

**ETHNIC WAR AND TRADITIONAL STATUS  
IN AN ETHNICALLY MIXED COMMUNITY:  
A STUDY OF PANAMA ON THE EAST COAST OF SRI LANKA<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

This study explores the impact of war on the internal fragmentation of traditional status groups in an ethnically mixed village community in Sri Lanka. The study location is Panampattuwa, situated in Ampara District on the east coast of Sri Lanka. The methodology of the study consists of life histories and memories of the people, together with observations by the researcher made in two phases which cover both the war and post-war periods in the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict. The main finding is that claims of ethnic belonging have started to change. The higher castes tend to identify with the majority community of the country, the Sinhalese, while the lower castes identify with the ethnic minority, the Tamil. This has led to the emergence of a caste-based ethnic identity.

**Background**

Sri Lanka has experienced ethnically based warfare for nearly three decades. Its impact on many spheres of life has been already studied. However, a survey of the literature reveals that existing scholarly works have limited themselves to studying the conflicting situations among the major stakeholders in the war. Although various scholars have examined many different facets of the ethnic war, they have not explored its impact on the internal differences within ethnic communities. Authorities on Sri Lankan culture and politics have pointed to an internal fragmentation of Sri Lankan society along with traditional statuses (e.g. caste) and ascribed values (Kearny 1973; Wilson 1974). Accordingly, Sri Lankan society is characterized by ethnic distinctions *within* its significant minorities (Ryan 2007: 243). The present study departs from all of the above studies by focusing on the impact of the ethnic war on an ethnically mixed village

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<sup>1</sup> A separate paper based on the first round of the research was presented at the 9<sup>th</sup> Sri Lanka Studies conference held at the University of Ruhuna, Matara, Sri Lanka. The author would like to thank the participants in the session for their comments and to acknowledge the assistance provided by Prof.Sumanasiri Wawwage.

community composed of minorities and marginalized groups who have been trapped in the armed conflict.

The location where this study was carried out was the village of Panama in the Panampattuwa Division on the east coast of Ampara District, Eastern Province of Sri Lanka. The lack of scholarly interest in the impact of the war on traditional status groups applies specifically to these communities, since they cut across a major ethnic divide. A major lacuna in the present literature is the tendency to disregard internal differences and identities among both Sinhalese and Tamils, internal differences that have been ignored by the popular media too (Tangarajah 2007: 48). Politically motivated scholarly as well as propaganda literature has portrayed their communities indiscriminately (see Tenuwara 1998). It is as if ethno-nationalists in the Sinhalese and Tamil camps have thought that highlighting any internal differences would damage their political projects, based as these are on ethnic rivalry (see Satischandra 1995). In fact, they have produced discourses portraying the brotherhood of internally differentiated and diverse groups in order to obtain the cooperation of these groups in the struggle to create a mono-ethnic state (Tenuwara *ibid.*, Aloysius 1993). The media, which is dominated by ethnic entrepreneurs engaged in mobilizing ethno-political advantages, have discouraged any attempt to bring such issues into the media for constructive and democratic debate and dialogue in the context of the ethnic war (Tangarajah *ibid.*). Those scholars who have spoken of such internal differences have been labelled traitors to the nationalist cause (Weerasuriya 2002) and have sometimes been threatened. In fact, the ethnic politics of both camps in Sri Lanka has treated studies of the differences and similarities of different ethnic groups as damaging to mono-ethnic nation-building projects.<sup>2</sup> The present study is based on the firm belief that the recognition of internal differences and cross-cutting identities is instrumental in envisioning a better and more humane political system and public policies after the conclusion of the ethnic war in Sri Lanka.

Among the few studies that focus on this aspect, Yuwaraj Tangarajah's can be regarded as a path-breaking and courageous piece of scholarly work in the context of its time (2007). His

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<sup>2</sup> I call the nation-state building project carried out by the Sri Lankan government in and around the state structure 'mono-ethnic nation-building' because all the 'constitution-making exercises' and also substantial and supplementary policies on development and culture can be viewed as an attempt to erase minority identities. The nation-building project being pursued by both moderate democratic elites and militant movements have attempted to Tamilize minorities within their claimed homeland or to eliminate groups that do not respect this project.

important discoveries are the existence of minorities among ethnic Tamils in Sri Lanka and the necessity to develop a way of preserving the particular identity of the Vedda community on the east coast. In addition to these important insights, he also draws attention to the tendency to marginalize and forget the problems faced by smaller groups within the larger parties to the conflict.

The present study differs from Tangarajah's important study. It is concerned with a community that has maternal and paternal relatives in both the conflicting ethnic groups. The historical memories of the community reveal a tendency to treat traditional groups of equivalent social status in other communities as equal, even if they differ in language and religious practices, and to pursue social relations through intermarriage with such groups. Treating each other as relatives and not as ethnic others has been the practice. Hence, the present study should be understood as an attempt to understand the development of a coping mechanism in response to the challenges of the recent ethnic war and to penetrate the ethnic ideologies of traditional status groups in an ethnically mixed community. In particular, it is an attempt to examine the impact of war on the ethnically mixed traditional community in the village of Panama and its impact on traditional status groups within this community.

### **Approaching ethnicity**

Identities are not fixed but change in the course of time. War is instrumental in changing ethnic identities (Ameer 2001), resulting in changes to the time and space of identity groups. Ultimately, it leads to changes in the life worlds of the inhabitants of a particular locality. Following Bourdieu, a life world is to be understood as involving changes in feeling and in the nature of society – how it ought to be a cosmology for present purposes (Jenkins 1992). In this context, an examination of some major approaches to ethnicity is pertinent.

Studies of ethnic identities have recognized different trends in ethnic politics. It has been shown that identity groups strive to keep untouched those aspects of their cultures that they consider inherent and essential for their existence as a group. Those who have studied colonial interventions and the colonial presence have treated these as a force that has contributed to building, strengthening and giving new impetus to ethnic identities. Fox (1985) has brought out the impact of colonialism in relation to Sikhs and Gurkhas in India. Smith (1981) has explored the impact of unequal economic growth and economic uncertainty on the part of the elite on the

development of ethnic consciousness. Sivanandan used this economic argument in his explanation of the example of Sri Lanka (1984: 1-37). Some, in their explanations of ethnically based violence, have emphasized the role of culture. According to this formulation, ethnicity-based violence is a long-term historical phenomenon (Kapferer 1988). Another school that is dissatisfied with the above formulation approaches the problem from a Foucauldian perspective that helps us to understand the ethnic problem as situational and conditional (Feldman 1990). Accordingly, ethnicity is not a precondition for conflict but a definer of conflict, as well as a phenomenon that may develop through a conflict. Further, it has the potential to define the nature of a conflict as ethnic. Accordingly, the definition of ethnicity and its development depend on the dynamics of the activities carried out in the name of ethnicity itself. This approach holds that ethnicity is a historical and material condition and a dynamic process which obtains its meaning from what we call social process (Tangarajah *ibid.*).

Approaching ethnic identity from this point of view allows us to understand the willingness of a particular minority community associated with an assortment of ethnic groups to maintain either a distinction from or a similarity with the others or a particular group as a situational dynamic determined by the material conditions that prevail at a particular juncture in history. Although Sri Lankan ethnic groups are presented as lacking any internal differences, Sri Lankan society is fragmented along the lines of other local identities such as caste and region. So far no study has sufficiently explored the impact of these other local identities and the form of politics that prevail in ethnically divided societies. The experience of the present researcher suggests that, in the case of ethnically mixed communities, some superior caste groups have easy access to majority politics in respect of the allocation of social rewards, while inferior caste groups are fenced off, labelled as ethnic others. For this purpose the elite in ethnically mixed communities assumes the role of the ethnic-political entrepreneur and produces discourses aimed at exploiting opportunities created through the conflict.

## **Methodology**

The criteria for selecting Panama as the study area were first, the popularity of the area for ethnic co-existence since at least the colonial period, and secondly, the close contact of the present researcher with the people of the area. The fieldwork was carried out in two phases: the first phase, during the war between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil

Elam (LTTE); and the second phase, immediately after the government forces eliminated the top leadership of the LTTE. The first phase of the fieldwork was conducted in 2003 over a period of two weeks when the present researcher had an opportunity to be with the people of Panama. This enabled him to listen to the life histories and memories of ethnic co-existence among Tamil, Sinhalese, Veddas and Muslims for generations in the neighbouring districts of Batticaloa and Monaragala and other places in the area. In this phase of the fieldwork a deliberate attempt was made to select cases representing different age groups. The approach adopted for this allowed respondents to speak of their life histories and identities. The same process of data collection was applied in the second phase, which took place in December 2010. There the researcher had the benefit of reading the field notes of around fifty students from the Department of Sociology at the University of Ruhuna and sharing their experiences. Reflections on various cultural events and day-to-day transactions of the area's residents and field observations have been extensively used in the present analysis. It should also be noted that the elderly and some young people who responded in the first phase could not be contacted for various reasons such as migration to other parts of the country for employment. The distinctive characterization of the Panamians has so far been formulated from details provided by people from outside the community. This does not mean that the present researcher is from within the community itself. Rather, it implies that, in the presentation of the analysis, an attempt has been made to bring out the voices of the people of the community in order to understand the changing dynamics of ethno-nationalist politics and their impact on the identities of ethnically mixed communities.

### **Social geography of Panama**

As has already been noted in the introduction, this study was conducted in the Panampattuwa Division of Ampara District, which is situated on the coast of the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka. It was part of Batticaloa District until 1961. It was the political considerations of the ruling elite that led to the creation of a separate district called Ampara in 1962. The recorded history of the area emphasises the harmonious ethnic co-existence and ethnic intermixing of Sinhalese and Tamils.

The existence of aspects of modernity side by side with those of tradition is easily noticeable. However, discussions with the villagers revealed that the present scale of modernity

has been caused by the ethnic war between the government and the LTTE, the Tamil insurgency movement.

There are two major status groups based on the traditional caste hierarchy in the village. The majority of the people in the area comprise the Govi and Wellala castes (Wellala is equivalent to Govi in traditional Sinhalese social practices). This group is regarded as high in status by themselves as well as by the other status groups. Those who identify with the Sinhalese among the high castes said that their forefathers had migrated to this area to avoid the brutality of the British Army's response to the Uva-Wellassa rebellion of the early nineteenth century.

The other group is the Dobi (Rada in Sinhalese). This group forms the great minority of the village community. The settlement areas of the different groups are segregated on the basis of caste. The lower castes reside alone on the coastal belt of Panama. The traditional occupation of this group was washing clothes for the higher castes, who occupy the agricultural lands in the interior of the area. However, in the past they used to work as agricultural labourers, besides engaging in traditional service provision. Presently, most of them also engage in fishing-related activities. Their mother tongue is Tamil. Though illiterate in Sinhala, they can speak it as well.

In the cultural sphere, including marriage, both Govi and Wellala treat each other as equal in the village. However, the Dobi have to go to other Tamil-speaking areas to find brides and grooms if they are not available from within the area of their settlement.

One other social group is present, who have recently migrated from the Kumana area. They too claim that they are the descendants of refugees from the Uva-wellassa rebellion and explain that they originally migrated to Kumana to avoid the brutality of the British colonial army during that rebellion. They have now had to migrate to Panama and settle on small plots of infertile land provided by the government after being forced to leave their traditional settlement at Kumana because of the ethnic war. Even though they used to highlight their Sinhaleanness, they are not accepted as equal in social status by the high-caste Panamians, who treat them as social others, despite their growing ethnic consciousness and attempts to identify with the majority Sinhalese in the rest of the country.

High-caste Panamians treat people who migrated there from distant places in the recent past as equal to them in social status. Once they have settled down, they become members of the higher caste. Some who have migrated to Panama during and after the war have married high-caste Panamian women and settled down in the area. A careful observation of the background of

the families, their family names and villages of origin or places of birth suggests that they actually belonged to lower caste status groups in other parts of the country.

The lingua franca of the area is Tamil, which is spoken as well as a dialect of Sinhalese. In the second phase of the fieldwork, it was observed that young, educated members of the higher castes did not let it be known that they knew Tamil and could communicate in it. One significant observation is worth recording here. The graduate who facilitated the stay in Panama in the second phase of the fieldwork said that he could not speak Tamil. However, on the way to the Okanda temple (a Hindu shrine with a recorded past), he happened to come across a Tamil-speaking maternal relative of his from Nindavur and started speaking with the latter in very fluent Tamil, since his relative was unable to communicate in Sinhalese except for a very few words.

### **Perceiving war**

Members of this community have regarded war as both good and bad in respect of their communal relations. On the positive side of the impact of war on this community, it is stressed that its residents have enjoyed new opportunities for their children in education and employment and new sources of income, improved infrastructural facilities and new social relations with the rest of the country.

On the negative side of the war, the main point that was made was that villagers had to live in constant fear during the conflict between the government and the LTTE. The elderly pointed out that they had fallen under the suspicion of the government forces as well as the LTTE because Panamians are related to Sinhalese as well as Tamils. One elder who had been upset about the impact of the war on his social relations explained the situation as follows: 'It has changed everything in the village. It has changed religious practices as well as cordial relations among the people of different language groups. This is the major damage. It has also resulted in changes to their life-style, identity and relations with others, i.e., Tamils and Sinhalese, as well as inferior caste groups resident in the same locality'.

Nonetheless job opportunities opened up during the war have arisen in the army, police and home guard. The military sector of the employment market has been dominated by the Sinhalese. This has required aspirants for jobs to embrace the dominant culture of the Sinhalese as practised in the rest of the country as an extension of the Colombo-based elite culture. This has in practice

amounted to a forced denial of shared ethnic origins as well as of culture. On the other hand, the LTTE also insisted that Panamians should either identify themselves with Tamils or keep silent if they cannot oppose the government forces. Presently, the older generation in the area faces many difficulties in dealing with their relatives in solely Tamil-speaking areas, as their children have started to become more and more ethnically minded as Sinhalese.

In previous scholarly accounts of Panamians, they have been characterized as a Sinhalese group who speak a dialect influenced by the language and culture of the Tamils. However, it was observed that in the present situation of ethno-national politics no young Panamian would speak this dialect to visitors except with kin and family members. This can be seen as a result of the level of penetration by the dominant Sinhalese ideology and culture into the lives of the Panamians. However, recognition of the difference in dialect has helped to identify the important influence on the Sinhalese life world of the language and culture of the Tamils, who have been the dominant ethnic community in the eastern coastal belt of Sri Lanka for centuries.

### **War, new opportunities and identity**

The role of war in creating ethnic identity has already been documented. For instance, the growing ethnic consciousness of the Muslim religious community in response to the ethnic competition between the Sinhalese and the Tamils has been studied by Sullivan (1999). In fact, war functions as a modernizing force in rural and traditional societies which have hitherto been marginalized by mainstream state development processes. The infrastructural requirements for war involve the connecting of rural and marginalized societies through the development of road networks and transportation facilities. Extending telecommunication and transport facilities not only facilitates the easy movement of troops but also connects these communities with the rest of the country. Members of the older generation in Panama still recall the difficulties they had before the war in taking a patient to the hospital or going to a public office for some essential service such as obtaining a licence.

The villagers pointed out that infrastructural development has taken off in the growing context of the war between the government and the LTTE. The government army had been much concerned with the development of roads etc., which the LTTE had not cared about, as its strategy had involved ambush, as is typical of a guerrilla movement. The government also set up camps to block the penetration of the area by the rival forces of the LTTE. The army and the

police Special Task Force started building camps in and around Panama in the late 1980s, leading to the development of the road network, transportation facilities, the electricity supply to the village and mass consumption entertainment media. Connecting the village through bus services from Colombo and Matara to Panama has brought about enormous changes in society, even though its main objective was to enhance transport facilities for the troops.

Another impact of the war-related infrastructural requirements has been the system of proportional representation introduced under the second republican constitution. The preferential voting system under this program compelled the Sinhalese politicians to woo the previously neglected Panamians under the new rules of the power game. The strategic requirements of the war, coupled with these politics, have had a significant impact on Panamian identity, as will be discussed later in this study. As already noted, the war has opened up new opportunities for the people of the area, such as employment and access to the public sphere of news media. Specifically, access to news media has also helped the ethnically minded majority of the people to reflect on their problems and village affairs generally. This has been instrumental in taking the identity issue of Panamians in a new direction because of the war and ethnic competition.

As a result of the news media, education also flourished because of wartime priorities. The Tamil-medium school collapsed during the war, but the Sinhala-medium school has continued. New teaching staff have been attached to the schools, and the pass rate of students for the General Certificate of Education has improved. Some have entered university and graduated, resulting in significant changes to their life worlds. Before the war, a significant number of students who now identify as Sinhalese also attended the Tamil-medium school. However, the war has resulted in a decrease in the quality of education in the Tamil-medium school, resulting in almost all the Wellala children now usually attending the Sinhala-medium school. The students who attend the Tamil-medium school are normally lower-caste Dhobi children. The only exception to this segregation is that the chief incumbent of the Buddhist temple accommodates a Tamil-medium pre-school on his temple premises. However, even in the pre-school caste segregation is practised, as those who attend the Tamil-medium pre-school are the Dhobi children.

### **Panamians on their origins**

Panamians are regarded as the descendants of the Uva-wellassa rebels who were later influenced by the Tamil language and culture. The present generation of Panamians are conscious of the historical status of the area as one of human settlement. Discussions with the young people reveal that the reason they remember the historicity of the residents and their Sinhalaness as high-caste educated youth is to produce discourses for the Panamians as well as the people in the rest of the country for easy assimilation into the 'the majority is right' politics practised by the ruling elite in Colombo. They only accept that the area has been one of settlement for different peoples throughout this history when they are asked about their maternal and paternal kin ties with high-caste Tamils. There is a high degree of consciousness of the historical legacies of their forefathers among the educated youth in the community, that is, those who have passed public examinations such as the GCE, university degrees or other higher technical examinations. They are normally employed as public servants in the area, as well as in other parts of the country. They work as schoolteachers, postmasters, soldiers, police officers, clerks in public offices, etc. One such officer who works in a divisional secretariat in Monaragala District, drawing evidence from folklore, pointed out that it was in Panama that the very progenitor of the Sinhalese, Prince Vijaya, landed in Sri Lanka. They also point to sources such as Ptolemy's map and the canonical Pali text *Rasavahini* in their attempts to prove the historicity of the area.

Educated people are not ready to reduce their history to the Uva-wellassa rebellion because it does not legitimize the Sinhalization discourse of the higher castes or erase the mixed ethnic identity of Panamians. One variant of this discourse connects Panama with 'King Duttha Gamini Abhaya'. According to the story, the name of the village comes from the fact that this was the place where 'King Duttha Gamini Abhaya' rested cross-legged ('Pa Nama gena hiti tena panama vuva'). This popular myth depicts him as the very first Sinhala king to get rid of the enemy Tamil invader called 'Elara' and to secure the nation and Buddhism from Tamil and Hindu attacks. It was thus he who united the country by eliminating the Tamil invaders from South India for the first time.

A change was evident in the responses received from the young people regarding their social histories in the two phases of the fieldwork. Since the ethnic war the Panamians' need to stress their high-caste Sinhalaness is very great. The extreme representation of Sinhalaness was

less apparent in the first phase of the fieldwork. In the second phase, it was easily observable that young people are inclined to more extreme discourses that uphold the political discourse of Sinhala superiority in the country. This does not imply that there was no tendency to produce discourses identifying the inhabitants of Panama with other Sinhalese during the first phase of the fieldwork. Rather, the representations of educated young people have become stronger, their discourses having greater political vigour.

This observation suggests a crisis in identity politics between the older and younger generations. The generational gap in identity has resulted from the two generations' different experiences with different communities. The older generation of Panamians have good memories of ethnic intermixing with Tamils. Most of the young people only have war-time experiences and tend to represent the pure Sinhaleanness of the higher castes in the village. This gap was observed through the conflicting ideas exchanged by the older and younger generations in their responses to the questions raised by the researcher. The older generation tends to resist the attempt to present Panamians as pure Sinhalese. The single most significant incident that can be presented in this regard is a conflict over identity that erupted between a son and his elderly father. The son, an unemployed graduate of the University of Ruhuna, was narrating his forefathers' heroic qualities in an attempt to portray the Panamians as descendants of the Uva-Wellassa rebels who found refuge in the remote jungle area of Panama. He did not reveal anything of the connections of his family with the Tamil and Vedda communities. The father became annoyed at his son's attempt to identify the family with the Sinhalese alone and then started recollecting his own memories of his ancestry. According to him, on his paternal side he was not originally descended from either the Sinhalese or the Tamils. His ancestor had been a Vedda who had married a Sinhala woman whose family happened to take refuge in the Panama area during the Uva-Wellassa rebellion. The practice of treating the Vedda as equal in social status to the Govi caste has already been highlighted (Ryan 2007, 246). According to the father's account, this marriage (or relationship<sup>3</sup>) produced five sons and one daughter. All the sons married into the Tamil community in Batticaloa, who are of the Samana *jati* (that is, equal in status, i.e. Wellala or Govi). It was the custom that one could marry people of equal social status. Their marriage patterns, places of worship, customs and manners suggest that, except for caste, the Panamians

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<sup>3</sup> He preferred to use the term 'relationship' rather than 'marriage' for sexual intercourse between a man and a woman.

had never cared about dialect, language or religion, i.e., whether people were Buddhist or Hindu. This elderly father remembered that his own grandmother had been a Tamil, that his aunts had married Tamils and that one of his brothers married a Tamil woman from Trincomalee. In fact, the son involved in this dispute was a student of the present researcher, and the next morning he continued to explain the force of ethnic consciousness upon their lives. He felt that he had no other option than to identify with the Sinhalese, as his future prospects depended on his embracing the culture of the majority.

Identifying Panamians as descendants of those who fled the Uva-Wellassa rebellion is a very familiar and easy way to stake a claim in the majority ethnic politics of the country. However, whenever people were asked for the life histories of their families, they were ready to accept their mixing with the Tamils. Thus the inability to conceal the reality behind the intermixing has lasted a long time. On such occasions, people start digging into the history back beyond the Uva-Wellassa rebellion and accept their relationship with the other communities. The Buddhist monk at the Buddhist temple in Panama was of the opinion that labelling Panamians as the descendants of those who fled the Uva-Wellassa rebellion alone is inaccurate and unacceptable. There has indeed been a mixture of many communities who happened to come to Panama for many reasons. The brutality of the British in dealing with the rebellion was just one reason for the Sinhalese to migrate to this safe haven in the lesser known Panama area. Although historical remains in the area substantiate the existence of a considerable number of Buddhist Sinhalese in Panama from ancient times, the Buddhist monk agreed that the historical route to the sacred site of Kataragama that connects Tamil Hindus of the north and the east has resulted in contacts with the latter. In former times, it was customary to find brides as well as grooms from among pilgrims who had come to the area. He further pointed out that he himself has maternal as well as paternal Tamil relatives. Another discourse is that the Panamians took to marrying Tamil women because there was a scarcity of women among the refugees from the rebellion. No lineage of any family in Panama can substantiate this argument regarding the scarcity of women. Even today, the tradition of marrying cousins has remained effective from former times to the present and has resulted in linking neighbouring Tamil communities as well as the Sinhalese.

The irony of this argument is that the life history of this informant itself suggests generations of mixing with Tamils. He was an ex-public servant. His mother had passed away

leaving him and his sister behind. Soon, his father married a sister of his former wife of Tamil origin. However, the children of the earlier marriage were not treated well by their stepmother. The informant decided to leave home and was able to obtain a government job through a maternal uncle. When he was eighteen years of age, he visited his mother's brother. He was received warmly and asked whether he had come to leave or stay, actually a question as to whether he was willing to marry his cousin. He told his uncle that he did not intend to go, which implied he would marry her. He only had daughters, who all married Tamils from Nindavur. This suggests that the argument about taking female partners from Tamils because of the scarcity of women can be interpreted as a justification of the present-day attempt to claim the pristine Sinhaleanness of the Panamians as part of the intruding political ideology of the Sinhalese Buddhist state. What informants tend to think is that ethnicity is inherited from the father's side, not from both the father and mother. One elderly father pointed out that the process of Sinhalization in this mixed ethnic community has received extra impetus under the influence of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People Liberation Front)<sup>4</sup>.

During the second phase of the fieldwork the researcher met two graduates who volunteered to reveal their family histories, which made evident the impact of the majoritarian ethno-nationalist politics practised by the present regime in changing their life worlds. They were at pains to accept their maternal and paternal ties with Tamils as well as Veddas, as explained by their elders. Their claim of descent from the Uva-Wellassa rebels is nonetheless beneficial to them in the present political situation in the country. The denial of blood relations with the Tamils paves the way for easy access to social rewards allocated by the government. In addition, they drew attention to the impact of legal and cultural practices in changing the identity of certain groups like the Panamians during ethno-nationalist political conflicts. They pointed out the difficulties they had encountered in the practice of naming people in Panama and used their father's names instead of family names, as practised in other Sinhalese areas. They explained that, because of this situation in the sphere of custom and culture, the new generation is facing many problems. One of them explained, 'Our people have been influenced for generations by Dravidian culture as practised in the surrounding areas. So, it has been the practice to give the

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<sup>4</sup> This party claims to be a Marx-Leninist radical party in Sri Lanka, though there are aspects that suggest it is rather an ethnic-based party.

father's name as the family name and a new personal name.'<sup>5</sup> The government as well as Sinhalese in the other parts of the country are therefore reluctant to accept them as equals, even though they have been willing to assimilate into the Sinhalese community.

Accordingly they have produced a new argument for their difference from other Sinhalese. This has to do with the shrewd ethno-nationalist politics of the Tamil officers in the area. It was explained that many elders have at least one Tamil name before their surname. Tamil officers who are conscious of ethno-national politics wanted the Panamians to be portrayed as Tamils by giving them Tamil names.<sup>6</sup> The point of this argument is that there are many young and middle-aged people between 18 and 45 who either have an entirely Tamil name or a partly Tamil name. The other important observation is the different levels of awareness of the Uva-wellassa origin story among the less educated in Panama, whether they are young or elderly. It is important to compare the differences in the two phases of the fieldwork. It was noted in the first phase that educated young people were aware of the impact of the Uva-Wellassa rebellion on the Panamian heritage and blood link with the Sinhalese while acknowledging their connections with the Tamils in the Eastern Province. A significant departure of attitude in respect of this acknowledgement emerged in the second phase of the fieldwork. Some people in Panama, at least in their communications with outsiders, now tended to ignore blood relations with Tamils, and there was a growing tendency to conceal cultural artefacts connected with Tamils while embracing the mainstream Sinhala Buddhist culture.<sup>7</sup>

It is also important to examine the relations that Panamians maintain with the people of Kumana, who have recently migrated into the area. Their lands have been taken into the Kumana Wild Life Sanctuary on the pretext of the government's security concerns. They have been provided instead with a small plot of land near the sea in Panama and are now both spatially and culturally segregated from other Panamians. The high-caste Panamians regard them as of inferior

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<sup>5</sup> One elder explain the tradition of naming. The permanent name is given in a time of crisis. When a child falls ill, a betel leaf is taken and a certain name of a deceased person mentioned. In the old days, if the child were cured, this name was given to it.

<sup>6</sup> This argument is championed by both Sinhala and Tamil elites in their ethno-political power struggle. However, in the case of Panama, the present fieldwork suggests that this cannot be substantiated.

<sup>7</sup> See section on religion in this article.

social status and unsuitable to marry, as they belong to the Padhu caste group<sup>8</sup> in the Sinhalese community. According to some elderly people of the area, they too had migrated to escape British rule during the Uva-Wellassa rebellion and settled in separate places, keeping their distance from the superior caste groups. They were a service group to the Govi in those days, and after settling in Kumana, they earned their living through cultivation as well as collecting and selling fruit and honey from the abundant jungle resources. The war and resultant government policy have contributed to the dispersal of this community. Discussion with them in the initial phase of the fieldwork indicated that they had a certain degree of pride: they regarded themselves as superior because they had not mixed with Tamils. However, in the second phase of the fieldwork, less pride and a growing interaction with the Tamils, who are considered low-caste Panamians, were observed. The two groups cooperate with each other in fishing-related activities, and some members of the two castes had married. One Kumana youth who married a low-caste Panama woman narrated his experiences as follows: ‘Our elders say that we too are descendants of those who had been involved in the Uva-wellassa rebellion. We are not mixed with the Tamils. However, those high-caste Panamians do not treat us equally. It is only the Dobiwho treat us as equals. We do not have any problems with these people.’ Caste relations among the people of Kumana and the high- and low-caste Panamians suggest the force of historical memories of living close together.

### **Religious Practices**

The life memories of the older generation in Panama revealed a period of the co-existence of Buddhism and Hinduism. Formerly there was no Buddhist clergyman to perform the rituals related to events such as death and the commemoration of the deceased. Some elders were said to perform these rituals before the 1950s. However, with the passage of time and a little improvement, a Buddhist temple was opened, which resulted in a gradual formalization of these rituals. The Sinhalese in Panama, i.e. high-caste Panamians, identify themselves as Buddhists, and the Tamils, i.e. low-caste Panamians, identify themselves as Hindus. The Tamils used to perform both types of religious rites at funerals. The performance of Buddhist rites precedes that of the Hindu rites.

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<sup>8</sup> This caste group has traditionally been treated as beggars and labourers.

However, the most important religious activity in the area is the annual ritual performance for the Goddess Pattini. This involves a folk play lasting two weeks called *An Keliya*, and participation is limited to high-caste men. Women and lower-caste Hindus are allowed to visit the site only up to certain boundary. Furthermore, the Panamians have a claim to the Okanda Hindu temple, which they consider to be a possession of their village. However, it became the property of the Tamils after one of their relatives married a Tamil woman. During the war, the right to have a street procession in the annual ceremony was denied to the Panamians, but after the war they won back the right to do so through the involvement of the chief incumbent of the Buddhist temple. The Buddhist monk is a relative of the present custodian of the Okanda Hindu temple, and his father had supported the custodian's relatives in winning the election when Panama was part of Batticaloa District. In fact, the Buddha, who remains at the top of the pantheon of gods, the cult of Pattini and the god Skanda Kumar have the most respectable places in the religious life of the Panamians.

One significant observation that could be made in the second round of the research is that Buddhist practices have penetrated into the religious life of the higher castes and removed the Tamil heritage in respect of its contribution to the development of Buddhist culture there. In the first round of the research, it was observed that the monastery (where the Buddhist monk resides) had a placard stating that it had been built by the Tangamma Upasika Matawa, a name that indicates the ethnically mixed nature of the initiator of the building. But, during the second phase of fieldwork it was noticed that it was missing, and when the researcher inquired about its disappearance, he was informed that it had been removed because the building was being renovated.

### **Concluding observations**

The war and the infrastructural facilities that go hand in hand with it have made a considerable impact on the process of changing the identity of this ethnically mixed community. The attempts to identify with Sinhalese culture as a practice of the higher castes must be understood as a calculated attempt by educated young people to cope in a context of the intrusion of an ethnicity-based political regime. The emerging pattern of social interaction among status groups in the study area suggests a process of the Sinhalization of ethnically mixed high-caste Panamians and a limiting of the process of Tamilization among the lower castes in Panama. There is also a

tendency to assimilate the Kumana community into the low-caste Tamil group, which facilitates the caste-wise integration of the people of Kumana and their treatment as inferior by the high-caste Panamians. Discussions with informants in Panama nonetheless revealed that the Veddas and the Govi among the Sinhalese and the Wellala among the Tamils are of equal social status.

The accounts given by informants revealed this particular community as comprising a mixture of Sinhalese, Tamil and Vedda through both kin ties and culture. In the old days before there was no ethnic conflict or war, mixed ethnic origins never mattered in the daily transactions with the rest of the people. This has only become a problem in the context of ethnic politics. This allows us to conclude that ethnicity as an aspect of political conflict in the context of Panama became an important issue only after the political independence of Sri Lanka. Politically determined district boundaries as well as electoral politics have contributed to the growing ethnic consciousness among Panamians.

The elite in ethnic communities, i.e. high-caste, educated people in the context of Panama, have produced discourses for the members of the community and others to win acceptance by the majority ethnic community, depending on the locality and power of the conflicting parties. This production of discourses is, however, not easy, being extremely painful to relatives in the other ethnic communities, with whom those who produce these discourses are mixed in many respects. Discourses of this kind revolve around historical legacies and links with the majority community. The practical reasons for developing such narratives could be viewed as creating a path to easy assimilation with the dominant ethnic community in the country.

In other words, ethnicity itself is a political construct that has been invented by ethno-political entrepreneurs and that continues to make and remake itself in their struggle for existence and power. In times of conflict between major ethnic groups, the minorities who have mixed with the conflicting parties are compelled to identify with the dominant ethnic groups in the conflict. In societies which have caste-based status groups based on ascribed values, the higher castes are normally the first to be accommodated into the dominant ethnic group, while the lower status groups tend to be labelled as the ethnic other. Also, as there are still traditional status-based differences within the dominant ethnic group, the minorities within this group might become assimilated to the politically defined other ethnic group. The losers in the ethnic conflict or those ethnic groups that have the same or similar caste statuses normally become marginalized lower castes. In fact, the advanced positions of the higher castes in the sphere of ownership, as

well as cultural activities within the ethnically mixed community in Panama, has eased the process of identifying with the dominant ethnic community in accessing political spoils in Sri Lanka.

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