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Agentive minorities: place-memory, identity and ontological security in post-war Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how minoritised and securitised neighbourhoods respond creatively to inflection points in prolonged violent conflict and its afterlives. Drawing on ontological security studies and the anthropology of violence, it highlights the everyday labour of coexistence and the positive role of anxiety management in securing the community. Typically, inflection points – critical occurrences that unsettle routine coexistence and test community bonds – prompt narratives to re-assert a stable “we-ness”. However, based on oral histories from Kompagna Veediya, a multi-ethnic neighbourhood in Colombo, Sri Lanka, the article shows how long-term residents draw on their collective place-identity rather than their ethno-religious affiliations to mitigate outside scrutiny. They mobilised this place-identity in three interconnected ways: by banking on their multigenerational history, by performing rituals of community cohesiveness and by mobilising their collective electoral power. Together, these practices draw on social capital from within, serve as a source of ontological security and as leverage in negotiating protection with security regimes. The article contributes to debates on everyday security, post-conflict urban life and the politics of recognition in divided societies.

KEYWORDS

Ethno-religious conflict;
ontological security;
minoritisation; coexistence;
post-conflict urbanism;
Sri Lanka

Introduction

Sri Lanka has a long history of intersecting conflicts since it gained independence in 1948. The lived realities of how competing and often militarised nationalisms – Sinhalese, Muslim and Tamil¹ – manifest themselves inevitably influenced the formation of national and group identities,² and indeed, the ‘Othering’ of those identities culturally and as a political tool.³ These socio-political subjectivities, often ethno-religious in orientation and constituted in response to existential anxieties and reified by structural transformations – such as civil war, and the increasing inequalities of post-war development – tended to reinforce an established order so well entrenched, that it is ‘utterly normalised and unremarkable’.⁴ A related phenomenon, particularly in representational politics – where securitising narratives of ‘Othering’ and Otherness⁵ are heightened during cycles of violence and crises – became so ingrained in the lived experiences of

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those who are minoritised, that it effectively relegated them to the everyday reality and subordinate status of ‘lesser citizens’.⁶ However, defining these dynamics of minoritisation as a whole only through the lens of status quoist notions of majoritarianism and (in) security, oversimplifies the complex relationships and motivations that exist at a micro-social level, particularly in contexts like Kompangna Veediya.

Kompangna Veediya⁷ is unique. It is a neighbourhood in the heart of Sri Lanka’s commercial capital Colombo, characterised by minoritisation and securitisation over different phases of crises and upheaval in Sri Lanka. It also has a multi-generational experience of being grounded in the shared history of a largely unchanged geographical boundary. But, that is not what makes it unique. What makes it unique is how it *engages* this shared history – as a collectively and mutually recognised value rooted in ‘place-identity’ – to defy the logic of how majority–minority relations supposedly play out at a neighbourhood level.⁸ What we see in Kompangna Veediya is that not all minoritised groups are motivated to self-preserve by collapsing into their ethnic or religious insularities or sub-nationalisms in the face of majoritarianism that is heightened at times of crises (and in their afterlives). What we see in Kompangna Veediya is that even as the macro-politics of dominant nationalisms that rely on ethno-religiosity and its violent manifestations percolate into the neighbourhood, this community calls upon sedimented histories of coexistence. They do this to counter the overarching influence of ethno-religiosity and political polarisation of violent regimes and therefore navigate their security of being. As long-term residents, particularly during times of crises, they project a narrative of community unity that blends their internal differences – class, caste, ethno-religious identities – to outside scrutiny. Similarly, they highlight how they are different from ‘new-comers’ (into the neighbourhood) that may invite surveillance or scrutiny from outside.

Such creative labour – constructing self-other narratives that are mutually acknowledged and internalised practices of ‘everyday’ coexistence⁹ – is an exercise in pragmatism.¹⁰ In this article, we attempt to understand it along two registers: how ontological security is derived through mutually agreed notions of ‘what it means to be from here’ *without* invoking ethno-religious insularities or its associative political allegiances; and how these practices of performative community identity uniquely differ from the kind of sub-nationalisms that are historically rooted in ethno-geographies elsewhere in Sri Lanka. We delve into the oral histories of multi-generational families from Kompangna Veediya to understand how as a community with a long-history of place-identity, it has maintained, invested in and renewed these practices multi-generationally, internalised almost as a type of community DNA, throughout many phases of crises, conflicts and insecurity – such as the 26-year-long Sri Lankan civil war¹¹ and its many inflection points¹² – such as the anti-Tamil pogrom of 1983¹³ or the Easter Attacks of 2019.¹⁴

Understanding the creative labour of co-existence in violent contexts

This article draws its conceptual scaffolding from two disciplinary perspectives that offer new epistemological insights on the creative labour of coexistence within the context of violence.

First, it draws from ontological security studies (OSS), a field grounded in psycho-analysis and political psychology. Building on Anthony Giddens'¹⁵ concept of ontological security – the security of being, or the management of anxiety over the potential loss of self-identity in changing circumstances – early OSS scholars emphasised the role of stable identity narratives and biographical continuity. This framework explains how majoritarian populist leaders employ 'speech acts'¹⁶ to create a sense of home as a safe haven, to address public anxieties about globalisation, migration and conflict, that ultimately fuels right-wing nationalism.

However, subsequent scholars such as Nicolai Gellwitszi have critiqued the reduction of ontological security to 'the stability and security of particular identity claims'.¹⁷ They contend that it carries a status quoist and conservative bias, potentially justifying violent and exclusionary practices while foreclosing the possibility of a more nuanced politics of subjectivity. Consequently, they propose understanding ontological security not as a fixed state of being, but as a psychological position – a mode of managing anxiety and relating to others. This opens the analytical field to multifinal¹⁸ ways of managing anxiety, including creative and constructive approaches that move beyond fear-inducing and securitising dynamics. Here, creativity is understood as the capacity to act outside established narratives and routines – disrupting 'the bordering practices of everyday life'.¹⁹

The second perspective comes from anthropological studies of violence in South Asia, which have, to an extent, engaged with the 'everyday' micropolitical labour required for coexistence and living with violent heritage. While OSS scholars acknowledge the role of anxiety, ethnographic research reveals the specific circumstances under which anxiety can be channelled into creative outcomes and the ground-realities that shape this process. For instance, Laura Ring's study on gendered neighbourhoods in Karachi and Veena Das's work with Partition survivors in Delhi examine how peaceful coexistence is actively produced. Ring argues that the relentless and creative labour required for coexistence, and conflict makes them social products, made possible through a complex array of cultural discourses, narrative conventions, forms of authority and lines of fissure.²⁰ Similarly, Das shows how violent events are etched into bodies and subjectivities, shaping everyday relations and the 'ethics' of living together. An 'ecology of fear'²¹ as she terms it, reveals how the memory of violence is embodied within ordinary relations, informing affective dispositions, moral codes, and everyday ethics.

While anthropologists have shed light on the ground-level practices that enable everyday coexistence, a gap remains in understanding the inflection points that disrupt peaceful coexistence. In his work on Northern Ireland, John Cash identifies two distinct modes of ontological security: diffusing the antagonism of cross-border politics by relating to the other as 'adversary-neighbour', which 'gained authority'²² after the Good Friday agreement; and a friend-enemy binary rooted in political ideologies of violence. He notes that the latter reasserts itself at inflection points, destabilising the ontological security of those who embraced a more inclusive 'norm of recognition'²³ of postcolonial identity.

We address this gap by focusing on how 'minoritised communities' in Sri Lanka have responded to such inflection points. We explore how these responses influence their practices of coexistence even as successive ethno-religiously motivated incidents of violence have tested the multicultural and secular ethos of *Kompangna Veediya*. We conceptualise these inflection points as sedimented experiences, which residents narrativise as

place-memory – an affective register for how events shaped their experience of *being-in-the-world* and how they act upon it.²⁴ This subjective articulation of place-memory differs from state narratives about the past, which seek to create a bounded political community in time and space.²⁵ Totalising state narratives that claim to represent historical truth²⁶ attempts to reconstitute social relations through securitising logics and memorialisation. These are inevitably incompatible with the nuanced histories and memories of the subaltern²⁷ precisely because the state's objective is to downplay one's negative actions at the expense of constructing one's positive legacy.²⁸ Instead, we suggest that memory is open to the dialectics of remembering and forgetting, rooted in concrete spaces and objects. It is an affective bond that is only as true as the group that it binds together.²⁹

If memories of violence, as Das explains, are etched into everyday life and the ordinary ethics of being moral subjects,³⁰ then narrating subjective experiences of past events becomes deeply collective, relational and ever-evolving. It is a crucial part of the labour of everyday coexistence. The concrete 'place of memory' – in this case the neighbourhood Kompangna Veediya – can be viewed as a socio-historical construct³¹ of meaning-making. This is not nostalgia for an idyllic past, but about recreating lived relationships sedimented over time, particularly in response to inflection points in phases of crises, that present dilemmas of how one *relates to others*. In this article, we foreground 'place-memory' as a source of narratives, routines and meaning-making that enables Kompangna Veediya to manage their 'anxiety of being',³² particularly as a minoritised community living in the long shadow of violence and securitisation.

Methodology

We chose Kompangna veediya as the locus of our research for several reasons, the first of which is because it is a neighbourhood in Colombo city, characterised by minoritisation and inequality.³³ Historically home to low-income and precariat migrant labour made up of different ethnic and religious backgrounds over the centuries,³⁴ it reverses the national majority-minority population percentages within its locality, with a Muslim majority.³⁵ Demographically, this Muslim-majority population has largely remained unchanged, which presents a unique space for understanding historically minoritised relationships.

Second, Colombo's rapid urban development and beautification after the civil war served to symbolise and legitimise 'post-war nation-building' as dividends of victory, thereby 'making good' on the nationalist rhetoric of majoritarian politics.³⁶ Kompangna Veediya forms part of a triptych in Colombo's urban development landscape, alongside the Port city and Galle face. It bears the violent legacy of demolition and displacement, which by extension, contested the residents' historical claim to their birthplace.³⁷ By invoking post-war development rhetoric that framed these proposed changes as dividends of victory, authorities further constrained the community's ability to challenge public-private agendas that value the land they inhabit for its financial potential, over the intrinsic value of multigenerational attachment to place.³⁸

Third, Kompangna Veediya borders the central business district (CBD), Colombo's main port, and during the war, the demarcated High Security Zone (HSZ) of military headquarters of the tri-forces. This meant that the density of population and the movement of precariat labour, and Tamils or Muslims³⁹ from war-affected regions in and out of Kompangna Veediya, may have been perceived

as a threat to the security of the tri-forces headquartered adjacent. Here, some of the key inflection points during the 26-year civil war and in its aftermath asserted statist notions of national security in Kompangna Veediya in ways that continuously reminded minorities of their place in Colombo⁴⁰ and within the larger national social fabric.

Our research approach moves away from primordialist interpretations and from the dominant frameworks of anthropologists of violence and political geographers that often focus on broad theories and external observations. Instead, it is grounded in the situated memory of co-remembering with the long-term residents of Kompangna Veediya. By documenting their personal stories and narratives about their experiences during crises and their responses to the violent legacies of conflict, we prioritise an emic perspective. This enables us to highlight their perceptions, meaning-making processes, and emotions, in contrast to an etic approach that focuses on causality. We bring together two distinct disciplines: public history, with its focus on memory and the lived experiences of gendered and minoritised subjects, and political anthropology, which examines how minoritised groups develop political agency within the context of structural change and conflict.

This research took place between June 2023 and June 2024. We began with a series of meetings and home visits together with an artist that lives in Kompangna Veediya to establish initial contacts. Thereafter, with those who were willing, we collaboratively documented the life histories of local community members from Sinhala, Tamil, Malayaha Tamil,⁴¹ Muslim, and Malay backgrounds, as well as individuals with mixed heritage. These participants were also Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist whose families were second to fifth-generation residents of Kompangna Veediya. This process of co-documenting life histories was layered and multifaceted, enabling intergenerational discussions and revealing respondents' activist positions by facilitating a safe space which prevented ethnicity, language, and religion from acting as barriers to open communication. It also deepened our understanding of how they curated their cultures and self-identities for themselves, and when presenting to a wider audience.

Following the life history documentation of each family in August 2023, we conducted four semi-structured group discussions with the same residents in May 2024. These discussions explored their perspectives on navigating minoritised and assimilative group identities, community festivals and histories of place, family histories and socio-economic, cultural, religious and physical patterns of how their community is structured, local and national politics, political participation and behaviours, and security responses to crises. After these focus group discussions, we returned to the community after the elections in November 2024, to conduct key informant interviews with the same participants to fill in the gaps in our knowledge and build on their narratives within the changing political landscape of the post-economic crisis⁴² period.

Contextualising minoritisation and securitisation in Sri Lanka historically

To understand the uniqueness of Kompangna Veediya, a brief contextualisation of minoritisation in Sri Lanka is useful.

Ethno-religious group identities are not monolithic but when minoritised, share experiences of 'lesser citizenship'

Despite Sri Lanka's liberal democratic constitution guaranteeing equal treatment for all citizens, in practice, both Tamil and Muslim communities routinely face systemic disadvantages of becoming 'lesser citizens', including limited access to jobs and public services, and equitable treatment by public administration, security forces and the judiciary.⁴³ Thus, Sri Lanka's minorities were forced to derive ontological security by being 'conditionally compliant' by accepting the hierarchical ordering of nationhood first and ethnic affiliation second.⁴⁴ It is important to note, however, that ethno-religious group-identities were not monolithic: intra-group struggles and political positions rooted in ethno-geographies characterised notions of Tamilness,⁴⁵ Sinhala⁴⁶ and Muslimness.⁴⁷

Tamil nationalism(s) – the largest, although non-homogenous, numerical minority – was driven by a history of (both perceived and real) discrimination, and the failures of federalism as a solution to their existential uncertainties of securing self-determination.⁴⁸ They gradually escalated, becoming militarised nationalism(s) violently moving through northern Tamil intra-group struggles for supremacy⁴⁹ into an armed struggle for a territorial homeland for Tamils.⁵⁰ The Sri Lankan state, increasingly embracing Sinhala majoritarianism and hardline politics, engaged in two violent armed struggles in the 1980s: a 26-year-long civil war (1983–2009) against Tamil insurgents in the north and east, and a 3-year insurrection in the south.⁵¹

During these phases of conflicts, a 'securitised mindset'⁵² prevailed in Sri Lanka, where suspicion between ethno-religious groups increased in tandem with heightened militarisation. It affected the way in which majority–minority relations deteriorated. Communities in the north and east were not without agency, as they developed a sense of 'resistance and immunity from such pressures' and personal insecurity.⁵³ Minna Thaheer presents examples of individuals building trust instrumentally by communicating in Sinhala or alluding to any other connections to the state (such as working for the Sri Lankan public service), or women developing sexual relationships with military men to serve their immediate need for safety.⁵⁴ However, as we see later in this article, the normalisation of 'living with militarisation' as 'lesser citizens', in the north and the east was qualitatively different to how it was experienced in the south. In the south, the securitised mindset was reinforced through such pervasive measures as checkpoints, barriers and surveillance necessitated by violence and violent spectacles staged strategically for maximum political impact.⁵⁵ The fear psychosis that permeated the south in its wake meant that proving hierarchies of citizenship⁵⁶ by carrying identification at all times marked Sinhalese (who could pass through with mild inconvenience) entirely different from minorities who would be treated with varying levels of suspicion (broken down further by ethnicity or religion and where 'they were from').

An ethnically-dominant political system influences minority political interests and mechanics

This ethnically based hierarchical organisation of majority-minority communities has been a primary political fault line for Sri Lankan society shaping the fine-grained mechanics of its ethnic-based electoral democracy. These are often locked into

hierarchical ‘ethnic-dominance political systems’ rooted in Sinhala-Buddhist majoritarian culture.⁵⁷ In 2015, for example, Sinhala-dominated parties aligned the interests of both majority and minority voters to *remove* an authoritarian regime and establish a broader reformist, democratic coalition. Conversely, in 2019, the same party pandered to the Sinhala majority’s perceptions of historical political and economic injustices, distancing themselves from minoritised narratives to *vote in* a majoritarian regime. However, both instances serve to maintain the ‘ethnic dominance system’ and the established patterns of interactions between ethno-politics and democracy.⁵⁸

Against this ethno-political backdrop, minority parties have frequently leveraged their ethnic demographics as the bloc votes to make or break parliamentary coalitions or authoritarian regimes, often led by Sinhala-dominated parties (such as the UNP or the SLPP). Meanwhile, diverse minority communities in the north, east and the hill-country areas – ethnic-geographies where minorities are numerically dominant – have voted along ethnic lines for parliamentary representation through Tamil or Muslim group-identity-led parties. While Tamil socio-political identities are multiple, and at times, exclusionary based on caste, geography, origin stories, and on how they act on their distinctive interests, historically Tamil nationalism(s) often sought recognition and political representation based on claims of historical marginalisation, self-determination rooted in narratives of a homeland, and demands for equal rights of citizenship.⁵⁹ In this respect, Muslim politics has significantly diverged from Tamil minority politics and its context-specific narratives. Unlike the ethno-political territoriality of self-determination that the Tamils of the north and east saw possible. Muslims were dispersed throughout the country lacking any specific territorial integrity and primarily based in ‘concentrated localities without a provincial majority anywhere’.⁶⁰

Muslim ethno-political self-identification and its impact on how they are perceived

Muslim ethno-political self-identification is a relatively recent phenomenon, gaining currency as a separate ethnic political group ‘in response to the rising Sinhala and Tamil ethno-nationalism of the 1970s and 1980s. The year 1990, marked by the expulsion of Muslims from Jaffna and the Kattankudy mosque massacre of Muslims at prayer, serves as its definitive turning point.’⁶¹ Farzana Haniffa contends that in Sri Lanka, political choices made by these minorities should be understood not merely as “reactions”, but as “endpoints” in a process of institutionalised minoritisation.⁶² She further illustrates how the southern⁶³ Sri Lankan Muslim leadership adopted a strategy of “quietist” politics, thus remaining within the existing power structures to ensure survival in a landscape where “the state was insensitive to their predicament and later participated in their demonisation” – a stark contrast to the Tamils’ perceived ‘political capacity to push back’.⁶⁴

Conversely, how the Muslim community was perceived by others as an ethno-religiously minoritised identity, shifted and pivoted in complex ways. Significantly, while Muslims were viewed as allies in the fight against ‘terrorism’ during the war (with the Sri Lankan military routinely relying on Tamil-speaking Muslims for reconnaissance and intelligence services),⁶⁵ the post-war era increasingly viewed them with suspicion. Sinhala-Buddhists began to view them as homogenous blocs to fill the void left by the now vanquished LTTE as the object of their existential anxieties.⁶⁶ This shift

coincided with increased physical attacks and vilification of Muslim communities in the South, acts of vandalism, challenges to the authenticity of their religious sites, and threats against Muslim-owned businesses. These escalations by organised groups, fuelled by racist rhetoric and rumours on social media, coincided with the radicalisation of Muslims, particularly in the east.⁶⁷ The Easter attacks of 2019 only served to securitise this growing antagonism, introducing a lens of terrorism and shifting the focus of counter-terrorism towards Muslims.⁶⁸ In effect, this positioned Muslims as a convenient *third player* within the ethno-political landscape, subject to manipulation and instrumentalisation.

These socio-political histories reflect broad patterns of minoritisation, highlighting the state's approach to managing the social contract with its citizens broadly. The lived realities of securitised and minoritised subjectivities – such as Tamils and Muslims that inhabit minority-dominant neighbourhoods of Colombo, however, are more nuanced in how they seek ontological security, how they navigate an ecology of fear and uncertainty, and how their social relations are shaped by both securitisation and marginalisation.⁶⁹

A place apart: responding to securitisation and minoritisation in Kompangna Veediya

Returning to the spatial focus (Figure 1) and historical focus on Kompangna veediya, we need to locate our research in what makes Kompangna Veediya different from other minoritised or ethno-geographical localities.

First, Kompangna Veediya is *not* an enclave – effectively spaces of exception, marked by a specific territoriality and governmentality.⁷⁰ Ethnographies of political geography have shown that some ethno-religious identity-based groups, when actively and persistently demarcating enclaves over generations (as seen in Kattankudy in eastern Sri Lanka),⁷¹ may resort to the securitising logic of self-other narratives as a defence against external forces. Dominant nationalisms often fold back into politics of purification⁷² when the 'internal minority'⁷³ exposes their inherent 'incompleteness', and contradictions within their vision for an 'untainted national ethnos' or nationhood.⁷⁴ Similarly, the minoritised 'Other' within these enclaves may invoke securitising logics to purify their communities from within, striving to create a more homogenous and unified whole – essentially, an ethno-nation.⁷⁵ In contrast, other communities reject these primordial constructions of categorically distinct notions of people and place, opting instead for a form of situated assimilation. They draw upon the immediate social context of *where* they live, selectively forging connections with their surroundings and 'Other' communities that they live amongst,⁷⁶ embracing and inhabiting multiple, fluid identities, much like 'porous sieves'.⁷⁷

Kompangna Veediya is closer in characteristic to the second. Even as acts of boundary making occur – both physically and metaphorically – long-term residents do not perceive self-other dynamics as rigid binaries. Unlike ethno-religious enclavism that prioritises homogeneity, Kompangna Veediya's creative labour and pragmatism relies on a form of internal purification based not on ethno-religious communalism (be it Muslims or Tamils or Sinhalese), but on collective, and 'everyday' acts of 'community identity' constituted by agreement. They are rooted in a historically shared sense of place-memory, transcending individual or familial ethno-religious affiliations.

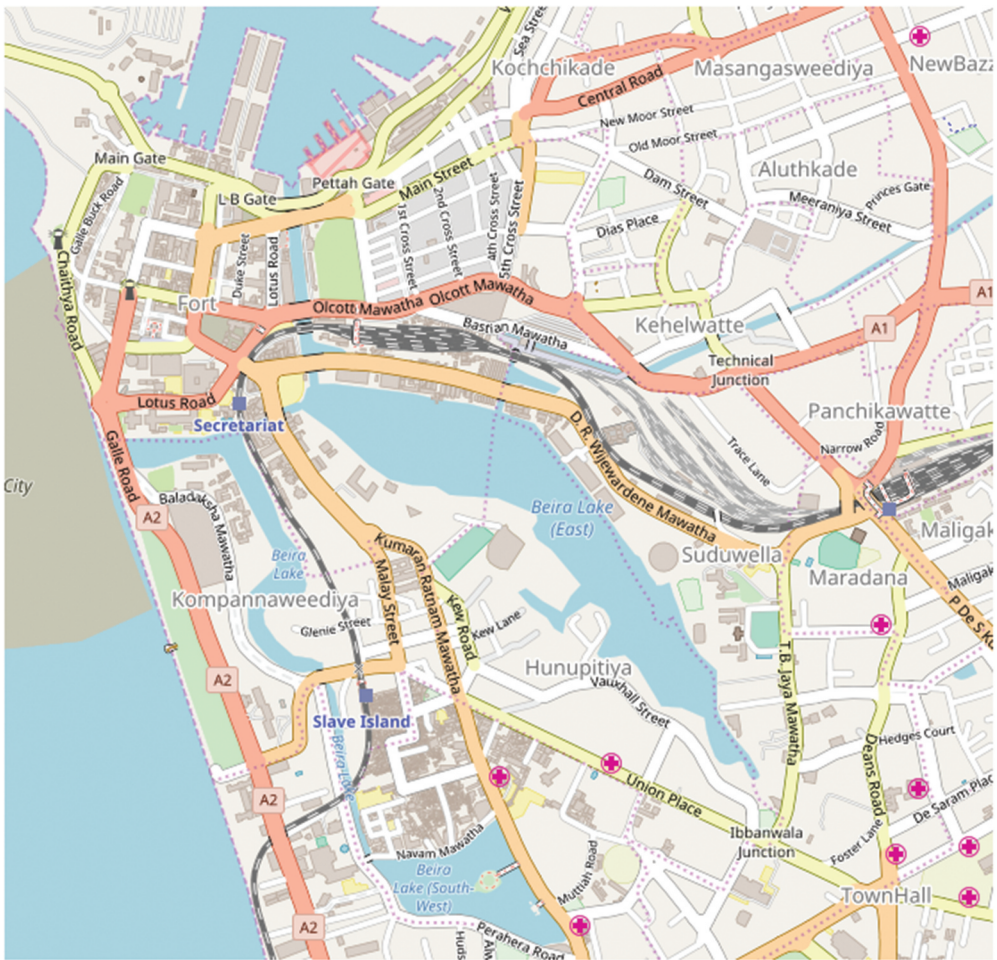


Figure 1. Map of Kompanna Veediya, here marked as Slave Island nestled between the Central Business District, Colombo Port, central transport links, Port City Development project, and the Presidential Secretariat (Wikimedia Commons).

Second, Kompanna Veediya differs from other minoritised localities within Colombo district, such as Wellawatte, known as ‘little Jaffna’.⁷⁸ Wellawatte was gradually settled by Tamil-Hindus, displaced from the north during the war, who could afford the higher rents or real estate value in the area than those who moved to areas such as Kompanna Veediya. While residents of both share affiliations to minority identities, long-term residents of Kompanna Veediya strategically dip in and out of identity categories – ethnic or religious groups, informal labour or small business owners – in response to external scrutiny and influence. For them, cosmopolitanism and preserving a multicultural neighbourhood is a radically different, even subversive, alternative to nationalist narratives that frame them as objects of scrutiny and suspicion or position them within political factionalism. In contrast to Wellawatte, which readily accepts and integrates Tamil newcomers from the north as their own, Kompanna Veediya forms networks of connections and trust between long-term residents, hesitant to acknowledge

parts of the community – new entrants be they Sinhala, Tamil or Muslim from elsewhere in Sri Lanka or foreign labour migrants – as belonging to it.⁷⁹

In Anton Piyarathne's study of Crow Island and De Mel *watte* – two communities on the periphery of Colombo – he identifies similar pragmatic strategies for managing (in) security.⁸⁰ He terms these mechanisms 'commongrounds', defining them as 'shared positions and abilities to use cultural resources in distinctive, pragmatic and creative ways that best match emerging situations and contingencies, while taking account of external forces/limits that threaten local social living in its meeting of external needs'.⁸¹ Residents of both Crow Island (primarily middle-class) and de Mel *watte* (more slum-like dwellings) use social, cultural and symbolic capital to establish 'commongrounds'. While both De Mel *watte* and Crow Island invoke socio-economic class⁸² to forge a sense of 'community' rather than ethnic essentialism,⁸³ their specific approach differs from Kompangna Veediya.

Kompangna Veediya, however, presents a more complex picture. It comprises middle-class residents (referred to by the residents as 'respectable' families) who occupy larger houses along the main roads (acknowledged by residents as middle-class socio-material spaces), and groups of small homes in '*wattes*' behind them (unlicensed temporary dwellings that have been incrementally built up).⁸⁴ Together, the residents of both project an image of Kompangna Veediya as an unified community, often repeating the refrain that 'we live here together peacefully', thereby choosing to ground themselves in place-identity. Perhaps, this is because they cannot effectively seek parity in the socio-economic class (as in Crow islanders or de Mel *watte*), religious or ethnic identity (as in Kattankudy or Wellawatte). This is not to suggest that class divisions do not exist⁸⁵; rather, these fissures tend to remain beneath the surface of their projected unity, revealed only through associations and social clubs, marriage and the internal dynamics of public spaces such as religious sites. Unlike the 'everyday social lifeworlds'⁸⁶ that Piyarathne identifies in Crow Island and De Mel *watte*, Kompangna Veediya's situated reality – nestled between the HSZ, CBD and the port – necessitates a different response. During the civil war, Colombo served as a site for staging spectacular displays of violence rather than as a strategic target for either the rebels or the Sri Lankan government.⁸⁷ Kompangna Veediya's proximity to these strategic centres (and therefore targets) of capital and power makes its community hyper-aware of their precarity of place, securitised and minoritised ethnicities, and the need to respond proactively.

At times of crises, all these neighbourhoods – each characterised by its own form of minoritisation and securitisation – experienced heightened surveillance and racial profiling. Pivotal moments and inflection points – the 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom, the assassinations of prominent political figures in the vicinity,⁸⁸ and the 2019 Easter attacks set against the backdrop of increasing geopolitical Islamophobia – served as formative experiences of securitisation for many communities, including for Kompangna Veediya. However, as we describe below, Kompangna Veediya stands apart in *how* its community adapted and evolved to navigate securitisation, charting a different course than minorities living in LTTE or state-controlled areas in the north and the east,⁸⁹ as well as other minority-dominant localities in southern Sri Lanka.

Coping with securitisation: how Kompangna Veediya defies logic

During wartime and in post-war periods, the most obvious and visible articulations of securitisation and militarisation were in search and seize operations. While

Tamils living in Kompangna Veediya experienced intense profiling and suspicion throughout the war, not all Tamils living there experienced it in the same way. Following the 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom, many Tamil families, like many others in Colombo,⁹⁰ sought refuge abroad *from* Kompangna Veediya. The 1980s and 1990s saw increased inward migrations of northern Tamils and Sinhalese blue-collar workers *into* Kompangna Veediya.⁹¹ These increased movements in and out of the area, coupled with security checks and ethno-religious profiling, made securitisation a lived reality for long-term residents.

The anti-Tamil pogrom of 1983, remembered by some residents as a pivotal moment in Colombo's violent history,⁹² is often viewed as the beginning of the civil war that distilled notions of ethnic identity and purification in the psyche of the civil war generation. Sinhala mobs, allegedly sanctioned by or in collusion with those in power, used electoral lists to identify minorities, attacking, vandalising, looting and burning Tamils shops and homes (Figure 2). The violence, which began in Colombo on 23 July 1983, quickly spread throughout the south, resulting in thousands of deaths and displacements.⁹³ In its wake, densely populated areas, especially areas with low-wage labourers labelled as 'slum-dwellers', were viewed as threats to 'national security', as ethno-nationalism and securitisation of the state intensified in tandem.⁹⁴

Meena Auntie,⁹⁵ a Malay woman in her 70s, married to a Sri Lankan Moor, traces her family lineage in Kompangna Veediya back to her great-grandmother from whom Meena auntie heard stories of how the site where the fifth generation of their family still live on the corner of New Ferry Lane and Malay Street, was a marshy field. She remembers that in 1983,



Figure 2. The destruction caused by the allegedly state-sanctioned mob violence in 'Black July' 1983. Here looted, burned and destroyed Tamil-owned shops, that left people displaced, if not killed, stand against the backdrop of the Colombo Fort railway station, in close proximity to Kompangna Veediya (Image sourced from AP archives).

There was a Tamil shop nearby owned by the Kanagasaby's. Their shop was burnt down. . . . Jothi, Lalitha, they were my friends but they left for their own safety. . . . It was [set] on fire by outsiders. We didn't know who carried it out. We hid them [neighbours] in our house for three days, and then gave them over to the temple in Bambalapitiya for further assistance.⁹⁶

Mangala auntie, a Malaiyaha Tamil woman in her late 60s, identifies her family as fifth-generation residents of Kompangna Veediya. She lives in a 12 ft × 12 ft house in Church Street *watte*, a part of a row of houses now converted into multi-storey dwellings, with living downstairs and boarders occupying rooms or upstairs. Recalling 1983, Mangala Auntie listed out the shops destroyed by violence that were owned for generations (*parampara*) by Tamil neighbours, insisting that 'some neighbours [Sinhala and Muslim] tried to help but some were overwhelmed by the mobs everywhere'. Thereafter, she continued to expand upon the impact of securitisation on their daily lives, when she said that,

It doesn't matter what time in the night [the army] they come and check. They pull everything and check the place and go and we have to arrange it. . . . they trample what [the mats] we're sleeping on. They don't remove their shoes . . .⁹⁷

As the war intensified, heightened securitisation placed an additional burden on Tamil residents, especially with the influx of Tamils from the north and the east who sought refuge in Kompangna Veediya, to prove their status as long-term residents. Similar to minorities living in other southern neighbourhoods, Kompangna Veediya experienced increased state surveillance: requirements to carry National ID cards at all times, completing resident information cards, and routine registration with the Police (Figure 3) and having to endure search and seize operations in their homes.⁹⁸

They gave us a card which was yellow to show that we are residents, and if the army came to check us again we had to show it . . . If someone is staying in our house, we have to inform them about it. We go and hand them over to the police. It's not good to keep people in the house. That's because we had written down in the form, how many people are residents of the house. Only those people can stay. They say it is for our safety and that's true in a way . . .⁹⁹

Rizwiya, a fourth generation Muslim woman in her 40s lives in a 10 ft × 10 ft house off an alleyway on Henry de Mel Mawatha with her four children, husband and 82-year-old father. She recounts that their family lived on the same site since her father's grandfather migrated to Kompangna Veediya from Kerala. While she views the searches as a violation of privacy, like auntie Mangala, she too normalises and justifies them as a tolerated nuisance because,

. . . It was normal for them [military] to come and search. Men and women would come. Various LTTE persons who were living and hiding in Kompangna Veediya like 'sleeper cells', like the fruit seller who hid that bomb or the police woman who was a secret tiger and built a bunker in her house. You never know who is who, because when you rent you don't ask questions, because they will pay any amount we ask. So it was a good thing the checks were happening . . .¹⁰⁰

However, after the Easter attacks, when Kompangna Veediya's multi-generational minorities stepped outside their insulated neighbourhood, they experienced minoritisation personally. The roles enacted by residents, living in close proximity to presumed suspects, reflected the shifting positions of minorities as bystanders, witnesses, and

CODE

3 16 A - 586A

ISSUING AUTHORITY

COLOMBO SECURITY.

1. මෙම තාවකාලි සේවකයාගේ සිට නොගෙන යන්න.
DO NOT REMOVE THIS CARD FROM YOUR PLACE OF RESIDENCE.
இந்த ஆட்டைய நீங்கள் வதையும் இடத்திலிருந்து அகற்ற வேண்டாம்.
2. ගුවන් හමුදා ආරක්ෂක රාජකාරීවලට පැමිණි විට තාවකාලි ඉදිරිපත් කරන්න.
PRODUCE CARD WHEN AIR FORCE VISITS FOR SECURITY CHECKS.
விமானப் படை வீரர்கள் சோதனைக்கு வரும் பொழுது இவ்வட்டையை காட்டுங்கள்.
3. තැපැනවත්ත හෝ විනාශ නොවන ස්ථානයක ස්ථිරව රඳවා තැබිය යුතුය.
PREVENT LOSS OR DAMAGE BY LOCATING CARD IN A SAFE PLACE.
இவ்வட்டையை சேதப்படுத்தாமலும் இழக்காமலும் கவனமாக வைத்திருங்கள்.
4. තම ස්ථානයට තාවකාලික හෝ ස්ථිර ස්ථානයට පැමිණි අවස්ථාවේ විස්තර කර වසමේ තොරතුරු ලබාදිය යුතුය.
PROVIDE DETAILS OF ANY ADDITIONAL TEMPORARY / PERMENENET RESIDENCE TO THE CIVIL POLICE STATION / YOUR AREA.
உங்கள் வீட்டிற்கு தற்காலிகமாகவோ அல்லது நிரந்தரமாகவோ வதிய வருபவர்களின் விவரங்களை உங்கள் பீரிகு போலீஸ் நிலையத்திற்கு அறிவிக்கவும்.

3. මෙම තාවකාලි සේවකයාගේ සිට නොගෙන යන්න. නොගෙන යන තොරතුරු ලබා දෙන තෙක් ඔබගේ ස්ථානයේ රඳවා ගන්න. ON RECEIPT OF YOUR CARD PLEASE CHECK ON YOUR NEIGHBOURS. PERSONS NOT RECEIVED ARE REQUESTED TO BE INFORMED TO WRITE TO SECURITY DIVISION, SRI LANKA AIR FORCE HEADQUARTERS COLOMBO 02.

ආරක්ෂක හමුදා ආරක්ෂක සේවකයන්ගේ පරීක්ෂණයන් සඳහාත්, විනාශ නොවන ස්ථානයක ස්ථිරව රඳවා ගන්න. අවිනාශය වීම හෝ විනාශය වීම සම්බන්ධයෙන් තොරතුරු ලබා දිය යුතුය. නොගෙන යන තොරතුරු ලබා දෙන තෙක් ඔබගේ ස්ථානයේ රඳවා ගන්න. ON RECEIPT OF YOUR CARD PLEASE CHECK ON YOUR NEIGHBOURS. PERSONS NOT RECEIVED ARE REQUESTED TO BE INFORMED TO WRITE TO SECURITY DIVISION, SRI LANKA AIR FORCE HEADQUARTERS COLOMBO 02.

6. මෙම අවස්ථාවේ සේවකයාගේ ස්ථානයේ සිට නොගෙන යන්න. අවිනාශය වීම හෝ විනාශය වීම සම්බන්ධයෙන් තොරතුරු ලබා දිය යුතුය. ON RECEIPT OF YOUR CARD PLEASE CHECK ON YOUR NEIGHBOURS. PERSONS NOT RECEIVED ARE REQUESTED TO BE INFORMED TO WRITE TO SECURITY DIVISION, SRI LANKA AIR FORCE HEADQUARTERS COLOMBO 02.

7. තම ස්ථානය අතහැර යන අවස්ථාවේ හෝ අවසන් ස්ථානයට පැමිණි අවස්ථාවේ හෝ විනාශ නොවන ස්ථානයක ස්ථිරව රඳවා ගන්න. අවිනාශය වීම හෝ විනාශය වීම සම්බන්ධයෙන් තොරතුරු ලබා දිය යුතුය. WHEN TAKING OVER PREMISES OR WHEN VACCATING PREMISES YOU ARE REQUESTED TO INFORM SECURITY DIVISION SRI LANKA AIR FORCE HEADQUARTERS COLOMBO 02. STATING YOUR CODE NO.

ආරක්ෂක හමුදා ආරක්ෂක සේවකයන්ගේ පරීක්ෂණයන් සඳහාත්, විනාශ නොවන ස්ථානයක ස්ථිරව රඳවා ගන්න. අවිනාශය වීම හෝ විනාශය වීම සම්බන්ධයෙන් තොරතුරු ලබා දිය යුතුය. නොගෙන යන තොරතුරු ලබා දෙන තෙක් ඔබගේ ස්ථානයේ රඳවා ගන්න. ON RECEIPT OF YOUR CARD PLEASE CHECK ON YOUR NEIGHBOURS. PERSONS NOT RECEIVED ARE REQUESTED TO BE INFORMED TO WRITE TO SECURITY DIVISION, SRI LANKA AIR FORCE HEADQUARTERS COLOMBO 02.

මෙම ස්ථානය වරින් වරින් පරීක්ෂණය කිරීමට තමා එන්න. DO CO-OPERATE TO MAKE YOUR PLACE A SAFER PLACE TO LIVE. ඔබගේ ස්ථානය වරින් වරින් පරීක්ෂණය කිරීමට තමා එන්න.

Figure 3. Registration card for 'Colombo Security' redacted to protect the privacy of the resident (V. Shajahan).

interlocutors, assessed solely based on the legitimacy assigned to them as one or another by the state security apparatus and their proxies. They also demonstrate a unique response to Islamophobia: rather than leaning into tradition and socio-cultural exclusivity,¹⁰¹ the residents blended and highlighted differences selectively to negotiate surveillance on their own terms.

Raheema, like Rizwiya, was present when Mangala auntie described her experience of war-time racial profiling. Raheema, a Muslim widow of a Tamil man in her 40s with a Muslim father and a Sinhalese mother, shared similar experiences in the post-easter attacks era. She lived in the same house on Dispensary Lane *watte* where her family has been for five generations. She explains that although there was no evidence of Islamic fundamentalism or terror cells in Kompangna Veediya, she and other Muslims faced suspicion and animosity from outsiders when they stepped out of the protection of their neighbourhood. Both she and Rizwiya recalled similar experiences from a hospital visit and to the local bank,

Now [after Easter Attacks] when we go into the bank, they will look from top to bottom and say something, right to your face, that they couldn't trust us and this and that Over here that doesn't happen. Only if we go somewhere, those things happen. The hospital, mostly the hospital, if we go they ignore us. If we are in front, they will move us back. They won't call us up.¹⁰²

Rizwiya added that she confronted the security guard for profiling her after the Easter attacks – 'don't you know me? Why are you suddenly treating me like this? Search me if you want, I have nothing to hide'.¹⁰³

However, rather than simply developing coping mechanisms to live with securitisation, as their counterparts do in the north and the east,¹⁰⁴ the southern experience of minoritisation (in Kompangna Veediya for example), is more of a negotiation. This is perhaps because securitisation was not experienced *en masse*, in Kompangna Veediya as it was within minoritised enclaves or entire regions. The difficulty residents experienced in ‘fixing identities territorially’ – that enclaves are able to call upon to maintain an outward projection of ethno-political strength in numbers¹⁰⁵ – necessitated going beyond invoking ethno-religious identities for their ontological security. It is this power to negotiate with security regimes, which residents fiercely project (and protect), that they stand to lose if they are displaced or priced out of Kompangna Veediya as a result of Colombo’s post-war development.¹⁰⁶

Otherness and othering: navigating (im)permeable boundaries of minoritisation

The long-term residents of Kompangna veediya evolved to manage their vulnerabilities by negotiating security through the construction of a seemingly stable and authentic ‘we’, secured through boundary-making between ‘us’ and ‘them’¹⁰⁷ (Figure 4). For example, Shakthi Auntie, a Tamil-Hindu woman and her half-sister Theresa Auntie, whose father was Sinhala-Catholic, both in their 80s, trace their family history in Kompangna Veediya back five generations. They, like their neighbours, believed that belonging to an ‘old and known’ family from Kompangna Veediya, and vouching for each other as ‘from here’ protected them. This sense of safety stemmed from the intercultural unity they projected on to the neighbourhood



Figure 4. A wedding celebration where multiple generations celebrate spilling out onto the street in the familiarity of the neighbourhood, where passers by known to the family are free to come in with well-wishes (V. Shahjahan).

as their '*upan gama*' (home town).¹⁰⁸ Despite eviction from their '*maha gedera*' (ancestral home) at the edge of Java Lane and Malay street, to make way for luxury apartments development by India's Tata Group¹⁰⁹ (Shakthi auntie now lives in the Metropolitan Flats she received as compensation and Therersa in the *watte* by the railway tracks), they invoke their origin stories and place-identity in Kompangna Veediya as an asset. Their history provided a safety net and insulation from ethno-religious profiling, even during times of crises;

We never had any problems in Kompangcha Veediya because we didn't have anyone who joined the LTTE here nor did we have anyone who joined Zahran [Easter attack bombers]. Those days [during the war] the police would come and check, looking for people who've come in from outside and bought houses here. If we don't know them [new people], then we can't vouch for them.¹¹⁰

Veena, a Tamil woman in her 50s living with her father-in-law Rajkumar uncle, whose children are the third generation to live in on Stuart Street in Kompangna Veediya, also exemplifies the power of lineage and shared memory as social currency, in creating a sense of place-identity and safety:

If I say I'm Raja's daughter from Stuart Street, everyone will know. There's no need to say I'm Tamil or Muslim or Christian or Hindu even to outsiders because as soon as they hear the name or see the dress they will know exactly [what my ethno-religious identity is].¹¹¹

The ability to trace lineage and heritage allowed long-term residents to mark their difference from new migrants or outsiders.¹¹² Their awareness of the complex intra-group dynamics and national security concerns connected to ethno-geographies is illustrated by Meena auntie's statement that 'it was clear when we spoke, that we were from here [the south]. We spoke all three languages and they [from the north and east] only spoke Tamil'.¹¹³ Veena extended this argument framing place-identity as an assurance of safety, when she said,

We are from here. They [military] know us, so we wore mottus [vermillion bindi on the forehead] and weren't afraid. But they [migrants from the north and east] would not [show external markers of difference] because they were not [from here] and tried to blend in [with the majority community of Colombo] ...¹¹⁴

Such confidence in their intrinsic nativeness allowed them to negotiate their relationships with each other, the state, and the security apparatus even as they maintained visible cultural markers of difference, while newcomers eschewed them to blend into the (culturally majority-Sinhala) southern constituency in the Colombo district.¹¹⁵ Nazeema Auntie highlights how this nativeness of place translated into perceptions of safety, illustrated by who she could call upon in an emergency. A Muslim woman in her 60s living in a three-storey house on Church Street, where her children (the fourth generation to live there, each with their own floor), is a different social stratum from people that live in the slum-like *watte* behind their home.¹¹⁶ Yet, despite these socio-economic and cultural differences (she describes them as 'loud' and 'belligerent'), interpersonal relationships with these long-term neighbours provided her security: 'In an emergency? It's always the neighbours that come running to help first. They will first do [the needful] and then call the rest of the family'.¹¹⁷ Such trust, where neighbours are effectively kin, resonates with Piyarathne's observation that people living together actively construct

and share ‘commongrounds’ in a ‘multitude of everyday activities’ necessarily ‘disregarding the [external] ethnic mobilisations’.¹¹⁸

Despite living in a minority-dominant neighbourhood, the state security apparatus viewed Auntie Kumari as an ally, based on her ethno-religious identity and higher socio-economic class. She is a Sinhala woman in her 70s, living in a large house with a garden, from an ‘old family’ (her mother’s family was the second generation to live there). She was careful to highlight how a Sinhala-Buddhist would internalise *securitisation differently to minorities living in Kompangna Veediya*.

They [the military] would come and check if we were ok. [During the war], they would come and look at the card but never searched [inside]. They would come in and have a chat, very apologetically for disturbing us, about everyday things. My neighbours have even seen the military coming (without even ringing our doorbell) and surveillance in the area for our protection. They would ask me to ask their questions, as they didn’t know who was around us [but we did] . . . They asked if there was anyone in the area that we did not trust. If there were people in the area who were unfamiliar.¹¹⁹

After the Easter attacks, the military attempted to showcase their presence around Sinhala families’ residences, to signal that ‘this house is under their protection’. This, she suggests, compelled her Muslim neighbours – long-term acquaintances – to explain how they were ‘different’ from eastern Muslims.¹²⁰ It highlights both the global rise of Islamophobia and the context-specific anxieties about heightening Muslim militancy in eastern Sri Lanka (a concern even for Muslims living in the south amongst the majority community).¹²¹ Nevertheless, Kumari emphasised that being ‘from here’ and from an ‘old family’,¹²² transcended the fault lines of identity politics that consistently shape Sri Lanka’s conflict landscape,

Wahabis that wore different clothes [black burqas], prayed differently raising their fingers [Zahran’s videos showed the signature gesturing which is taken by many to indicate extremism]. After the Easter attacks my family from outside [Kompangna Veediya] kept asking me to move to their houses for awhile, but I was not interested and have 100per cent faith that they had nothing to do with it [attacks] and that they [neighbours] would rally around and protect me [if there was trouble].¹²³

When crises and securitisation trigger responses of ‘othering’ and ‘otherness’, residents adapt by shaping and reshaping their relationships. Long-term neighbours vouch for each other based on mutual recognition of lineage, collective memory and intertwined family histories. Secure in their core-identity as *upan gamay atto* (people born in this village) and irrespective of their ethno-religious or socio-economic differences, they negotiate (im)permeable boundaries amicably, as implicit modes of survival. This fosters a strong sense of ontological security for long-term residents, although potentially increasing the vulnerability of newcomers to harsher scrutiny, derived from their place-identity rather than by aligning themselves with group-identity constructs that articulate citizenship regimes elsewhere in Sri Lanka.¹²⁴ As we elaborate further, it positions them as interested parties in preserving the insularity of Kompangna Veediya as a secure (vis-à-vis national security) and cooperative space as we elaborate in the next section.

Negotiating securitisation: a patron-informant culture

When conflict-related securitisation directly impacted Kompangna Veediya, institutions – ranging from families, to community leaders to religious authorities – increasingly engaged in mediation or negotiation roles. Long-term residents often functioned as a community-watch, effectively acting as insiders within the state security apparatus. This suggests how interpersonal relationships built on trust and local knowledge provided the means to negotiate security with the state. For example, Raheema, became a (non-remunerated) police-nominated community leader following the Easter attacks, whose role was to report on ‘outsiders’ taking up residence in Kompangna Veediya. She explained the pragmatism underscoring this transaction of information:

... even during searches they would know we are [long-term] residents because of the registration cards [yellow cards issued by the police] that we had to hang on the door They (police) cannot possibly check every home for suspicious activities and residents also cannot tolerate spot checks and searches inside their homes.¹²⁵

This negotiated relationship with the state’s security apparatus allowed Kompangna Veediya’s long-term residents to avoid direct confrontations with ‘newcomers’ or prevent threats to their community by undertaking the burden of people-on-people scrutiny. Echoing Rizwiya’s cautious acknowledgement of the benefits of letting the security forces deal with individuals who might be security threats, Meena auntie explained how they manage these delicate situations in the interim:

If something was suspicious, we don’t directly ask them [newcomers from the north or east] to leave. That’s not nice. So we say that the house is needed for relatives [so they leave on their own volition].¹²⁶

In the north and the east, increased militarisation and securitisation-led people to develop varying degrees of ‘resistance’ and ‘immunity’ from external ‘pressures’ by learning ‘to live with’ the evolving status quo.¹²⁷ However, Kompangna Veediya differed from areas under government-control where militarisation may have been perceived as an occupying force. During and after the civil war, Kompangna Veediya residents, leveraging their situated knowledge and history, came to view militarisation as a protective force with whom they could negotiate security for the neighbourhood. This alliance with the securitised state, while being subject to surveillance and routine searches, allowed the neighbourhood of Kompangna Veediya to minimise disruption and suspicion experienced by minorities living in other majority-dominant districts or localities. In this way, the residents became active agents, fostering what we term, a *patron-informant culture* that provided a degree of control over how they managed securitisation over passive acceptance. This illustrates how communities under scrutiny performed their allegiance to the majority-dominant state, not despite, but because of their minoritised identities.

Nazeema auntie and Raheema emphasised that after the Easter attacks, ‘the mosque intervened almost immediately to ask women to wear colour and not cover our faces and only wear the usual headscarf’.¹²⁸ This intervention can be interpreted as a response to the Sinhala-Buddhist majoritarian perception of the black abaya (increasingly common

among Muslim women in eastern Sri Lanka) as a symbolic representation of growing hardline or extremist Islam.¹²⁹ Coloured abayas not only reduce this visibility but signify Kompangna Veediya's history of non-extremism and its ties to Colombo's urban-multicultural character. Raheema reiterated that 'the mosque worked with the police to share information and protect us'.¹³⁰ She shared the story of another instance when the Mosque intervened after the Easter attacks: a long-term resident was arrested after a 'sword' (described by neighbours as an elongated machete) was discovered in this home,

The mosque collected [ceremonial] swords and gave it to the police to protect the community from arrest because they [the police] lacked cultural understanding about our ceremonial swords.¹³¹

The interventions by the mosque reveal its awareness of its social capital as an institutional representative of the Muslims in Kompangna Veediya. This resembles, in practical terms, how the Mosque Federation in Kattankudy ensured the safety, security and access to resources for the Muslim communities in the militarised landscape of eastern Sri Lanka. In that context, they managed everyday Muslim–Tamil relations, liaised with Tamil militants and the state security apparatus, and coordinated unified decision-making as a Muslim polity.¹³² In the east, the Mosque Federation (comprising over 48 mosques and registered in 1987 to fill the 'vacuum' on the ground, of local political leadership who focused on 'Muslim interests' at the national level), focused on the 'everyday'.¹³³ However, Kompangna Veediya differs from the enclavism and positionality of the Mosque Federation, in terms of national, regional and communal power that it represents. Here, the mosque works to protect the community by acknowledging the need to de-escalate heightened suspicion placed on this predominantly Muslim neighbourhood, a goal it achieves by creating broad partnerships with the security apparatus. This type of mediation illustrates the aforementioned *patron-informant culture* as an adaptive form of resilience. However, it also highlights that, despite claims to unity and safety derived from history, lineage and community-consciousness, minorities in the south live in a sustained state of insecurity at times of crises, particularly when surrounded by the dominant majority. This may explain the dogged insistence on presenting a more secular and inclusive identity within Kompangna Veediya. Maintaining allyship, and managing security as a neighbourhood, requires more than place-identity; it requires displays and performance of similar values and shared sympathies with the majoritarian identity. This dynamic reflects what Malkki describes as 'situated assimilation',¹³⁴ a process that is particularly salient in contexts vulnerable to potential violence, as Das suggests.¹³⁵

Developing a performative community consciousness

Rituals play a significant role in solidifying the core identity of Kompangna Veediya's residents in fostering community cohesiveness, belonging, and reifying the historical and secular multi-culturalism. This core identity is not static; it is actively constructed, maintained and conveyed through visible ritualisation. Shakthi auntie's description of the community illustrates the interconnectedness between the performance of rituals, reaffirmation of their shared heritage and perceptions of safety;

... there is unity [between ethno-religious groups] here. "So many mixed marriages. It's like a malay pickle. Everybody will get together to do things. Everything is close by and it's really safe. We can even walk at midnight without worrying. Nothing will happen."¹³⁶

Public displays, such as festivals, serve as spectacles that annually reinforce Kompangna Veediya as a community bound by common heritage. Veena's account, corroborating other oral histories, illustrates this by citing Vesak – a festival celebrating the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha – as the community's most important, grandest and unifying religious celebration.

Everyone celebrates the Gangarama Perahera and Vesak. Everybody in Kompangna Veediya makes the lanterns. Everybody cooks for the dansal and contributes [money]. Everyone serves and feeds and participates in the festivities ... Even for Sinhala and Tamil New year, everyone enjoys the [traditional] games on the street. No one forces it. It is just a fun thing to do. It's always like this. There's the Vale and Eid and the church feast but the biggest is Vesak.¹³⁷

The fact that vesak, a Buddhist festival (Figure 5), is *the one* inter-ethnic religious celebration that is truly inclusive and embraced by all, despite Kompangna Veediya's Muslim majority and Buddhist minority¹³⁸ is striking. This represents a significant and telling socio-political choice. It suggests a 'regulatory fiction',¹³⁹ where performative 'acts' of allegiance are expected of securitised citizens. In a neighbourhood, so closely situated to the centres of power and capital, and composed primarily of minorities, the celebration of Vesak serves as a visual manifestation of the community's loyalty and deference to Buddhism – and by extension Sinhala-Buddhism. It tacitly acknowledges and displays the community's



Figure 5. The streets of Kompangna Veediya, decorated for Vesak with Buddhist flags as residents go about their daily lives. Photo with permission from R. Ramkalyan.

s intent in not challenging Buddhism's 'foremost place in Sri Lanka'¹⁴⁰ reinforcing Kompangna Veediya as a community of allies.

Community cohesiveness is also demonstrated through socio-cultural rituals, such as funerals. Karunasiri uncle, a man in his 60s of Sinhala-Malayaiha Tamil mixed heritage, is the second generation born in Kompangna Veediya's 55 *watte*. His mother lived in a polyandrous relationship with Karunasiri's father and another man. He, like others in Kompangna Veediya, makes it a point to,

[I] go for [all] funerals. Even [if] it's on the other side and [even if] you didn't know the person but you see a flag [funeral banner], you go and show your face. That is normal [here].¹⁴¹

Kumari auntie reinforced this sense of connectedness when she shared the memory of her mother's funeral;

When my mother died while visiting my sister in Thalawatugoda, People we didn't even know got a [chartered] bus and came all the way there to pay respects. For months after that, people apologised to me that because we hadn't put up flags they did not know about the funeral. That's how we are in Kompangna Veediya.¹⁴²

Both performances – the public spectacle of festivals and the quiet connectedness of funerals – reaffirm tradition, history, and collective memory. This performative community consciousness, however, functions on two levels. It not only presents a unified whole to outsiders observing Kompangna Veediya but also serves as a reminder to residents *themselves* of their collective identity – an identity that transcends the ethno-religious or class differences that subtly shape their lives. Although these underlying nuances may become apparent upon deeper scrutiny,¹⁴³ the community's outward performance of this community consciousness and unity as a hallmark of Kompangna Veediya, tends to obscure them to external observers, enabling the residents to further their position politically.

Presenting an image of the neighbourhood as a secular polity

The concept of performative community consciousness also illustrates how Kompangna Veediya responds to the entrenched ethnicisation of electoral politics in Sri Lanka. As we elaborated earlier in this article, minority political choices in Sri Lanka include marginalised communities pursuing recognition and political representation through group-based identity politics or quieter alignment with dominant political forces, highlighting the complex interplay of identity and political agency in a landscape of inequality. Despite the historical use of ethnicised relationships between the Sinhala majority and the numerical minorities as a political strategy¹⁴⁴ in the lead-up to elections, Kompangna Veediya demonstrated an ability to navigate the larger socio-political landscape of Sri Lanka at a micro level. The oral histories of Kompangna Veediya illustrate that historic allegiances, political preferences and electoral loyalty render macro-narratives of ethno-religious marginalisation immaterial within the community.

As a neighbourhood bloc, Kompangna Veediya has consistently voted as Colombo has voted¹⁴⁵: for the UNP,¹⁴⁶ the less authoritarian, non-majoritarian, Sinhala-dominant party that represents the values of a more liberal polity,¹⁴⁷ thereby demonstrating their

secular credentials. However, they ‘show face’ at various parties’ political rallies ‘for a good time with free alcohol and food’.¹⁴⁸ As Rizwiya stated,

[We vote] UNP always For generations this has been the case. And older people will never vote [for] anything else. My own cousin is asking for votes from the NPP and still my father won’t give. It’s traditionWhen rallies happen, there will be buses [belonging to various parties with the promise of lunch and booze] and the people will get into all three like during the May Day rallies ... and then half-way even switch from rally to rally. It’s just for a fun day.¹⁴⁹

In 2019, Gotabhaya Rajapakse’s electoral victory coincided with the rise of a post-war nationalist rhetoric that emotively moved a largely Sinhala-Buddhist voter-base to support him. This reaffirmed the capacity to rouse nationalistic sentiments in the majority population whenever the established and ethnicised political system was existentially threatened.¹⁵⁰ The anti-Muslim rhetoric that followed the Easter attacks of 2019.¹⁵¹ In contrast, Kompangna Veediya has remained unmoved by both majoritarian and group-based identity politics. In this sense, their resistance is similar to the people of de Mel watta and Crow island who are not swayed by the ‘lure of ethno-nationalist feeling’ because ‘their social, cultural and economic capital provide them with an ability to “manipulate” ethno-political manipulation in turn’.¹⁵² Sandy, a Muslim-Tamil transgender woman in her 30s from Stuart Street, who is a third-generation resident, said that,

... there are other parties and offices here [Kompangna Veediya]. There was even a ‘Sinhale’ [a Sinhala -Buddhist nationalist group] that included some of the old [Sinhala] families in 37 watta that went around the streets acting menacing after the Easter attacks but it has died down now.¹⁵³

Veena suggests, that the reason why parties with nationalist intentions do not bring their divisive rhetoric to Kompangna Veediya is because of its ethno-religious make-up;

No, but this area is Muslim no? So they [nationalist parties] don’t come in here and say this and that [nationalist rhetoric] because they know we don’t vote for anyone who says anything like that [against minorities].¹⁵⁴

In effect, this means that the political choices of this predominantly Muslim neighbourhood – particularly during and after ethnically polarising events such as the Easter attacks or the many inflection points during the civil war – are not dictated by their ethno-religious identity. They actively choose not to align themselves with exclusivist ethno-religious politics.¹⁵⁵ Instead, they selectively connect with the pro-liberal, pro-democratic, pro-multicultural secularism that represents Colombo’s dominant political value,¹⁵⁶ thereby discouraging and limiting the impact of nationalism in their neighbourhood. These choices enable Kompangna Veediya to project an image of a community unfazed by, and intolerant of ethno-religious majoritarianism. This, in turn, strengthens their ability to negotiate protective alliances with the state, and reinforces the established patron-informant culture, now backed by their voting power. Community leaders such as Raheema and Karunasiri uncle, whose intimate knowledge of the neighbourhood allows them to accurately gauge and influence voting preferences, leverage it to negotiate with political parties.

Both [Raheema and I], wait outside the polling booths, [like a few others who are appointed by the community organiser] and strike people off the list as the officers read their names out, to count the votes [informally].¹⁵⁷

The vehement emphasis on Kompangna Veediya voting patterns – based, at least ostensibly on tradition and familial loyalty – suggests that their unique identity as a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and liberal-minded community, is a carefully curated *brand* to be maintained and fiercely guarded. It serves as both a response to mitigating nationalism and nationalist rhetoric and a tacit agreement to place a *secular value* on their bloc vote. All this, illustrates Haniffa's observation that, 'traditional Southern Muslim political groupings that held (and continue to hold) powerful positions within the mostly Sinhala "national" political parties, eschew the politicisation (in terms of exclusive political parties) of Muslim group identity'.¹⁵⁸

Conclusion: embracing adaptation as a mode of survival

As a neighbourhood in Colombo, Kompangna Veediya has maintained a relatively stable demographic composition over generations, where one of Sri Lanka's numerical minorities – the Muslims – are its majority population. For long-term residents, the inter-generational transfer of their unique *brand* of secular multiculturalism, rooted in place-identity and memory, is a powerful asset in negotiating protection during periods of intense securitisation and their inflection points. Multi-generational families, bonded together by emotion, memory and common purpose, describe Kompangna Veediya as a village or an *upan gama* (birthplace). In some ways, they are correct: The residents of Kompangna Veediya operate as one community, internalising a pragmatic approach to coping with and living with the violent history of minoritisation, securitisation and upheaval.

By viewing the state security apparatus – as a protector rather than as an occupying force – Kompangna Veediya, although largely composed of minorities, aligned with a broader southern political identity. Rather than being passive or living in fear – the reality for most minorities living in majority-dominant districts – Kompangna Veediya's long-term residents mirrored southern political, economic, and security regimes. This suggests that their alliances are to place, heritage, and lineage rather than the ethno-religious or political lived experience as Tamils, Muslims, Malays or Malaiyaha minorities. Thus, in times of crises, the community looks inward to manage the impact of securitisation. By emphasising place-memory and local roots (narratives of 'we are from here'), they negotiate (im)permeable boundaries amicably with their long-term neighbours and blend ethno-religious, socio-economic differences internally, to present a stable 'we' to outside scrutiny. This makes Kompangna Veediya different from enclavism intent on creating a territoriality rooted in internal ethno-religious purification, or minorities that fold into their minoritised ethno-religious identities for survival elsewhere in Sri Lanka. At various inflection points during the civil war, and in the wake of the Easter attacks, Kompangna Veediya's residents understood and leveraged this uniqueness.

Long-term residents of Kompangna Veediya curated and established their *brand* or 'we-ness' as a neighbourhood with a southern, secular multicultural identity in three interconnected ways: they banked on their shared multigenerational history and native-ness; they performed rituals of community cohesiveness and belonging consciously showcasing synchronicity with a southern cultural identity; and they aligned their electoral power with a southern political identity.

First, at a time when the influx of outsiders to densely populated areas in the heart of Colombo, such as Kompangna Veediya, challenged the security apparatus of the country, long-term residents used their social capital as currency. Distinguishing themselves from other minoritised communities elsewhere in Sri Lanka, Kompangna Veediya's long-term residents leveraged their intimate knowledge of each other, linked family histories and collective memories, rituals and practices as valuable social capital to be exchanged for protection. They marked themselves different from newcomers, by openly displaying minority cultural markers (unlike newcomers who concealed them). They remained silent when the newcomers that rented houses were racially profiled, even if the outsiders shared their ethnicities or religious beliefs. They created a *patron-informant culture*, based on who they could and could not vouch for as known families 'from here', effectively trading information on suspicious activities for the safety of their neighbourhood, thereby demonstrating allyship.

The second, community cohesiveness, they performed through 'everyday acts', strengthening their secular, multicultural identity across generations. Funerals, for example, become public displays of community cohesiveness. Similarly, Sinhala-Buddhist, Tamil-Hindu, Muslim/Malay-Islamic and Christian festivals, celebrated en masse (with a very public emphasis on the Buddhist festival Vesak), to communicate multiculturalism and secularism. These were displays of socio-cultural affinity with the dominant cultural identity of southern Sri Lanka. In both cases, these rituals reiterate Kompangna Veediya's unique 'brand' to remind its membership of what they stand to lose, if this commitment to each other is forgotten. While these performances may signal their intense awareness of being minoritised – evident in how invested they are in celebrating a Buddhist festival so publicly – *the performative community consciousness* signals their positioning, projection and relationality to the majoritarian politics beyond their borders.

Third, Kompangna Veediya recognises the value of resisting ethno-religious minoritisation by politics of nationalism which intensifies during crises. Long-term residents do this by protecting and projecting their historical track-record of favouring secular political ideologies and adding another layer of protection, by voting as a bloc. Kompangna Veediya's residents, affiliate themselves with the political trends and voting patterns of Colombo demonstrating its southern political behaviour, rather than the group-identity-based minority politics happening elsewhere in Sri Lanka.

All of this means that for people living with the violent heritage of conflict and upheaval, lineage, cohesive community identity and collective memory stemming from being rooted in place over multiple generations, offers sanctuary and ontological security. It allows them to negotiate and manage their contextual realities with *practices of resilience* that are formed of *inherited* place-memory, collective meaning-making and lived experience passed down as *community DNA*. What we have identified in Kompangna Veediya is that, for communities living in the shadow of minoritisation

and securitisation, it is possible to derive ontological security by rejecting their status as ethno-religious minorities, at least to outside scrutiny. Instead, they leverage their social capital, built up and passed on intergenerationally, to respond to place-specific realities contingently, while maintaining a collective community consciousness – which is both performative and relational. Thus, they demonstrate how bargaining with power can be a conscious process of allyship, grounded in place-memory, to manage ontological (in) security pre-emptively and proactively.

Notes

1. *Census of Population and Housing*, Preliminary Report 2024 - https://www.statistics.gov.lk/Resource/en/Population/CPH_2024/CPH2024_Preliminary_Report.pdf shows the population of Sri Lanka at 21.7 million although demographic data is only available in 2011 (<https://www.statistics.gov.lk/Population/StaticInformation/CPH2011/CensusPopulationHousing2012-FinalReport>). In this, the three largest groups are Sinhalese 74.9 per cent; Sri Lankan Tamil 11.1 per cent; Sri Lanka Moor (colloquially referred to as Muslims) 9.3 per cent.
2. Perera, 'Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka'; Kelegama, 'Impossible Devolution'; Silva, 'Caste, Ethnicity'.
3. Herath and Rambukwella, *Self, Religion, Identity and Politics*; Thiranagama, *In my Mother's House*.
4. Venugopal, 'Ethnic Domination', 3.
5. Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 'Theorising Representing the Other'.
6. Venugopal, 'Ethnic Domination', 3.
7. The name Kompanna Veediya was officially instituted by cabinet decree in 2023 in all three languages over the use of the more colonial 'Slave Island'. See Ada Derana News, 'Cabinet approves use of "Kompanna Veediya" in all three main languages'. 23 May 2023. Retrieved from <https://www.adaderana.lk/news.php?nid=90739>.
8. Basu and Hettiarachchi, *Valuing the Neighbourhood* - This article is the second of two sister articles emerging out of our research that should ideally be read as companion pieces. The first titled *Valuing the 'neighbourhood': Responding to Racialised Post-War Development in Slave Island, Colombo* published in the *European Journal of Development Research* (2024), focuses on how the community negotiates terms of post-war development dividends based on 'intrinsic value' as a response to displacement, disturbance, personal safety and the new migrant labour being brought into the neighbourhood. This article further explores how they manage and negotiate minoritisation, during times of crises and upheaval, using the same tools available to them for different ends.
9. Das, *Violent and Descent*; Ring, *Zenana*.
10. Hyndman and de Alwis, 'Bodies, Shrines'.
11. The civil war in Sri Lanka between the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the self-proclaimed sole representatives of the Tamil cause for self-determination, lasted 26 years, ending with brutality and violence as they Sri Lankan state vanquished the remnants of the LTTE. Both sides have been accused of grave human rights violations particularly in the last stages of the battle, the legacies of which still impact socio-political relations and political positions in the country. While the armed struggle generally marks the beginning of the war, since independence in 1948, many majoritarian Sinhala – Buddhist policies have marked the lead-up to it including strengthened Sinhala ideological positions (1956–1965; 1970–1977) as a result of socialist economic policies and the 1972 republican constitution, that ended any hope of federalism proposed by successive attempts at negotiating the 'ethnic question' since the late 1950s. See Thiranagama, *In my Mother's House*; and Klem, *Performing Sovereignty*.
12. We use the term 'inflection points' to signal that events that are marked as collective and exceptional violence are not isolated ruptures in the social fabric, but deeply embedded in

everyday life (Das, *Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*, 1). These events are shaped by what preceded them, and which continue to reverberate in their aftermath, as uneasy co-existences between ethnic and religious groups. At critical occurrences, which we term here as inflection points, co-existences are tested and require reassertion and reorientation of the norms and codes of living together. In the Sri Lankan context, such points expose and challenge the red lines- the conditional terms under which minorities co-exist with majorities. For instance, prior to the prolonged armed conflict of 1983–2009, an uneasy cohabitation between the minorities and the Sinhalese, had already produced several inflection points since independence, such as the anti-Tamil violence of 1958, 1977 and 1981.

13. Bastian, 'The July 1983 Riots', 159–161; Spencer et.al., *Checkpoints*, 3. On 23 July 1983, known as 'Black July', generally regarded as a retaliation for the killing of 13 Sri Lankan soldiers by the LTTE, Sinhala 'mobs' attacked, vandalised, looted, burned Tamils shops and homes, killing and displacing thousands, starting in Colombo and spreading across the south in the next few days. It is thought they got specific details of 'Sri Lankan Tamils' from electoral lists, which implies that this was sanctioned or with the collusion of those in government or Sinhala politics.
14. Griffiths and Kelly, 'Sri Lanka Bombers' Mentor is Dead'. On Easter Sunday, 2019 three churches and two luxury hotels in Colombo were targeted through a series of coordinated attacks by suicide bombers. A local Islamist group with self-proclaimed affiliations to ISIL, claiming responsibility. Communal relationships between Muslims and Sinhalese, particularly in the South of the country, suffered as a result.
15. Ontological security has been reinterpreted by the sociologist Anthony Giddens to encompass routine-bound activities and interactions by which individuals construct situated self-narratives. These are supported, Giddens argues, by biographical continuities, their ability to maintain inter-subjective social relationships and secure, socially-constructed frameworks of reality. Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Cambridge, Polity, 1991: chap. 2).
16. Waever, 'Securitisation', 46.
17. Gellwitzki, 'Positions of Ontological (In)security', 140.
18. Kinvall and Mitzen, 'Anxiety Fear', 241.
19. Cash, 'Dilemmas', 393.
20. Ring, *Zenana*, 5.
21. Das, *Life and Words*, 9.
22. John Cash, *Dilemmas*, explains that the co-presence of two competing ideological formations of postcolonial identity in Northern Ireland, created an ontological security dilemma for citizens (407). The friend-enemy ideology organises one's identity and relation with others according to a split worldview, where restricted emotions of fear and vulnerability are deployed to combat anxieties about the self and the group with which the political subject identified while projecting all negativity onto the other. In contrast the adversary-neighbour ideology supports a mode of being, feeling and relations which is more multi-faceted and contains the ambivalence of political experience. Identities are respected even if their political orientations are contrary to one's own, thus allowing for a more inclusive mode of politics (397).
23. *Ibid.*, 388.
24. Gellwitzki, 'Positions of Ontological (In)security', 144.
25. Bernskoetter, *Paremetrics*.
26. Nora, 'Memory and History'.
27. Chatterjee, 'Subaltern Studies'.
28. Gustafsson and Malksoo, 'Memory-Political', 4.
29. Nora, 'Memory and History'.
30. Das, *Textures Ordinary*, 108.
31. Dennis Cosgrove, cited in Stephen Daniels, *Field of Vision*, 5.
32. Giddens, *Modernity and Self Identity*.

33. Liyanage and Wickramathilake, *Life in the Cracks*.
34. Perera, *People's Spaces*, 26–27, 35–36.
35. *Census of Population and Housing*, 2012. The Kompangna Veediya Grama Niladari division had a population where 52.2 per cent and 12.8 per cent were Moor and Malay respectively, practising Islam and thus colloquially commonly referred to as Muslims. 17.6 per cent were Sri Lankan Tamils while 15.8 per cent were Sinhalese. Indian Tamils and others made up the remaining 1.3 per cent and 0.4 per cent respectively.
36. Perera and Spencer, *Beautification*, 220 – The state's strategy for post-war reconciliation prioritised infrastructure development over redressing historical injustices and structural vulnerabilities of the minorities
37. Such violent transformations can be seen not as a departure from 'normal' ethno-politics but as 'the heightened and intensified continuation of normal politics (Spencer, 2007, 120); or simply an extension of post-war majoritarian politics (Perera and Spencer, 'Beautification', 224–225)
38. Basu and Hettiarachchi, *Valuing the Neighbourhood*, 17–18.
39. *Census of Population and Housing*, 142. Sri Lankan Moors, a distinct minority identity group that is colloquially known as 'Muslims' and comprises 9.3 per cent of the Sri Lankan population.
40. Perera and Spencer, 'Beautification', 215.
41. Institute for statelessness and Inclusion, *Hill-country Tamils*, 2019. Malaiyaha Tamils also known as hill country Tamil or Indian Tamils, were formally indentured labourers brought to Sri Lanka during the British raj to work in the coffee, tea and rubber plantations between 1837–1939, who were not given citizenship when Sri Lanka received independence, and only formally resolved the issue in 2003.
42. Hemachandra and Hettiarachchi, 'Memoryscapes', and Uyangoda, 'Sri Lanka's Aragalaya'. The economic crisis which came to a head in 2022, changed the socio-political landscape of Sri Lankan politics and democracy. The people's movement – *Aragalaya* – that marched on the capital with calls for system change led to the ousting of the Rajapakse regime, introduction of an IMF bailout and debt restructuring, and overtime, the elections of a left-leaning President and Parliament in a landslide victory in 2024.
43. Venugopal, 'Ethnic Domination', 2.
44. *Ibid.*, 13.
45. See Thiranagama, *In My Mother's House*; and Klem, *Performing Sovereignty* for Tamil intra-group dynamics.
46. See Venugopal, *Nationalism*, Chapter 2.
47. See Nuhmann, *Sri Lankan Muslims*.
48. Klem, *Performing Sovereign Aspirations*, 38–39.
49. For the most part, the struggle for a homeland excluded Malaiyaha Tamils, eastern or Batticaloa Tamils and the Tamil-Speaking Muslim populations.
50. *Ibid.*, 31–32, 40–41.
51. See Moore, 'The Insurrectionary JVP' – The two class-struggle based youth insurgencies of 1971 and 1987–89 took on the state, the latter more violent in its method and even more brutally hunted down by the state when it failed. In both the youth were predominantly Sinhalese subscribing to a rural identity grounded in socialist ideals and the notion of injustice that 'Colombo' (representative of the 'establishment'/elite) revelled in its privilege
52. De Mel, *Militarising Sri Lanka*, 59–61.
53. Thaheer, *Reconciliation in Sri Lanka*, 39.
54. *Ibid.*, 35–39.
55. The central bank bomb in 1996 (BBC. On this day http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/january/31/newsid_4083000/4083095.stm; Kebethigollawa bus bomb in 2006 in Anuradhapura district - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/jun/15/srilanka>); The Temple of the Sacred Tooth bombing in Kandy in 1998 - <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/50366.stm>.

56. Perera and Spencer, 'Beautification', 2014–2015.
57. Bandara, *Ethnic Politics*, 302–305.
58. Ibid., 319–320.
59. Thiranagama, *In My Mother's House*; Klem, *Performing Sovereignty*.
60. Klem, *Performing Sovereignty*, 36; Haniffa, 'Majoritarian Democracy's Minoritisation Initiatives', 401–405.
61. Klem, *Performing Sovereignty*, 1:33.
62. Haniffa, 'Majoritarian Democracy's Minoritisation Initiatives', 382.
63. In this article, southern Sri Lanka, is a vague classification of a political state with a numerical majority of Sinhalese, geographically excluding the northern and Eastern provinces. While it is largely multicultural the dominant presence of a Sinhala-Buddhist ideological framing underpins its socio-cultural and political leanings, including how communalism, nationalism and sub-nationalisms are formed, negotiated and contested in this space. Navaratne Bandara and Farzana Haniffa's articles cited in this article provide a clearer understanding of what a 'southern political identity' constitutes.
64. Haniffa, 'Majoritarian Democracy's Minoritisation Initiatives', 409.
65. Sri Lanka Guardian, (April 21, 2012). 'Many Muslims recruited into the Sri Lanka intelligence service'. <http://www.srilankaguardian.org/2012/04/many-muslims-recruited-into-sri-lanka.html>
66. Herath and Rambukwella, *Self, Identity, Religion and Politics*.
67. Ibid., 2–3.
68. Imtiyaz, 'Easter Sunday Bombings', 6–7.
69. Kinnvall and Mitzen, 'Fear, Anxiety, Ontological Security', 243; and Das, *Violence and the Descent*, 9. Here we use the terms 'fear' and 'uncertainty' as the everyday internalised experiences of living with the politics of fear, in the form of continuous acts of socially constructing 'threats' and its related mirror image the ontological self to be secured through conservative politics of belonging (as well as the potential of violence not in the sense of a reality that will take place but as something that is already present in everyday life in the form of what Das describes as scepticisms, unrepaired traumas and frayed guarantees of belonging to larger entities like community and state.
70. James Sidaway cited in Hasbullah and Kopf, 'Muslim Geographies', 34.
71. Hasbullah and Kopf, 'Muslim Geographies'.
72. Spencer, *Impossible Purification*.
73. Rohan De Silva, (2004) cited in Wickramasinghe, 'Reorienting', 157.
74. Arjun Appadurai *Fear of Small Numbers* (2006) cited in Hasbullah and Kopf, 33.
75. Hasbullah and Kopf, 'Muslim Geographies'.
76. Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, 3–4.
77. Tambiah, *Ethnic Fratricide*, 6.
78. Peiris, 'Affective Materialities', 8.
79. Basu and Hettiarachchi, *Valuing the Neighbourhood*.
80. Crow Island in Colombo 15 is at the northern edge of Colombo bordered by the sea, Kelani river delta made into an island by a Dutch-era canal. De Mel watta is considered an area of slum-dwellings at the edge of Colombo 12. Both these sites are multi-cultural and have experienced violence from outsiders (and protection from neighbours) during the 1983 pogrom. However, they are some distance away from the CDB, the ports, the main markets (Pettah) and the former HSZ, unlike Kompangna Veediya. As it is more central, Kompangna Veediya is not only a more politically important locus of 'staging' violence, it is also more vulnerable to surveillance and the pressure to conform to expected 'behaviours'.
81. Piyarathne, 'Constructing Commongrounds', 7.
82. For example, the residents of De Mel Watta – a multi-cultural area with a consistently Muslim majority like Kompangna Veediya – ground their sense of place identity and 'everyday dependability' (Piyarathne, 105) in their neighbours through a shared acknowledgement of the working-class experiences of their predominantly slum-like dwellings (Piyarathne, 92–95). Crow Island, which was reconstructed in the 1960s as a middle-class

settlement, similarly fosters a community identity based on class-consciousness rather than ethnic essentialism.

83. Piyrathne, 'Constructing Commongrounds', 60.
84. Basu and Hettiarachchi, *Valuing the Neighbourhood*, 18.
85. Ibid., 19.
86. Piyrathne, 'Constructing Commongrounds'.
87. Perera and Spencer, 'Beautification', 215.
88. See Sunday Times, 'Suicide Bombers Identity Still a Mystery'; BBC News, 'Bomb Targets the Sri Lanka Army Chief'.
89. Hyndman and Alwis, *Bodies, Shrines, Roads*, 549; Thaheer, *Reconciliation in Sri Lanka*, 37.
90. Perera and Spencer, 'Beautification', 212.
91. Mangala auntie interviews, Colombo, 5 August 2023.
92. Tambiah, *Ethnic Fratricide*, 216. Tambiah notes that in slum-areas the residents might have played a role ethnic-polarisation, caught between participating in the violence and in protecting each other, signifying the nuances of ethnic violence in densely populated multi-cultural areas.
93. Bastian, 'The July 1983 Riots', 159–161; Spencer et.al., *Checkpoints*, 3.
94. Piyrathne, 'Constructing Commongrounds', 103, 123.
95. All names in this article are not the real names of the storytellers.
96. Meena auntie interview, Colombo, 21 August 2023.
97. Ibid.
98. Ruwanpura, 'Post-War Sri Lanka', 10 - notes that state surveillance, police raids and a variety of profiling categories are not a new phenomenon ebbing and flowing with rising tensions throughout the many inflection points including the JVP insurrections in 1971 and 1987–89.
99. Mangala auntie interview, Colombo, 5 August, 2024.
100. Rizwiya Interview, Colombo, 8 August 2023.
101. Nandy, 'The Twilight Certitudes', 158.
102. Raheema interview, Colombo, 4 August 2023.
103. Focus Group Discussion, Colombo, 10 May 2024.
104. Thaheer, *Reconciliation in Sri Lanka*, 35–39.
105. Hyndman and Alwis, *Bodies, Shrines, Roads*.
106. Perera and Spencer, 'Beautification', 221–222.
107. Maria Stern 2005 cited in Piyrathne, 'Constructing Commongrounds', 122.
108. Focus Group Discussion, Colombo, 10 May 2024.
109. Sunday Times, 'Tata Company Undertakes Mixed Development Project in Colombo 02', 9
110. Shakthi and Theresa interview, Colombo, 20 August 2023.
111. Rajkumar uncle and Veena interview, Colombo, 16 August 2023.
112. Focus Group Discussion, Colombo, 15 May 2024.
113. Meena auntie interview, Colombo, 21 August 2023.
114. Rajkumar uncle and Veena auntie, Colombo, 16 August, 2023.
115. Hyndman and Alwis, *Bodies, Shrines, Roads*, 552.
116. Basu and Hettiarachchi, *Valuing the Neighbourhood*, 18.
117. Nazeema auntie interview, Colombo, 10 August 2023.
118. Piyrathne, 'Constructing Commongrounds', 197.
119. Kumari auntie interview, Colombo 13 August, 2023.
120. Ibid.
121. Imtiyaz, *Violent Muslim Mobilisation*, 62–64.
122. Kumari auntie interview, Colombo, 13 August 2023.
123. Ibid.
124. Venugopal, 'Ethnic Domination', 6.
125. Raheema interview, Colombo, 4 August 2023.
126. Focus Group Discussion, Colombo, 15 May 2024.
127. Thaheer, *Reconciliation in Sri Lanka*, 38–40.

128. Focus Group Discussion, Colombo, 10 May 2024.
129. Srinivasan, 'The Abaya and Tensions in Sri Lanka's East'.
130. Focus Group Discussion, Colombo, 10 May 2024.
131. Ibid.
132. Hasbullah and Kopf, 'Muslim Geographies', 37.
133. Ibid., 37.
134. Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, 3.
135. Das, *Violence and the Ordinary*, 9.
136. Shakthi auntie and Theresa auntie interview, Colombo, 20 August 2023.
137. Rajkumar Uncle and Veena Auntie, Colombo, 16 August, 2023.
138. *Census of Population and housing*, 2012. In Kompangna Veediya, Hunupitiya and Wekanda areas that constitute Colombo 02, Buddhism is practised only by about 12–15 per cent of the residents while at least 65–70 per cent practice Islam (Moors and Malays), while 10–15 per cent practice Hinduism
139. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 155.
140. *Constitution of Sri Lanka*, 3.
141. Karunasiri Uncle interview, Colombo, 8 August 2023.
142. Kumari Auntie interview, Colombo, 13 August 2023.
143. Basu and Hettirachchi, *Valuing the Neighbourhood*, 5, 18–19.
144. Haniiffa, 'Majoritarian Democracy's Minoritisation Initiatives', 381.
145. Perera and Spencer, 'Beautification', 209; and Wikipedia, *Colombo District Elections*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colombo_Electoral_District. In most elections this has been the UNP or the Samagi Jana Balakaya (SJB), which is a breakaway faction of the UNP, often holding out against the national trend. The cumulative historical results of all the Presidential and Parliamentary elections in the Colombo district highlights how Colombo (central, north, east and west) has consistently voted for the UNP/SJB or their coalition
146. *Key person Interviews*, Colombo, November 2024. While this article is based on research done prior to the elections, it is important to note a dramatic change in voting patterns of Colombo, which Kompagna Veediya mirrored. In 2024, the Presidential and parliamentary elections showed landslide victories for the National People's Power. Colombo city shifted from a traditionally UNP base to the left-leaning NPP or Maalimawa, as they are colloquially known. This round of follow-up Key Person Interviews with the same residents in January 2025, confirmed that the reason that they, and the middle aged and younger generations of their families, had shifted loyalty was because they believed that the NPP presented a new breed of politician rather than the 'usual' who have done little to address their demands. However, this largely collective shift also appears to align with the village-like nature of Kompangna Veediya. For example, some of the residents identified a long-term 'friend of the community' who, as a social worker, had gained their trust before she became a politician for the NPP as one of the reasons for the change in voting patterns. Many also noted the corrupt practices and consistent non-delivery of promises of previous governments as another reason for shifting away from the UNP/SJB. However, the residents implied that within their families many of the older generations still voted as 'usual'.
147. Amarasuriya and Spencer, 'The Politics of the Urban Poor', 69.
148. Mangala auntie interview, Colombo, 5 August, 2024.
149. Focus Group Discussions, Colombo, 10 May 2024.
150. Bandara, *Ethnic Politics*, 316.
151. Imtiyaz, 'Easter Sunday Bombings', 4.
152. Piyarathne, 'Constructing Commongrounds', 201.
153. Focus Group Discussions, Colombo, 20 May 2024.
154. Focus Group Discussions, Colombo, 15 May 2024.
155. Imtiyaz, 'Easter Sunday Bombings', 5.
156. Perera and Spencer, 'Beautification'.
157. Focus Group Discussions, Colombo, 8 May 2024.
158. Haniiffa, 'Majoritarian Democracy's Minoritisation Initiatives', 383.

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