may explain Sirimavo Bandaranaike success as the first woman prime minister in appropriating 'motherhood' for political gains. This idealisation of country and woman as mother reflects an essentialised and limiting view of women as explored in the following chapter.

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<sup>86</sup> DeLargy, 2013, p.61

<sup>87</sup> Skjelsbaek and Smith, 2001, p.61

<sup>88</sup> Tambiah, p.86 & 87

<sup>89</sup> *ibid*, p.80 & 81

<sup>90</sup> Volkan, 2008, p. 3

## CHAPTER THREE

### WOMEN'S ROLES IN POST-CONFLICT SRI LANKA

I will now examine the roles women played during the civil war and post conflict with reference to Brewer's first three categories of women as 'victim/survivors', 'combatants', and 'healers/reconcilers', leaving his fourth category of women as 'social transformers' to the following chapter. In this chapter I will also explore women's identities in Sri Lanka, the predominant societal expectation of them to play traditional roles in the family, the cultural negotiations of femininity, and the views they hold of themselves. These will be situated within a wider discourse of gendered peace and the 'structural' and 'cultural violence' expressed in Sri Lanka through patriarchy and militarization. Galtung explains 'structural violence' as the negation of four classes of needs: 'survival', 'well-being', 'identity/meaning' and 'freedom'.<sup>91</sup> These needs are denied through exploitation, penetration, fragmentation and marginalization. He further elucidates that 'cultural violence' is the aspect of culture expressed through religion, ideology, language, and art that justifies or legitimises direct or structural violence. Flags acting continually as symbolic reminders of chosen glories and traumas, exemplify this culture in Sri Lanka.

#### Women's Roles

Defining women's roles and even the concept of 'woman' is fraught with difficulties and paradoxes. In sociology 'gender is understood as a social construction' with meanings of masculinity and femininity changing over time and according to social and cultural contexts.<sup>92</sup> As women's identities vary both historically and culturally according to time and place, there are dangers in trying to generalize the identity of 'woman'. For

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<sup>91</sup> Galtung, 1998 p. 197

<sup>92</sup> Brewer, 2010, p.69

instance my perception of what it means to be a woman will differ to those varying perceptions held by the women I interviewed in Sri Lanka. The definitions of gender and the identities of women are also constantly in flux, developing and changing over time, providing both the possibility for positive societal change on the one hand and leaving them open to political pressure and influence on the other. When the diversity and flux of gender roles is ignored they are in danger of becoming essentialised by 'simplifying patterns of identity and regarding identity formations and allegiances to them as fixed and frozen'.<sup>93</sup> The previous government's political rhetoric employed essentialism with regard to ethnicity and in this chapter I will throw light on how the essentialist view of gender and women also contributed to the conflict and is still felt in the aftermath of the war. But first I would like to briefly discuss why investigating the roles women played during the conflict and now post-conflict is in itself important.

In 2000 UN Security Council Resolution 1325 was the first to link women with the peace and security agenda acknowledging the affect conflicts have on women and calling for their active participation at all levels of decision making in conflict prevention, peace processes, post-conflict peacebuilding and governance.<sup>94</sup> It addressed a range of issues including sexual violence, women's unique experiences, gender inequality, and it acknowledged the 'contribution of women as agents of change for peace'.<sup>95</sup> The resolution and its subsequent additions attempt to redress the balance by arguing that as men are usually instrumental in creating violent conflict, women are consequently excluded and that their voices need to be heard in order to contribute to sustainable peace and inclusive social change. However, the argument that women are inherently more peaceful than men, naturally possessing nurturing, healing and peace-building qualities due to their traditional roles as mothers as described by UNIFEM (2000) is in danger of inadvertently perpetuating gender stereotypes and an essentialism that

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<sup>93</sup> Smith, 2001, p.41

<sup>94</sup> Cohn, 2013, p.57

<sup>95</sup> De Alwis, Mertus and Sajjad, 2013, p.183

assumes all women share the same characteristics.<sup>96</sup> Countering this kind of essentialism feminists including O'Rourke argue for the inclusion of women in reconciliation processes on the grounds of 'justice', 'different agenda', 'politics of care' and 'larger dream', a topic I have discussed elsewhere.<sup>97</sup>

In identifying four categories of roles women play during war and post-conflict Brewer also tries to mitigate this essentialist view of women. These categories are: 'victim/survivors', 'combatants', 'healers/reconcilers' and 'social transformers', and they provide a useful frame to explore the varying contributions women make to peacebuilding, countering some gendered stereotypes in the process.<sup>98</sup> The roles can overlap and should not be seen as mutually exclusive as in the case of Chandra, an active member of *Geheniya* who is both a 'survivor' of a LTTE attack on a bus in 1998, and who due to that event became a 'reconciler' and now sees herself as a 'social transformer'. I will briefly refer to the first two categories of victim/survivors and combatants before continuing to explore the second two more fully.

#### VICTIM/ SURVIVORS

Women and children are seen to suffer the consequences of violence, rape and displacement during war, traditionally casting them in the role of passive 'victim' emphasising their lack of agency and power. By giving them the possibility to reframe their experience as 'survivors' they can regain agency and have a choice of identities. For example, Chandra could have chosen to see herself as a victim of the LTTE attack and harbour resentment, reinforcing her image of the enemy 'other', however she chose to see herself as a survivor and from that moment on decided to work for peace.<sup>99</sup> How women deal with traumatic experiences and how they live with the

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<sup>96</sup> Wong, 1999, p.275

<sup>97</sup> Fuchs, 2015

<sup>98</sup> Brewer, 2010, pp.76-95

<sup>99</sup> Fuchs and Chandra, 2016

aftermath can influence the future of a conflict and contribute to peace and reconciliation. On one hand, if not properly addressed, traumas can lead to the harbouring of hate, fear and resentment and possible transgenerationally transmitted 'chosen traumas', on the other they can become an incentive to transform large-group identities and work for peace.

## COMBATANTS

In recent wars, and particularly in Sri Lanka, women have increasingly participated in guerrilla or liberation movements as combatants.<sup>100</sup> Young Tamil women joined the LTTE to fight, and later some became suicide bombers. They were often motivated by the desire to affect social change, both for their ethnic community as well as for themselves as women. As De Soyza says in her autobiography about being a child soldier for the LTTE, 'We had begun a social change by breaking out of the self-limiting attitude of, and towards, females ... hoping to elevate the status of women in conservative Tamil society and empower them'.<sup>101</sup> The LTTE claimed to be fighting for an equal society and many women joined the fight in the belief they were achieving a more equal status with men. They created the term '*puthumai pen*', a 'new woman' who challenges patriarchy and her traditional status, in the conviction that they were contributing to a future liberated society.<sup>102</sup> However, de Soyza acknowledges that volunteering as suicide bombers did not equal women's liberation and that it served the LTTE leaders' purpose to allow women to join the all-women Black Tigers suicide bombers as they could gain easier access to high-profile targets. Since the war has come to an end there has been a backlash in Tamil society with expectations for women to go back to their traditional roles even though they had actively participated in politics, the armed struggle, and had taken over as heads of households in the absence

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<sup>100</sup> This trend is has also been prevalent amongst Kurdish and Palestinian women who have operated as suicide bombers, see Mazurana (2013) in Cohn, (2013) pp. 159-162

<sup>101</sup> De Soyza, 2011, p.300

<sup>102</sup> Samuel, 2001, p.195

of men. In Brewer's first two categories, women as victim/survivor and combatants defined themselves, or were defined by the inherent structural violence in Sri Lankan society. On one hand women suffered direct violence as victim/survivors and on the other they chose to react to societal restrictions by enacting direct violence themselves as combatants. Both these roles were embedded in the context of existing patriarchal and militaristic structures.

### HEALER/ RECONCILERS

In my research the role of healer and reconciler was the one that the *Geheniya* women identified with most and all of them referred to these qualities in one way or another. They are inherent in the traditional roles of housewives and mothers dominant in most Sri Lankan women's lives. With cultural sensitivity the project emphasises these roles in order to promote peace, and encourages the participants' wider understanding of them. By discussing ways of not limiting their spheres of influence to their families and faith communities but also attempting to extend them to 'other' ethnic groups, the project is helping the women make the transition towards 'social transformer'. The focus on these roles can however inadvertently promote gender stereotypes and an 'essentialist' understanding of women, assuming they all share the same inherent characteristics.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, many of the participants discussed their own and other women's qualities as healers with reference to the role of 'mother', functioning primarily in the sphere of the family. As we have already seen this role is exalted and holds much meaning in Sri Lanka. Before discussing 'motherhood' in more depth, however I will first examine what it is that needs to be healed in Sri Lanka. On closer inspection the effect of violence on women can be divided into two categories: violence caused by the civil war itself, including trauma, displacement and economic deprivation, and structural violence with its more hidden systemic effects of domestic violence, sexual abuse and inequality in the aftermath of the conflict.

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<sup>103</sup> Wong, 1999, p.275



## Violence and the effects of Civil War

The first category has directly affected mainly Tamil and Muslim women in the North and East of the island, and women from *Geheniya* have taken steps to address these. Together they have organised trips to Jaffna and the surrounding area meeting with women in villages to teach them practical skills and support them in cultivating the land and become self-employed. These cottage industries have been very successful in building morale and helping the women transform their often dire economic situations. Many of the interviewees from the South talked about the Tamil and Muslim women's need in the North for spiritual healing and friendship as being even more important than economic help. By initiating collaborations between Tamil and Muslim women they feel that the relationships created are contributing to healing. In addition, Sister Canice, a trained trauma counsellor, and others are supporting the victim/survivors of the war.

In Kattankudi near Batticaloa on the East Coast the women's concerns were more immediate as they had experienced the effects of war directly themselves. IWARE (Islamic Women's Association for Research and Empowerment) led by Aneesa Firthous are working hand in hand with the Tamil community to heal their traumas. During the war the LTTE took revenge on Muslims, by extorting money, taking their land and accusing them of collaborating with the army. In 1990 the LTTE killed 109 Muslim men at evening prayer, a traumatic event known as the Mosque Massacre. For the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary the group of Muslim women asked themselves how they can build peace in the country and suggested to the Hindu community that they commemorate the event together by holding silent prayers and tree planting ceremonies. These ritual acts, as well as joint livelihood projects bring the women from both communities together to heal the wounds inflicted by the war and transform chosen traumas into joint projects. They organise exchange programmes for young people and invite each other to their places of worship. Slowly, healing and reconciliation seems to be taking place on a

grassroots level despite the previous government's divisive aid programmes, both after the 2004 tsunami and at the end of the war.<sup>104</sup> It is the grassroots actions towards reconciliation by local people that prove most effective. The women take ownership in an effort to bridge the divides between the communities and together they negotiate the existing patriarchal structures empowering themselves in the process.

### Structural violence: Patriarchy and Militarization

It is the second category of women's suffering caused by the country's inherent structural violence that seems to concern the majority of the *Geheniya* women most. Underpinning the war effort were the societal structures and cultures of patriarchy and increased militarization. Dahlerup defines patriarchy as 'that system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women'.<sup>105</sup> The societal expectation in Sri Lanka for women to play traditional roles of femininity make most women socially, economically and politically dependent on men.<sup>106</sup> This dependence is both exploitative as many women provide free labour in the home yet are economically totally dependent, and marginalising as they have little impact in public life.

According to an analysis based on the Gender Development Index (GDI) there is a correlation between 'high levels of gender inequality and proneness to armed conflict'.<sup>107</sup> Much research and feminist thinking has linked the structures and practices of patriarchy with the tendency towards militarisation and sees it as the 'principal cause ... of the outbreak of violent societal conflicts'.<sup>108</sup> In her analysis of the rise of militarism De Mel claims that it is underwritten by other ideologies, such as patriarchy, that form a mutually supportive grid.<sup>109</sup> Celia Enloe defines 'militarization' as 'a step-by-step

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<sup>104</sup> Even interventions of NGOs have often proved divisive as they were seen to favour one community over another

<sup>105</sup> Miller, 2001, p.81 quoting Dahlerup, 1987

<sup>106</sup> Samuel, 2001, p.184

<sup>107</sup> Ramsbotham, Woodhouse & Miall, 2013, p.312

<sup>108</sup> Enloe, 2005, p.281

<sup>109</sup> De Mel, 2007, p.26

process by which a person or a thing gradually comes to be controlled by the military or comes to depend for its well-being on militaristic ideas.<sup>110</sup> Under Rajapaksa's government the use of violence was increasingly legitimised. The *sangha* endorsed state violence through *pirit* and military blessing ceremonies that changed public perception from soldiers as aggressive fighting machines to Bodhisattva liberation fighters. Advertising campaigns contributed to this change of image, aligning the soldier to the compassionate service-orientated ideal of the warrior, a Sinhala Buddhist icon, thereby restoring humanity to the forces.<sup>111</sup>

The government also reinforced the patriarchal view of the traditional family, equating it with the military family by, for example, depicting a nuclear family under an army helmet with the father taller than everybody else on a RS 50.<sup>112</sup> Sinhalese women's lives together with men's became increasingly militarized as the government and army depended on their tacit support and active encouragement of their husbands, brothers and sons to join the army. By appealing to women's sense of vulnerability and insecurity in dangerous times the patriarchal government emphasised the need for women to be protected by men, thereby reinforcing stereotypical gender roles that still persist post-conflict. Several of the women I interviewed mentioned how women feel they need men for security and that a 'woman can't be safe walking down the street'.<sup>113</sup>

Patriarchal and militarised structures can lead to what Pankhurst calls a 'post-war backlash' against women which finds expression in the two elements of (1) an 'anti-women' discourse with accompanying restrictions on life-choices regarding social, economic and political activity, and (2) a high level of violence against women.<sup>114</sup> Analyses based on the GDI also correlate armed conflicts with gendered violence demonstrating that 77% of armed conflicts showed alarmingly high levels of sexual and

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<sup>110</sup> Mathers, 2013, p.128 quoting Enloe, 2000, p.3

<sup>111</sup> Premaratna, 2016, pp. 3 & 4

<sup>112</sup> De Mel, 2007, p.19

<sup>113</sup> Fuchs, Sister Winifreda and Tenzin, 2016

<sup>114</sup> Pankhurst, 2008, p.3

domestic violence in 2008.<sup>115</sup> According to De Mel 'patriarchy lowers the threshold of violence, including domestic and gender-based violence' which is therefore felt in society at large not just in militarized zones.<sup>116</sup> Violence becomes a culturally accepted means of expression first publicly through the use of armed conflict and then by invading the private sphere.

In societies post-conflict men often resort to violence, possibly in order to reassert patriarchal structures or because of psychological damage. They express 'their anger and frustration in the domestic sphere' and this can also lead to increased suicide.<sup>117</sup> Many men living in militarised societies find it difficult to communicate their feelings and emotions for fear of compromising their sense of masculinity. Tenzin made me aware of the high level of male suicide in Sri Lanka which is corroborated by the 2014 WHO report rating it 4<sup>th</sup> highest in the world, which might be an interesting subject for another study.<sup>118</sup> All the women interviewed referred to Sri Lanka's endemic domestic violence and sexual abuse, and it was one of the principal effects they saw as their responsibility to heal.

### Traditional Roles

When women act as healers and reconcilers post-conflict it endorses women's more traditional roles. It is assumed they display certain peacebuilding qualities naturally in the domestic sphere, and that they bring these skills of healing divisions and repairing relationships to the public spheres. These qualities can contribute to social change, but only if the structural inequalities and inhibitors are challenged. As Brewer says, 'it is only when women engage in social transformation ... that they transcend the constraints and limitations of cultural notions of femininity.'<sup>119</sup> These cultural notions of femininity

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<sup>115</sup> Ramsbotham, Woodhouse & Miall, 2013, p.312

<sup>116</sup> De Mel, 2007, p.13

<sup>117</sup> Pankhurst, 2008, pp. 306/7

<sup>118</sup> Kodituwakku, 2016

<sup>119</sup> Brewer, 2010, p.85

have been explored by Skjelsbaek, who identifies the three different categories of 'victimized', 'liberated' and conservative or 'traditional' femininity.<sup>120</sup> In Sri Lanka due to the patriarchal and previously militarised cultures it is the 'traditional' version of femininity that predominates, although no doubt many Tamil and Muslim women were victimized and there are some women, mainly urban and educated, who are becoming liberated.

### Motherhood

The *Geheniya* women from all religious backgrounds referred to the role of mother as being key to women's role as peacebuilder. 'Woman is mother – she can heal all people' and 'mother is the one who can heal best' was the way Bhikkhuni Meheninwahansa expressed the sentiment, herself the mother of a son, who now sees herself as mother to her congregation, to society and the world.<sup>121</sup> 'Woman is leader in each family' and 'woman is the centre of the family who can solve all problems' are the way two Muslim activists in different parts of the country expressed it.<sup>122</sup> The domestic sphere seems in many cases to be the primary focus of the women, though there is also a desire to extend their sphere of influence out into society: 'when women are strong in the family as mothers, then the family becomes strong and the effect ripples out into society.'<sup>123</sup>

Motherhood is an acceptable role that Sri Lankan women adopt to empower themselves. Women's peace movements used it as an unthreatening and 'legitimate' way of uniting across ethnic divisions when they mobilised in the 1990s. They established the Tamil 'Northern Mothers Front', and the Sinhala 'Southern Mothers Front' in response. These organisations pressurised both the government and the Tamil rebels to stop fighting, demanded truth and justice for their 'disappeared' sons, and

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<sup>120</sup> Skjelsbaek, 2001, p.62

<sup>121</sup> Fuchs and Sunethrapali Meheninwahansa, 2016

<sup>122</sup> Fuchs, Hilmy and Rifraya, 2016

<sup>123</sup> Fuchs and Chandra, 2016

were instrumental in initiating peace talks. On a personal level President Kumaratunge 'appropriated the discourse of motherhood' and extended it symbolically to becoming the mother of the nation, distancing herself from Sinhala chauvinism and calling for an end to ethnic conflict. Ironically, however, she did not substantially empower women to participate in politics and during her time 'no peace initiative had the participation of women at any level of negotiation or decision-making except for the President herself.'<sup>124</sup>

There is an inherent paradox in mobilising under the banner of motherhood: although it was acceptable for women to mobilise if they conformed to traditional gender roles, when they became politicised, crossing the border from private to the public sphere, they were excluded from formal politics and official negotiations.<sup>125</sup> On the one hand women transcended their ethnic large group identities through solidarity and an acknowledgment of their large group identity as 'women', on the other hand they marginalised themselves by limiting themselves to the role of 'mothers' which essentially banished women to the private sphere. The role of mothers is in many ways defined by the discourse established by patriarchy. Although women seemed temporarily empowered as reconcilers in the 1990s they succumbed to the established patriarchal structures and were not able to sustain their activism or achieve genuine empowerment.<sup>126</sup>

### How women see themselves

The majority of the *Geheniya* women expressed, independently from each other, that women in Sri Lanka were seen to be 'second rate', 'the most insulted part of the population', and the need to make men 'realize women are persons'.<sup>127</sup> Several said

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<sup>124</sup> Samuel, 2001, p.198 & 200

<sup>125</sup> Brewer, 2010, p.89

<sup>126</sup> Samuels, 2001, p.184 & 185

<sup>127</sup> Fuchs, Rifraya, Sister Sunita and Sister Canice, 2016

that men do not want to listen to women, and showed their appreciation for the safe space and equality that *Geheniya* provides by meeting as women-only groups. They are keenly aware of the hierarchies within their own religious denominations. This theme was reiterated by Bhikkhunis as their society is not officially acknowledged by the *sangha* or government, making it difficult for them to acquire identity cards once they have become ordained and changed their names. Catholic sisters also mentioned the disparity between them and male clergy, many of whom believe themselves to be superior as guardians of the faith. However, Sister Canice challenges male seminaries' 'mental frame of being superior' by teaching them feminist liberation theology as well as encouraging them to connect with their emotions. Although many of the women voice their concerns about societal inequalities, many of them do not seem able to challenge the status quo on a structural level yet.

The interviewees shared their concern about women suffering from domestic and sexual abuse, citing that child abuse and rape are prevalent, with a crime being committed every ten minutes in Sri Lanka.<sup>128</sup> The rise in domestic abuse after conflict is commonly attributed to two factors; first, due to economic and social pressures including displacement and loss of livelihood, and secondly, women having been empowered in the absence of men coupled with men's brutalisation through combat.<sup>129</sup> Research directly connects the rise in domestic and gendered violence to the after effects of direct violence during war.<sup>130</sup>

In addition the interviewees drew my attention to another aspect of structural violence in the form of women migrant workers and their families. Over the past decades women have been pressured through economic necessity and government incentives to work abroad in Gulf countries as cleaners and maids. They usually work under very poor conditions, in many cases being exploited and exposed to both domestic and sexual

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<sup>128</sup> Fuchs and Chandra, 2016 – this fact needs further research and verification

<sup>129</sup> DeLargy, 2013, p.64

<sup>130</sup> Pankhurst, 2008, p.7

abuse, which takes a toll on their health.<sup>131</sup> They send their wages home to their families, where the men often spend the money on alcohol, and their children suffer from neglect. The girls are expected to run the households at a very young age, take on the role of the mother, and are frequently sexually abused by their fathers or other male members of the household.<sup>132</sup>

According to DeLargy this sexual violence is underwritten by a patriarchal view of women being men's property, which legitimises rape and other forms of abuse.<sup>133</sup> She also relates sexual abuse to militarization where men's identities have become 'hyper-masculine' emphasising characteristics of aggressiveness, violence and dominance. In this culture violence becomes acceptable and the 'other' is dehumanised, exemplified by the abhorrent story of two young girls aged 7 and 8 being raped on their way home from school in Nedunkerny, Vavuniya district.<sup>134</sup> The perpetrators were military personnel who were shielded from prosecution thereby endorsing sexual violence and emboldening other similar cases in the area.<sup>135</sup> The Sinhalese government's tacit approval of these incidents is evidence of the culture's continued militarization and disregard of women. However, many women including the Catholic sisters, who counselled the traumatised girls and their families, came together in solidarity and demonstrated against this blatant disregard for the rights and security of girls and women.

All religious leaders and community activists saw it as their responsibility to support women suffering from domestic and sexual abuse. Buddhist nuns provide safe havens and Christian sisters run crisis centres for abused women. It is only the Muslim women who have no such spaces, yet it is one of their most fervent wishes to build refuges and

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<sup>131</sup> University of Oxford News and Events, 2016

<sup>132</sup> Fuchs, Tenzin, Uwais and Firthous, 2016

<sup>133</sup> DeLargy, 2013, p.61

<sup>134</sup> Fuchs and Sister Sunita, 2016

<sup>135</sup> Watchdog, 2013, p.1

safe houses in the future.<sup>136</sup> In the Northern district there is a hostel for girls having suffered from sexual abuse and incest, which is supported by Bhikkhuni Anila Tenzin who is raising funds from Australia. All the women perceive these places not only as refuges providing practical help, but also as places of healing.

Many of the women understand their role as intra-faith and intra-community peacebuilders, taking on educational roles such as running schools. Several also extend their work into society healing trauma, counselling groups of all faiths for addiction, and working with 'beach boys' with HIV. Their dreams are for women to 'give their best to society', 'bring happiness to their community', 'change the world' and 'raise their voice to be heard at the top level'.<sup>137</sup> The full extent of women's potential as reconcilers and social transformers will be investigated in the following chapter.

The culture of patriarchy and increased militarization in Sri Lanka cannot be ignored when discussing women's roles post-conflict. Because of this dominant cultural discourse women peacebuilders often choose traditional roles such as healers and reconcilers with an emphasis on motherhood as their primary modes of action. There is a paradox inherent in this choice of maternalism, however, as it can lead both to essentialising women and marginalising them from the public and political sphere. The *Geheniya* women are mostly aware of existing political and societal power structures, both imposed and also internalised, that disempower them and exclude them from much of the public domain. The project itself is an attempt to redress the balance and to draw and reflect on what Boulding calls 'the accumulated experience of women's cultures'.<sup>138</sup> Having addressed the gendered nature of women's peacebuilding in Sri Lanka I will now explore the potential and actual manifestation of their empowerment as social transformers.

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<sup>136</sup> Fuchs, Uwais and Firthous, 2016

<sup>137</sup> Fuchs et al, 2016

<sup>138</sup> Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall, 2012, p.316



## CHAPTER FOUR

### WOMEN AS SOCIAL TRANSFORMERS

#### Dream and Reality: a Reframing of Identities

'Women have potential to create change ... this argument contains the hope that women have unrealized potential for creating change, because they are not part of the present government of the world'.<sup>139</sup>

This final chapter will explore whether, despite and **because** of gendered roles, women are contributing to grassroots reconciliation in Sri Lanka by reframing ethnic identities through shared understanding of their group identity as women and of their personal multiple identities. It will first investigate the different understandings of 'power' underpinning patriarchy and feminist approaches and then explore the contributions that religions and interfaith dialogue can make in realising social change. I will investigate the attitudinal changes expressed by the women I interviewed and the symbols and processes they are using to transform social identities with reference to the frameworks provided by Bennett's DMIS model and Auerbach's reconciliation pyramid. Finally, I will briefly evaluate the impact, both actual and potential, that *Geheniya* is having in making peace in Sri Lanka more sustainable and in empowering women in the process.

### POWER

Questioning the concept of power as '*power over*' (resources, other people, nature etc.) which underpins patriarchal societies such as Sri Lanka, Afshar investigates alternative understandings and proposes the idea of '*power as process*', something that cannot be

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<sup>139</sup> Dahlerup, 2001, p.105

done to or for people. She contrasts this process with 'empowerment', a questionable assumption that women can be 'given' power by external agencies such as NGOs.<sup>140</sup> '*Power over*' is a controlling power, a source of oppression, an approach that traditional patriarchies often subscribe to. This power can be resisted or it can be complied with, the latter in many cases leading to 'internalised oppression', a belief that the messages a person receives about their supposed role is true.<sup>141</sup> This survival mechanism is a way of dealing with systematically being denied power by a dominant group and it was expressed by many of my interviewees who perceived that women in Sri Lanka see themselves as 'inferior' and without choice.<sup>142</sup> '*Power over*' often uses violent means to enforce solutions to problems, and inherent in this power is the idea that it is finite. Therefore others becoming empowered, i.e. women, can be perceived as inherently threatening.

In contrast, Rowlands discusses the feminist model of '*power as process*', which explores the possibilities of '*power to*', '*power with*' and '*power from within*' construing a different set of meanings for '*empowerment*'. She quotes Hartsock's 'energy' definition of power as not being finite but 'generative': "the power some people have of stimulating activity in others and raising morale" (1985:223).<sup>143</sup> This fundamentally different understanding of power is a way of evaluating *Geheniya's* potential impact on transforming the existing social and cultural structures in Sri Lanka. I suggest that it should also be adopted as part of the wider national discourse to avoid men feeling threatened.

#### POWER FROM WITHIN: RELIGION and spiritual transformation

'*Power from within*' is related to the inner spiritual transformation promoted and enabled by all religions. When asked about the inherent peacebuilding qualities of their

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<sup>140</sup> Afshar, 1998, p.3

<sup>141</sup> Rowlands, 1998, p.12

<sup>142</sup> Fuchs and Sister Sunita and Sister Canice, 2016

<sup>143</sup> Rowlands, 1998, p.12 - 14

religion many of the interviewees acknowledged prayer or meditation as being key to the creation of peace, which concurs with Hayward and Marshall's findings that 'in interviews, women peacebuilders cite spirituality as one of their primary motivations.'<sup>144</sup> All of the religious leaders, and many of the community activists reflected on the necessity to strengthen themselves as peacebuilders first, through their personal religious practice, extolling the benefits of meditation, retreats as well as time spent with *Geheniya*, away from the societal pressures of daily life.

This relates to Hertog's social framework of religion as 'living tradition', which identifies the peace-enhancing qualities of self-awareness, interiority, compassion and wisdom as being inherent in all religious traditions. It particularly refers to the first two of Gopin's four values inherent in religions that can be useful for conflict transformation: the 'values that focus on the inner workings of one's mind and heart (the self)' and those 'that move one to the encounter with the other'.<sup>145</sup> The former was certainly in evidence as a value stated, if not necessarily understood, by all the religious participants. In some cases 'inner focus' and self-reflection was connected to transforming relationships with the 'other', but I also perceived in some the inherent danger of self-absorption and an understanding of peace as 'mental quality and not as a social and ethical responsibility', a criticism often made of Buddhism, but which in this case could be extended to some of the Catholics and Brahma Kumaris.<sup>146</sup> The second value was therefore not a 'given' as, before participating in *Geheniya*, many (in particular Buddhists) had not seen their religion as motivating them to encounter the 'other', but mainly to interact with those from their own faith group who needed help.

However, through *Geheniya* they are beginning to draw on '*power from within*', an inner-generated spiritual strength, potentially helping them to engage socially. This personal empowerment can be measured by 'increased self-confidence', a 'sense of self

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<sup>144</sup> Hayward and Marshall, 2015, p.13

<sup>145</sup> Hertog, 2010, p.78

<sup>146</sup> Green and Mun, 2007, p.xxviii

in a wider context' and a 'sense of agency'.<sup>147</sup> By bringing the women religious leaders together *Geheniya* is stimulating growth and awareness in these three areas, enabling the participants' acceptance of others and possible social engagement. This intervention is helping the women to move from 'victimized' to 'liberated' femininity, establishing themselves as women of agency.<sup>148</sup> It became evident that the women I encountered are engaged in a long-term process and are at very different stages of the journey. All of them are, however, enjoying a new-found engagement with themselves and with women from other faiths, and most of them are aware of the process they are involved in.

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#### POWER WITH: Solidarity

According to Rowlands we are not likely to create lasting social change alone, yet by tapping the energy of 'power with', creating solidarity and a 'sense of the whole being greater than the sum of the individuals' many people working together can be successful.<sup>149</sup> Through collaborative processes it is possible to create collective agency and even to form a new group identity. Cooperation and 'relationships are at the heart of social change' without which intractable conflicts are unlikely to be transformed.<sup>150</sup>

Overcoming their initial reluctance and fear of meeting with the 'other' the *Geheniya* women are building friendships, and in many cases finding a common purpose through their encounters with each other. Many women, of their own volition, expressed this initial fear as being due to indoctrinated perceptions. These might take the form of status, with reference to Buddhist nuns, who although not awarded the same status as monks, are still revered in Sri Lankan society.<sup>151</sup> Because of these hierarchical

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<sup>147</sup> Rowlands, 1998, p.23

<sup>148</sup> Skjelsbaek, 2001, p.162

<sup>149</sup> Williams et al, 1995, p.234 in Rowlands, 1998, p.14

<sup>150</sup> Lederach, 2005, p. 86

<sup>151</sup> This is exemplified by the front two seats on each bus being reserved for clergy, as well as believers kneeling and kissing their hand for blessing

perceptions many women found it a revelation to see Bhikkhunis sitting on the floor with everyone else collaborating on a group project. Another form of alienation was clothing: many voiced their underlying apprehension of being able to connect with Muslim women wearing hijabs, Catholic sisters in their habits, and Bhikkhunis with their shaved heads and robes. These initial perceptions of difference are what Bennett defines as a 'defense against difference' leading to isolation and separateness.<sup>152</sup> Through *Geheniya* and their personal encounters with each other the women are breaking down these perceived differences and the previous lack of communication between their large-group ethnicities.

Through collaborations with the 'other' it is hoped that a new group identity of 'Woman' will emerge, which can, if not replace, at least soften the hard borders of the women's large-group identities. Acknowledging their communality and exploring their shared identity will hopefully empower them to work together for peace. I perceived instances of this happening in joint projects where Buddhists, Muslims and Christians visited Tamil and Muslim women in the war-ravaged Vavuniya area, to listen and talk as well as to help them set up various forms of self-employment. These and other ventures help create feelings of solidarity and empowerment, which were palpable as they spoke of them with pride.

On the other hand some participants were unaware of having inadvertently contributed to systemic divisiveness. For example, a Bhikkhuni living near Anuradhapura had emigrated from Kandy in the 1970s obviously as part of the government's Dry Zone resettlement incentive. However, she and her community do not seem to have had any interaction with local Tamils or Muslims over the decades since their arrival, and have little, if any awareness of the effect their migration may have had on the local population. This reflects what Bennett terms communities' 'isolation' and 'separateness' and *Geheniya* is contributing to transforming these by building

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<sup>152</sup> Bennett, 1993

relationships and capacity through workshops and encounters. Wider-reaching social change is not yet part of all the women's consciousness, yet most are aware that they are still a largely unacknowledged social force within the country's existing patriarchal structures and that they possess mainly unexplored resources, which they can potentially contribute to peacebuilding.<sup>153</sup>

According to Lederach the essence of creating sustainable peace is through building relationships as they 'create and emanate social energy and are places to which energy returns for a sense of purpose and direction'. It is the 'invisible web of relationships' that builds constructive social change.<sup>154</sup> Relationship-building is the essence of '*power with*'. Both the leaders of the project and the women themselves understand that it is important to work relationally influencing their families, communities and society by creating new friendships with women from other faiths. As a consequence it is hoped that relationships are being transformed both intra- and inter-community and –faiths, transcending ethnic, religious, geographic and linguistic divides. Through *Geheniya* the women are attempting to reframe their identities, gain strength to tackle problems together and achieve the agency to become social transformers. This is obviously a complex and dynamic process in which the women attempt to apply and explore the learning gained through the project in their own families, environments and communities. This is often challenging and many of them voiced the need to return to the project for 'nourishment'.

It is difficult to find ways of measuring the effect of projects on their participants and one approach is to apply Auerbach's heuristic tool of the Reconciliation Pyramid to evaluate the *Geheniya* women's attitudinal change. Auerbach maps the stages towards reconciling with the 'other' as processes that shift attitudes in identity conflicts from the

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<sup>153</sup> Fuchs and Firthous, 2016

<sup>154</sup> Lederach, 2005, p.75

‘cold’ relationships of acquaintance and acknowledgement to the ‘warm’ behaviours of empathy and responsibility.<sup>155</sup>

One participant spoke of ‘little changes’ starting to take place in her life and of

‘realizing that the things I cannot do on my own could be done with the help of few others. And I understood it should start first within me. I understood if I changed, I will have the ability to change others around me.’<sup>156</sup>

Many spoke with warmth and enthusiasm about friendships, sisterhood and love between the women. One of the tools used by *Geheniya* to facilitate this process is dialogue, a method used by many peacebuilders to help address deep ‘historical divisions between individuals and groups’ as well as ‘reflect on their shared humanity’.<sup>157</sup> Through ‘*power with*’ the *Geheniya* women are in the process of evolving rich forms of collaboration, which it is hoped will contribute to wider social change. This is an ongoing process that, for wider-reaching effect, needs to be continued and extended to a wider network of people.

#### POWER TO: Action

‘*Power to*’ is a ‘generative or productive power, which creates new possibilities and actions without domination.’<sup>158</sup> Many of the women spoke of the desire and responsibility to take social action in their communities and, as Tenzin put it, to ‘become change agents’.<sup>159</sup> This sense of agency and the actions taken varied from person to person: some women were only comfortable operating within existing structures emphasising the importance of the family, whereas others wanted to challenge the status quo and the hierarchies inherent in their faith groups and in society. In some

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<sup>155</sup> Auerbach, 2009, p.291-318

<sup>156</sup> Sister Shanithini Fernando in CPBR activity report, 2015

<sup>157</sup> Schirch and Camp, 2007, p.18

<sup>158</sup> Rowlands, 1998, p.14

<sup>159</sup> Fuchs and Tenzin, 2016

areas women worked together on social projects whereas in others they built on existing friendships and invited each other to attend their religious ceremonies. These religious exchange meetings surprise and also influence their various faith communities, opening up new possibilities of understanding and interaction on a community and societal level.

According to Rowland '*power to*' is also based on a self-organising agenda and leadership inspired by the wish for the group to achieve what it is capable of. Jayaweera's intention in setting up *Geheniya* is to see women's hubs working self-sufficiently in all parts of the country. Although this self-motivation is sometimes still lacking, the hubs in Colombo, Anuradhapura and Jaffna are active, and women in other parts of the country are collaborating in various ways. Part of the 'empowerment' process is helping the participants develop the confidence, motivation and resources to realise a degree of self-sufficiency, which is still an evolving process. On one hand Rifraya, together with her sister, gained the courage to successfully challenge the bus company they travel with by asking them to change the videos they were showing from violent films to videos of a geographical or historical nature. On the other hand a Brahma Kumari participant was deeply affected by research showing how women, in their traditional roles, were not acknowledged by their families for the hard work they do every day, until the roles were reversed. She uses the story to encourage women to believe in their inherent self-worth. '*Power to*' can work on many levels enabling agency through changes in self-perception and an increase of self-confidence as well as actions contributing to social change. The two cannot always be separated. In Rifraya's case personal action potentially contributed to social change by challenging an inherent culture of violence, whereas the Brahma Kumari's learning might contribute to a continued acceptance of the status quo. However, in both cases the women's self-perception and their awareness of their potential agency were enriched.

## Religion as 'social actor'

'Power to' is also related to Hertog's concept of religion as 'social actor' and the second two peace-enhancing values inherent in religions identified by Gopin as the values that 'move one to the encounter with a foreign or enemy other' and the values that 'move one to the construction of community' including social justice, taking responsibility and opening up one's home.<sup>160</sup> All the women were proud of their interfaith exchanges and visits and in particular the Muslim women mentioned the peacebuilding qualities already inherent in their religion: their greeting Salaam Alaikum (peace be with you) and how the Qur'an teaches respect for other religions and care for one's neighbours (including those from other religious backgrounds) by giving them food before eating oneself.<sup>161</sup>

By exchanging ideas about how religions can contribute to peace *Geheniya* is emphasising and enhancing the peace-building qualities in each religion and contributing to an exchange and understanding of the hermeneutics and lived experiences of women in their various religious traditions. This process prompted Bhikkhuni Vijitananda to say that *Geheniya* had 'opened her mind' as she had previously thought that Buddhism was the superior religion until she realised that all religions are equal and have the same aim of creating peace. Reflecting on this she added: 'Religion can be used to fracture society.'<sup>162</sup> For a Buddhist head-nun to openly acknowledge this constitutes a shift in thinking and behaviour and is an important step with the potential to influence the entire *sangha* and change Sinhala culture in the process. The project helps the women challenge their own negative religious ideas and replace them with positive narratives. According to Jayaweera the women are perhaps particularly 'receptive to understanding the issues of power dynamics propelling ethnic and religious

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<sup>160</sup> Hertog, 2010, p.78

<sup>161</sup> It would be interesting to investigate whether this particular emphasis of the scripture is the same world-wide or whether it is specific to Muslims in Sri Lanka because of their minority status.

<sup>162</sup> Fuchs and Bhikkuni Vijitananda, 2016

conflict ... because of their experience of gender oppression.<sup>163</sup> I believe their common identity as women who both witness and experience oppression helps them find equality and solidarity in their shared status. This understanding is also supported by their religiously motivated compassion and empathy for those suffering and oppressed (mainly women and children), which in many cases is leading to a wish to fight for justice. Religions have the inherent potential to contribute to peace and social change by opening up a new avenue through their ability to access large communities.<sup>164</sup>

### Education

Many of the women were involved in educational projects some running faith schools and others multi-faith projects. One example is the *dhamma* school founded by the energetic Bhikkhuni Sunethrapali Meheninwahansa as a Sunday school for around fifty village children, which she is planning to extend to a fully operating nursery and primary school teaching English and IT. Although there is no doubt that education can play a big role in transforming society, Cynthia Sampson sounds a word of warning regarding the involvement of religion in education and the inherent danger of indoctrination.<sup>165</sup> As much of Sri Lankan education seems to consist of single-faith schools this is an important caution and several of the women emphasised that projects should be open to all, as well as the need for interfaith exchange. One of the recommendations religious leaders, brought together by CPBR, made to the new government is the need for the teaching of both Sinhalese and Tamil language to become compulsory in schools. The new government is acting upon this, but it will take some time to bear fruit and, in my opinion, it will need to be accompanied by youth exchanges for all students. Making friends with young people from other ethnic groups will help them understand the need to learn each other's languages towards reconciliation.

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<sup>163</sup> Hayward and Marshall, 2015, p.130

<sup>164</sup> Fuchs and Firthous, 2016

<sup>165</sup> Sampson, 1989, p.292

## Political action

Much of the women's agency so far has been on domestic and community levels but there are also instances of political actions taken which have had a more far-reaching influence on existing social and political structures. One such action was by the Muslim activists from IWARE, strategic thinkers who in the run-up to the 2015 elections encouraged women to vote based on their own opinions. As a consequence they held rallies and on one occasion 5000 women decided to vote, contributing to the surprise victory of Prime minister Ranil Wickremesinghe whose success was generally attributed to the minority vote. Although *Geheniya* is still developing more far-reaching political action and impact it is in the process of transforming social identity, which will be explored more fully below.



## TRANSFORMING IDENTITY

Northrup talks of the 'dynamic of identity' as playing 'an important role in the escalation and maintenance of conflict' and identifies three levels at which change may occur and contribute to peace.<sup>166</sup> These levels are firstly changes peripheral to identity such as external conditions including ceasefires or in the case of Sri Lanka, the end of the war. The violent conflict ceased, but the root causes were not necessarily resolved and certainly not transformed. The second level is a change in the dynamics between the parties through building relationships, and the third is change that occurs in the parties' large-group identities themselves, transforming beliefs, behaviours and a core sense of self. It is this change that is most likely to sustain lasting peace. When beliefs and behaviours become more inclusive and able to embrace diversity, with an awareness of people's multiple identities, they help create sustainable 'positive peace', which on the structural level consists of the practices of dialogue, integration, solidarity and participation.<sup>167</sup> However, Northrup suggests that 'the strategy for change' is most effective when it begins at level two, as changing relationships in order to affect the dynamics between groups is less threatening to their identities.<sup>168</sup>

*Geheniya* is using the development of relationships and friendships as the starting-point for the transformation of ethnic large group identities and for the creation of a new 'common identity' - that of women working for peace. According to Schirch one of the ways identities are built, protected and transformed is through ritual.<sup>169</sup> Formal rituals, whether religious such as the Buddhist *pirits* and *poyas*, or national commemorations such as 'Victory' or 'Remembrance Day', help build large-group identity, and it is therefore also useful to draw on rituals in order to transform these identities. According to Schirch peacebuilding workshops in which existing, entrenched identities are re-

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<sup>166</sup> Northrup, 1989, pp. 76

<sup>167</sup> Galtung, 1996/1998, p.32

<sup>168</sup> Northrup, 1989, p.77

<sup>169</sup> Schirch, 2005, p.124

narrated or re-dramatised, are a form of ritual, as well as eating and drinking together, which she describes as informal rituals and 'ritual rehumanizing'. These rituals are all part of *Geheniya's* work towards social transformation.

Narrative techniques such as sharing experiences of life and the conflict are another path towards reframing identities, building trust and empathy, and developing relationships and deep friendships in the process. Through these experiences the women's perception of their own identities is being transformed and a new 'common' identity evolves, in contrast to but not negating their ethnic large-group identities. This process is contributing to the exploration of Gopin's second two peacebuilding values in religions: 'values that move one to the encounter with a foreign or enemy other' through trust, listening, humility, truth and 'love of strangers'; and those 'that move one to the construction of community (from self and other to community)'.<sup>170</sup> These values might be inherent in religions but are usually not at the forefront during conflict and times of threat to large-group identity. *Geheniya* is helping the women reconnect with these values and draw on them for the construction of a new community of 'women' with the intention of eventually extending this to men. As the women's individual and collective new group identity is fragile the participants perceive the importance of first strengthening it in a women-only forum.

The symbol chosen by *Geheniya* to reflect their evolving group identity is a Butterfly, the antithesis of the macho Sinhalese lion and Tamil tiger. Fragile and beautiful it is an insect that transcends borders, pollinating and cross-fertilising. These are all qualities that contribute to peace through peaceful means crossing ethnic borders and cultural divides, cross-fertilising ideas in the process. The symbol is artistically painted on wood, a natural material emphasising an awareness of humans' interrelationship with the natural world. The title 'woman' is hand-written, expressing humanity, in the three main languages of Sri Lanka: Sinhala, Tamil and English, aiming to be as inclusive as

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<sup>170</sup> Hertog, 2010, p.78

possible. Furthermore, it was explained to me that its four wings represent the four qualities of peace, truth, justice and mercy elucidated by Lederach in his reconciliation model.<sup>171</sup> These four qualities are interconnected and like the four main religions in Sri Lanka (also represented in the butterfly's wings) they are interdependent parts of a whole. Referring back to Kertzer's understanding of symbols functioning in the three ways of condensation, multivocality and ambiguity I suggest that the Butterfly symbol is primarily multi-vocal, expressing many ideas and associations in its attempt to condense, but not fix, the identity of women as social transformers. The choice and execution of the symbol expresses much about the processes involved in the transformation of the women's group identities. It also helps to make the peacebuilding work of the women 'visible', and to some extent counters the 'predominant forms of religious peacebuilding' that 'tend to reinforce patriarchy' and exclude women.<sup>172</sup> Visibility, which is inclusive and diverse without attempting to dominate, is an important quality for the impact of the women's work.

#### NETWORKS and 'orb weavers'

According to Lakoff and Johnson 'human thought processes are largely metaphorical', and linguistic metaphors reflect a person's conceptual system.<sup>173</sup> One of the metaphors most reiterated in my conversations with the *Geheniya* women is that of 'growing' and cultivation. Jayaweera expresses her initial frustration of there being 'no space to *grow*' which led to the establishment of the project. This demonstrates an understanding of personal and collective development as a dynamic process, which needs care, encouragement and the right conditions. She also talks of her long-term vision for the project as '*growing*' from shared ownership with the aim of changing social structures.<sup>174</sup> Cultivating the land and growing produce is also repeatedly mentioned as

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<sup>171</sup> Lederach, 1997, pp. 28-31

<sup>172</sup> Hayward and Marshall, 2015, p.15

<sup>173</sup> Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p.6

<sup>174</sup> Fuchs and Jayaweera, 2016

a way of both healing the spirit and transforming the economic situations of many Sri Lankan women post-war. To this end *Geheniya* has initiated cultivation projects in the North, and an exhibition to show their variety and success, which in turn has inspired women in the South to set up their own initiatives and help women 'develop their inner power', an expression Jayaweera prefers to that of 'empowerment'. It is understood that 'cultivation' works on many levels: philosophically it connects women to nature and their environment, spiritually it can be a way of healing, socially it brings women together through communal activities developing collaboration and friendship, economically it helps women sustain themselves and their families and become financially independent, and in terms of peace-building it can bridge the divide between different ethnicities through collaborative projects. Many, if not all of the women, identified themselves with the role of 'cultivator', which I suggest reflects an aspect of the role of social transformer, specific to the women in Sri Lanka.<sup>175</sup>

How people organise themselves is another way in which they express their identity. *Geheniya* is a 'grassroots' organisation, another image from the world of 'growing' nature, which reflects both horizontal equality and bottom up decision-making. 'Grassroots' use collective action to affect change and are often more responsive and spontaneous than traditional power structures. There is however an inherent danger in a gender-stereotypical approach by which women become 'locked into peacebuilding at the grassroots level, focused primarily on healing for victims, education, and relationship-building' because of an emphasis on their traditional roles.<sup>176</sup> Despite this caution I perceive an emphasis on traditional roles together with the women's growing

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<sup>175</sup> Many women mentioned being influenced by the 'Conflict Tree', a conflict transformation tool which they are applying in their own families and communities. Perceiving conflict as something complex that is constantly growing and developing, with invisible root causes and visible effects, is a complete change of consciousness to the inevitable two parties going to war. The tree is part of nature, accessible to all and a communal resource. This view of conflict reflects a shift in conceptual understanding which affects both the conflict dynamics and the perception of one's own personal and group identity.

<sup>176</sup> Hayward and Marshall, 2015, p.19

awareness of their personal and collective agency as providing the impetus towards social change. Traditional roles are seen to be important in Sri Lanka and legitimise women to change the narrative from 'an emphasis on ethno-religious enemy projections to a shared future'.<sup>177</sup>

The loose grassroots organisational structure with its emphasis on democratic principles also has the potential to create tensions between members of the group and its leadership. An expectation that the women will self-organise and run the hubs independently based on cultures of equality and responsibility in some ways clashes with a more hierarchical approach based on patriarchy which most women have grown up with. Success depends on the voluntary work of many highly motivated women. The strength of the system is that once established these hubs generate their own ideas and projects, adapting to local needs and issues in a sustainable way. On the other hand the voluntary nature of the project can also be a weakness as it relies on the women's motivation and commitment without always being able to compensate or support them adequately.<sup>178</sup> The ambivalence lies in having to rely on hierarchical structures for economic compensation (such as international or national grants applied for by Jayaweera) and in trying to find ways of making the organisation and hubs democratic, sustainable and self-reliant.

Establishing a series of hubs is reminiscent of Lederach's 'web approach' to peacebuilding.<sup>179</sup> Drawing on the world of spiders or 'orb weavers' he explains how they have some distinctive features in common with effective peacebuilders, which I would here like to link to the organisational pattern of *Geheniya*. Webs, as opposed to hierarchical, building-based organisational structures, are flexible, elastic, resilient, and adapt to their environment. Made up of interconnected threads they bridge space, cutting across ethnic identity divisions. *Radii* connect a central hub with an outer circle

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<sup>177</sup> Fuchs, 2016, p.6

<sup>178</sup> Ogega and Marshall, 2015, p.292

<sup>179</sup> Lederach, 2005, p.75

and gradually more threads are added to reinforce the hub in concentric circles making the final web elastic and resilient. This flexible, interconnected structure reflects how the *Geheniya* web of relationships is being built. At the moment they are in one of the initial phases of creating the hubs and the initial threads that connect them.

The challenge however will be whether they manage to attract more women from all spheres of society to the project and make the hubs and webs more complex and effective. In addition the undertaking of 'orb weaving', according to Lederach, 'requires a deep commitment to innovation and flexibility' and 'can never be thought of as permanent, fixed, or rigid'.<sup>180</sup> In order to create permanent change it will require 'the permanence of creative adaptation'. These flexible structures, requiring constant creativity and innovation, operate in stark contrast to the traditional, hierarchical government and bureaucratic structures. 'Webs' of equal relationships can contribute to softening hardened ethnic identity divides, creating new group identities, overcoming structural violence and transforming cultures of war into cultures of peace. The *Geheniya* women live in webs of interdependence not only with other women but also the men in their families, kinship groups and faith communities. It is here that the potential of affecting social change is greatest. Many of the married women acknowledged and even emphasised the fact that they discuss all their learning and understanding with their husbands, as their support is important to them. In Anuradhapura the women hold events that their husbands take part in, which contribute to the creation of mutual trust.<sup>181</sup>

#### A Reframing of identities: What is the impact?

Despite the notorious difficulty in measuring impact I believe my empirical research shows evidence of *Geheniya* contributing to attitudinal changes and a reframing of the

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<sup>180</sup> Lederach, 2005, pp.83 - 85

<sup>181</sup> Fuchs and Chandra, 2015

women's personal as well as their ethnic large-group identities. A shift in the women's attitude is taking place from feeling oppressed by 'power over', as expressed in the traditional hierarchies, to an increased understanding of the dynamics of power allowing them to tap both 'power from within' and 'power with'. Increased confidence through solidarity, friendship and collaboration is creating the potential for 'power to' take action for oneself and others. According to Bennett's model, through 'power with' the women are moving from 'minimising' and 'denying difference' to the more aware levels of 'accepting' and 'adapting' to them, with the final aim of 'integration'.<sup>182</sup> The acceptance of difference and diversity is an important process in building a new integrated society as otherwise there is a danger of trying to homogenize Sri Lanka, which could be likened to a 'totalitarian impulse' towards 'unity that can compete with 'Buddhist fundamentalism''.<sup>183</sup>

The project is in its beginnings but with consistent effort existing threads will be strengthened and new ones added thereby making the web of peace and reconciliation stronger, more resilient and inclusive. The philosopher Hannah Arendt writes of acts of 'weav[ing] our strand into the network of relations', thereby transforming a situation by proactively creating new connections, rather than becoming entrapped by it.<sup>184</sup> She acknowledged the uncertainty of the outcome of this action but also argued that one cannot be authentically human in isolation, but only through the "venture into the public realm". It is this venture that *Geheniya* is encouraging the women to be part of with the hope of creating a ripple effect that will bring communities together. In addition, the learning from the project is being passed on to the 'Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission' (LLRC) of Sri Lanka 'to ensure grassroots work can be included and accepted as part of the national reconciliation strategy'.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Bennett, 1993

<sup>183</sup> Bartholomeusz and Da Silva, 1998, p.26

<sup>184</sup> Ikeda, 2017, quoting Arendt, p.10

<sup>185</sup> CPBR summary of activity report, 2015, p.3

One of the difficulties of 'gendered' peacebuilding is the question of how much women peace-builders should confront the cultural values that pressurise them into playing traditional roles and stereotyped peace work.<sup>186</sup> By being aware of their gendered societal roles and by working within the existing structures, *Geheniya* women are not overtly threatening the status quo. They are using their traditional roles as healers and reconcilers to create change in their families and communities working within acceptable societal frameworks. By developing their peace-building roles and capacities, however, they are acting as 'cross-fertilisers' and 'cultivators', and in many cases are extending their agency to the transformation of society through work with war-affected women and those suffering from domestic and sexual violence. Their culturally sensitive approach is working at the relational level with the aim of subtly challenging existing power structures and melting hardened ethno-religious large-group identities.

Jayaweera is taking a multi-level approach by bringing together Track 2 religious and community leaders and helping them build their capacity and develop tools for conflict transformation. The project is working on a grassroots level and it has also 'crossed the barriers into public space' by gaining international acknowledgment and being awarded the prestigious Niwano Peace Prize.<sup>187</sup> It is hoped that international recognition and funds will help to 'weave the orbs', strengthen hubs and pull in more women and supporters from different backgrounds contributing to what Lederach calls a 'permanency' that is 'capable of continuous response' and 'creative adaptation.'<sup>188</sup> Important steps are being taken to reach this ideal and most of the women are in Brewer's definition social transformers 'seeking to realize peace by the transformation of the social relations that provoke the conflict'.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Brewer, 2010, p. 69

<sup>187</sup> Samuel, 2001, p.201

<sup>188</sup> Lederach, 2005, p.85

<sup>189</sup> Brewer, p. 78, 2010

“Otherwise we are like frogs in the well”.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Fuchs and Sister Shantini, 2016

## **CONCLUSION**

Tajfel and Volkan's ideas on social identity have proven to be a useful framework for my exploration of women religious peacebuilders in Sri Lanka. Their theories clarify how both Sinhala and Tamil large-group identities were formed and rigidified through 'chosen traumas', 'chosen glories' and cultural amplifiers. They explain why women from different ethnicities, socially and geographically isolated from each other during the civil war, retracted into their social identities, putting their ethnic communities first.

Their theories of social identity, however, do not necessarily explain why and how many women from different ethnic identities feel passionate about peace and therefore initiate ways of working together despite their differences. Even during times of violent conflict women in Sri Lanka set up initiatives based on their common identity as women, such as the 'Mothers' Front' and 'Mothers and Daughters of Lanka'.<sup>191</sup> Their shared experience of losing sons, fathers, husbands and brothers meant that their inter-group differences were no longer exaggerated. Instead their large-group identities became less important as their common humanity was emphasised and differences minimised through shared suffering. Similarly, post-conflict this continues to act as a connector, their common identity as women in many cases taking precedence over ethnic identities.

There is a danger in women's peacebuilding initiatives mainly emphasizing women's traditional roles and promoting an essentialised view. However, in the context of Sri Lanka it can provide an acceptable and at times powerful way for women to become socially and politically engaged. Traditional roles legitimize women to enter the public sphere in South East Asia, and for many the family is perceived as the starting point for creating social change. There is an inherent paradox, which means that women have to find ways of negotiating their traditional roles and the power and influence these

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<sup>191</sup> Samuel, 2001, p.192

provide in their families and communities, with the limitations of these roles, which potentially exclude them from politics and compound the status quo.

Brewer's four categories of the roles women play during conflict and in peace processes draws attention to their gendered nature, and to the diversity and complexity of women's agency, and lack of agency. In focusing on women's potential as 'social transformers' Brewer's framework has been invaluable. However, by establishing these general categories, the frame does not always allow for culturally specific variations and the complexities of women's roles. His definition of women becoming social transformers when they 'break out from traditional gender roles' and 'develop a wider engagement with peace issues' could be seen as viewing women's peacebuilding through a Western, male lens. In the case of *Geheniya*, women are in fact using their traditional roles to plant seeds of change, acting as 'cultivators' and 'nurturers' through relationships within their families and communities. Some see themselves as social transformers, others as educators, healers or 'cultivators'. The role of 'social transformer' is manifold and complex, and can take place on various levels and contexts: those of family, community and society, as well as intra- and inter-faith and -community. The *Geheniya* women are all at various stages in their development as peacebuilders, and they perceive their own impact and agency very differently. Although in no way conclusive, I hope this study will contribute to the exploration of women's contribution to peacebuilding with particular reference to the use of their traditional roles.

Sen emphasizes the need for people to understand their multiple identities in order to overcome 'singular affiliation' and the polarization of groups, which can lead to conflict and violence. Recognising multiple identities can help create peaceful societies that actively promote diversity. For the *Geheniya* women an understanding of their multiple roles has been essential in developing their peacebuilding skills. Firthous exhorts women to recognize their different identities, stand up for women's rights, and take

responsibility for the next generation of women, because they are mothers who design their own families, sisters for their community, daughters, religious leaders, community activists etc.<sup>192</sup>

However, it is my understanding that it is primarily the establishment of a 'new' communal identity of 'Woman' that is encouraging the *Geheniya* participants and their communities of women to work together for peace and social change. It can in some circumstances be easier to change conflict dynamics by creating a new group rather than trying 'to stop groups from doing something they are already doing'.<sup>193</sup> This 'new' group of *Geheniya* may be able to affect and influence the dynamics of post-conflict Sri Lanka. The women's shared experience of societal oppression and structural violence makes them in many cases more prepared to transcend their ethnic differences and become social transformers by working together in a new large-group identity. As I have illustrated, this identity is in the constant process of being created and developed through complex, dynamic interactions. It is therefore not likely to be in danger of becoming fixed or rigid as was the case with ethnic identities. A loose network of women are, through 'power from within' and 'power with', in the process of creating threads of relationships and collaboration across divides. Their growing awareness of their agency and 'power to' is enhancing their peacebuilding capacities and helping them become more conscious of their potential impact.

In the case of *Geheniya* religion is key to most of the women's social engagement. This is partly because the conflict in Sri Lanka has been perceived to be one of religion as well as ethnicity, and partly because the project was born from interfaith work. There is no reason why religion has to be an essential ingredient for women peacebuilders in general, but in a highly religious society like Sri Lanka, where religion and politics are in many ways intertwined, religion is a resource that can be mined for its pro-social and

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<sup>192</sup> Fuchs and Firthous, 2016

<sup>193</sup> Miall, 2016, p.11

peacebuilding qualities. The majority of *Geheniya* participants are religious leaders who desire to transform suffering and create peace through their religion's 'soft aspects'. The project therefore emphasises interfaith dialogue and exchange, as well as drawing on 'religion as living tradition' with its internal, spiritual resources and peace-enhancing values, and 'religion as organization', ready-made communication networks.<sup>194</sup> Religion is also a social phenomenon, which influences conflict and peace dynamics, and practitioners' beliefs, attitudes and behaviour in general. By questioning and gently challenging the hermeneutics and lived experiences of religious practitioners, the peacebuilding qualities of their various religions are being affirmed and emphasized.

The emphasis on religion underpinning the rationale of *Geheniya* can be seen as both a strength and weakness. There is no doubt that religion is an integral part of Sri Lankan society and that it has been a driver of the conflict. However, the danger is that the project's emphasis on religion marginalises it and reinforces the conceptual frameworks underlying the conflict. I would like to suggest that part of *Geheniya's* future work in building the women's peacebuilding capacities should be to deepen and widen their understanding of the existing patterns of structural and cultural violence.

Developing more women community activists and leaders with the aim to help raise women's consciousness to challenge and transform the existing patriarchal structures, which oppress minorities and diversity, will accelerate social transformation. An acknowledgement of women's traditional roles and the values of diverse religions are important, but there is still more scope for the future exploration of women's multiple roles in society.

At this point I would like to further reflect on my interviews as interventions and how I became increasingly aware that my subject matter and questions were at times influencing the interviewees' answers. Questions about the peacebuilding qualities and potential of their faith were in many cases encouraging the participants' emphasis on

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<sup>194</sup> Hertog, 2010, p.74

religion. For most women it was difficult to respond to my question about their faith's potential to contribute to conflict. I realized we did not always share the same cultural framework, and after some reflection think that most of the women interpreted the word 'conflict' as meaning violence or war. They felt it was a betrayal to even contemplate the potential divisiveness of their faith. Eventually, I found clues and answers in what the women did not say, in the topics avoided and in references made when they were speaking about other things. However, common threads and concerns did evolve which seemed all the more relevant as I had not been aware of them during my previous desk-based research. Although it is possible that an aspect of 'Group think' was evolving through the women's shared experiences of workshops and talks, their concerns seemed to reflect the systemic problems of gender inequality and domestic violence.<sup>195</sup>

With an awareness of my research as an intervention I decided to try and actively contribute in some small way to peacebuilding in Sri Lanka. Rather than being purely an observer (in any case an impossibility) it became my intention to stimulate thought, give encouragement and hope, as well as gather information. I refer to Bruner's research in how the 'telling of our narratives' helps us 'construct personal meaning (and reality)'.<sup>196</sup> Furthermore, Levinger states that 'the very process of asking questions can influence the way people see their conflict' and that interviewers inevitably influence the dynamics of a conflict.<sup>197</sup> Phelps argues that stories act as ways of discovering the truth as well as communicating across divides, 'translating events into a shared language' which appeal not only to our logical minds, but also our emotions.<sup>198</sup> The telling of personal stories affects both narrator and listener as a potentially powerful exchange takes place through the complex dynamics of life-to-life interaction, which can leave those involved transformed. Therefore interviews can be seen as peacebuilding

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<sup>195</sup> Keebler, D., 2015, p.93

<sup>196</sup> Atkinson, 2002, p.125

<sup>197</sup> Levinger, 2013, p.94

<sup>198</sup> Phelps, 2004, pp. 61 & 69

interventions, which influence conflict dynamics positively or negatively. With a 'Do no harm' approach there is potential for our questions to shift the conflict dynamics.<sup>199</sup>

I hope that my interviews have made some contribution to developing the *Geheniya* women's consciousness, thereby impacting on social transformation as well as 'increasing the visibility' of women peacebuilders and 'their distinctive approaches'.<sup>200</sup>

I would argue that, although the *Geheniya* project is specific to its Sri Lankan context, there are lessons that can be learnt by peacebuilders around the world. Some of the participants themselves hope that their work will help create peace in their own country and be taken up as a model for peace elsewhere.<sup>201</sup> Consciousness-raising and capacity building through women-only groups; personal development, interfaith exchange and joint projects; creating a 'new' large-group identity of 'Woman' as well as building hubs and networks of diverse, engaged women – these are some of the lessons learnt that can be made universal. Specific to South East Asia and maybe also other developing countries is the mining of women's traditional roles with the caveat that women should simultaneously develop their understanding of the patriarchal power structures and structural and cultural violence underpinning the societies they live in.

Suggestions for future research include further investigation into the long-term impact of women peacebuilders' grassroots approaches, Tamil women's invisibility as peacebuilders, and an exploration of men's gendered identities. There is still much work to be done for women peacebuilders to empower themselves. It is a constant process that the *Geheniya* women are involved in as 'cultivators', working towards social transformation in their 'Butterfly networks'.

'Sowing seeds of peace demands perseverance. Once planted, the seeds require nurturing and, only later, can the harvest be reaped. In other words, the peace process requires sustained commitment. Those who work to sow seeds of peace always seek new ways to reach out and to find fertile ground for planting.'<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Anderson, 1999

<sup>200</sup> Ogega and Marshall, 2015, p.283

<sup>201</sup> Fuchs and Sunethrapali Meheninwahansa, 2015

<sup>202</sup> Krieger and Ikeda, 2002, p.37

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