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Religious Nationalism, Strategic Detachment and the Politics of Vernacular Humanitarianism in Post-War Sri Lanka

Abstract: In this article, I am concerned with the ways different ethnic and religious groups in contemporary Sri Lanka use rhetorics of humanitarianism. Exploring a range of examples drawn from an inner city community, humanitarian foundations and national government, I show how different actors deploy cosmopolitan and nationalist humanitarian rhetorics to obfuscate claims of war crimes and communal favouritism on the one side, and to encourage allegiance to a national Sri Lankan identity on the other side. I introduce a concept of strategic detachment to help illuminate the ways minority groups in particular seek to cultivate distance from their contested ethnic and religious identities and in so doing re-signify their humanitarian practices as self-consciously non-partisan.

Keywords: charity, humanitarianism, nationalism, philanthropy, Sri Lanka

In May 2009, Sri Lanka's thirty-year conflict came to a bloody end when government forces contained the last remnants of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in a 'no fire zone' designated for fleeing civilians in the island's far north-east. The government's push into the area during the final months of the civil war resulted in thousands of civilian injuries and deaths, followed by mass internment in camps from which international observers had been banned (Weiss 2012). As political scientist David Keen has described, the strategy was 'presented by . . . [government] . . . as a "humanitarian operation" designed to free those "held hostage" by the LTTE rebels' (2014: 5). Portraying the military operation as a 'humanitarian mission' at least partly helped to deflect condemnation of the action by the international community, and also obscured the beginnings of a post-war process of government land-grabbing from displaced Tamil and Muslim communities across the north-east.

Yet even as the government was voicing commitments to universal humanitarian principles as a function of its own war strategy and post-war vision, it was denying the same in the field of conflict and trauma recovery. The defence ministry, which had recently taken over regulatory functions of the NGO sector, closed a number of programmes established by international agencies that offered psychosocial counselling to war-affected people. Supported by some sections of the local psychiatric community, the ministry justified its action by announcing that due to 'cultural differences' post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was not a problem in Sri Lanka – PTSD was a culture-bound syndrome found only in 'the West' (Jayatunge 2012). Denying the

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existence of a universal condition for and experience of mental health, government officials advocated for the establishment of support services developed from vernacular traditions, including Ayurveda and Buddhism.

Such use of a rhetoric of 'universal' humanitarianism to justify military intervention is not unique to Sri Lanka. As commentators noted at the time, UK and US governments had adopted a similar strategy for their doctrine of 'humanitarian intervention' around the world during the 1990s and 2000s, including in Rwanda, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq. Likewise, many governments around the world have appealed to vernacular 'culture' and 'tradition' as a means of turning down offers of humanitarian intervention when expedient to do so, while also refusing demands to recognise or to honour the existence of 'universal' human rights that often accompanies humanitarian action. In Sri Lanka, however, appeals to 'universal' and 'vernacular' humanitarian traditions became, over the decade following the war, a central part of how socially minded actors, from national companies to private citizens, framed the various kinds of charitable and philanthropic assistance they gave.

From 2009 onwards, national debate became increasingly framed in terms of two competing visions for the Sri Lankan 'post war' – a 'liberal-cosmopolitan', post-ethnic future on the one hand, and a 'vernacular', ethno-nationalist Sinhala Buddhist future on the other hand. Across political, civil and communal life, issues as seemingly unconnected as the conduct of scientific and medical research, the regulation of environmental pollutants, and the giving and receiving of humanitarian aid became sites of struggles between nationalists and liberal-cosmopolitans (Gajaweera 2015; Sariola and Simpson 2019; Silva 2015; Widger 2021). As I describe below, it was members of Sri Lanka's minority ethnic and religious communities, those at greatest risk in the post-war environment, who most strongly identified with liberal-cosmopolitan principles underpinning the ethos of universal humanitarianism, including the construction of autonomous persons rooted in a modern capitalist economy that stood in contrast to other forms of association and mutuality. Meanwhile, members of the majority Sinhala Buddhist community identified with an ethno-religious humanitarianism drawn from their own interpretations of vernacular practice. My research participants from minority communities often explicitly acknowledged their identification with liberal-cosmopolitan humanitarianism was a practical effort to evade or escape intimidation or violence by the majority community, which in turn was pursuing nationalist aims. Seeking to capture this, I refer to the actions of minority groups as *strategic detachment*, by which I mean an effort to downplay or remove any relationship between the mutual and charitable help they gave, their ethnic and religious identity, and the identity of those they helped. In contrast, the privilege of majority Sinhala Buddhist humanitarians meant they rarely had reason to question even the existence of that relationship, let alone downplay or remove it.

Along with other contributors to this special issue, I thus distinguish between a humanitarianism with roots in modern-universalist concepts of the moral individual, and 'vernacular' humanitarianisms that point to how the historic variability of persons, morality and ethics give rise to different humanitarian traditions (Brković 2014, 2016a, 2016b, 2017a, 2017b; Fechter and Schwittay 2019; Muehlebach 2007). For example, Erica Bornstein (2012) highlighted what she called the 'relational human-

itarianism' of Indian philanthropists involved in poverty relief work in communities with which they had longstanding connections. Katerina Rozakou (2012) showed how Greek volunteers greeted refugee arrivals as 'worthy guests', a relational designation that encompassed refugees within the sphere of hospitality. For Erica Weiss (2015), Jewish Israeli sympathisers with the Palestinian cause derived their political commitment from empathic understanding. What these approaches share is an understanding of humanitarianism that takes its point of departure local conceptions of the person that vernacular humanitarianisms operationalise. As Čarna Brković has argued, 'vernacular forms of humanitarianism are embedded into very particular local frameworks of morality and sociality. Vernacular humanitarianism cannot be fully understood if we do not take into account local ideas on humanness, personhood, and how one ought to behave towards others' (2017b).

In this article, I seek to extend those perspectives in two ways. The first is to show how the 'universal' and 'vernacular' are not simply conceptual or ethnographic categories but political categories that *do* things in the worlds that anthropologists study. In Sri Lanka, I argue, this politics is evident in the emergence of cosmopolitan and nationalist humanitarianisms. Claims to a unique 'vernacular' of Sinhala Buddhist humanitarianism could work to legitimise quite brazen efforts towards, or defend against claims of, interventions that would seek to favour one ethnic or religious community over another. Meanwhile, claims to a 'post-ethnic' or cosmopolitan humanitarianism could help actors to evade accusations of communal favouritism and separatist agendas. My own adoption of that language – for example, referring to charitable and philanthropic practices as 'humanitarian' – is itself an example of how the world and its words that I have recorded in Sri Lanka become part of the ethnographic story and anthropological contribution I wish to make, and not without problems. As I mentioned above, for both minority and majority groups, adoption of the humanitarian label reinforced assumptions about the identity and 'rightful' belonging of different ethnic and religious communities in post-war Sri Lanka. Thus, my second contribution is to show how, as an extension of this, long-run debates in anthropology on what Jock Stirrat and Heiko Henkel (1997) have called the 'problem of reciprocity in the development world' – the Maussian tension between 'interested' and 'disinterested' action – have in this context been displaced by a tension between the vernacular (nationalist) and the universal (cosmopolitan). In Sri Lanka, identifying as a 'humanitarian' in the most general sense of the term was to deny any special ethnic or religious allegiance. However, identifying as a humanitarian with a prefix, for example a 'Buddhist humanitarian', was to align with a specific identity and ideology.

Research for the article was conducted in 2012, three years after the end of the civil war. During that time, ethno-religious relations in Sri Lanka had appreciably worsened, with Sinhala Buddhist nationalism on the ascent, hopes of Tamil nationalism completely crushed and the Muslim community enduring the brunt of post-war reorientations of religious identity and citizenship (Imtiyaz 2020). I report findings from fieldwork carried out in Waseer Watte, a small administrative sub-division comprised of Muslims and Buddhists in north Colombo, Sri Lanka's capital city, as well as national companies and foundations owned or run by Muslims, Buddhists, Tamil Hindus and Sinhala Christians, with headquarters across the city. Waseer Watte, pop-

ulation around 3,000, was comprised of public flats and the remnants of illegal housing that had previously characterised the area. I worked in Waseer over a twelve-month period, during which I conducted a household census, carried out interviews with dozens of residents and participated in local charity events. My research with companies and foundations took place over two years and involved interviews with chairpersons, directors and managers, as well as reviews of annual reports and other documentation.

The article begins in Waseer Watte and the level of everyday articulations of humanitarian action among Muslims and Buddhists. I develop a relational model of humanitarian practice and show how residents deployed humanitarian rhetoric as a means of distancing gifting practices rooted in everyday sociality from their own ethnic and religious identity and community. By showing what distinguished their everyday humanitarianism from other kinds of mutual and religious 'help' was an insistence on greater degrees of disinterestedness, distance and detachment between themselves and receivers, I illuminate the strategic importance of claiming humanitarian motives for one's gifts *vis-à-vis* other possible motives. I then turn to the world of companies and foundations and follow examples of where Muslims, Hindus, Catholics and Buddhists had also claimed humanitarian status for their activities. I identify similar key principles, patterns and processes to those I tracked in Waseer Watte. However, what in the community was rendered subtle by its articulation in and through the realities of everyday life was broadcast in starker terms by humanitarians operating in full public view. There, the differences in how majority and minority humanitarians could express and deliver humanitarian sentiments and interventions were especially apparent.

Relational Spheres of Community Humanitarianism: An Ethnographic Sketch

I begin with a descriptive tour of giving and taking in Waseer Watte as a means of establishing the cardinal points of the everyday ethics of charitable and humanitarian 'help' (Tamil: *utavi*; Sinhala: *udav*[1]) in the community. Reflecting the wider north Colombo area, Waseer Watte (a pseudonym) was primarily Muslim, with around 60 per cent registering in the latest census as either 'Sri Lankan Moor' or 'Malay Muslim'. The remainder were Sinhala Buddhist, with small numbers of Roman Catholics, Evangelical Christians and Hindus. While I do not wish to suggest the patterns of humanitarian assistance I recorded within and between these groups amount to a wider 'Sri Lankan' cultural schema, I do argue they indicate recurring features of an ethical landscape of humanitarian action found in other spaces and levels of society, including, as we shall see, national companies, foundations and government.

Everyone I spoke with in Waseer Watte agreed that help began and ended at home. Giving within the sphere of kin relationships emerged from early childhood experiences and shaped the moral universe of adult charity. Kin relationships came not only with an obligation of mutual 'help' (Tamil: *utavi*; Sinhala: *udav*) that would be given and received across a lifetime, but defined relationships as kinship as such – regular mutual giving was a key constituting practice and marker of relationalities in the watte.

A Muslim resident, Mahood, aged 45, was typical when he told me how growing up in a household committed to regular charitable practice had had a lasting influence on his own practice. 'When I was young, our mother took care of us [Mahood and his three siblings]. She taught us that we should always try to help others, even if we don't have much to give ourselves.' Like others in the watte, however, Mahood had also learnt that he should prioritise kin – 'she . . . taught us that we should help our relatives first', he explained.

Giving within the sphere of kinship amounted to an ecology of informal social protection that provided insurance against unanticipated economic and health shocks. As Harris has argued, 'the best way for . . . [the poor] . . . to provide for their inevitable rainy days . . . [is] . . . to be generous' (2006: 285, cited in Hebo 2013: 16). Mangalika, a 52-year-old Sinhala Buddhist resident, and her two married daughters Chandani, 37, and Sudarshani, 30, shared similar ideas. For them, government welfare payments and assistance received from local charities were both less reliable and less valuable, materially as well as socially and emotionally, than the kinds of help they provided to each other. This they understood primarily in terms of mutuality – a belief that mother and daughters shared the same problems, faced the same hardships and contained within them an 'obligation' (Sinhala: *yuthakama*) to help the other – and not just, it must be stressed, when they lacked the ability to help themselves, but instead as a routine, everyday concern.

My Waseer interlocutors employed the rhetoric of kinship when describing unremarkable, everyday forms of familial help – when there was a certain inevitability that kin relationships would encompass mutual assistance. However, they drew from idioms of ethnic and religious community when giving took place at greater degrees of relational distance, which is to say giving within the context of community relationships that people considered *evitable*,[2] regardless of any potential claim to kinship. Among low-income Muslim residents, for example, everyday kinds of charitable help, often taking the form of small cash donations amounting to no more than a few dozen rupees to relatives and neighbours, offered a pathway to joining the wider (imagined) community of 'middle class Muslim givers' (Osella and Widger 2018). When framed as gifts of *zakat*, the spirit, if not the letter,[3] of Islamic orthopraxy allowed the Muslim poor an opportunity to express solidarity with their fellow-poor *and* to position their own charitability as an expression of personal moral betterment and privilege on the same level as their more financially secure brothers (Osella and Widger 2018). Put another way, the charity of the poor affirmed claims of kinship as well as claims of Muslim belonging.

For Buddhists like Mangalika, Chandani and Sudarshani, whom I introduced above, the mutual 'help' they exchanged among themselves stood in contrast to what they gave in a Buddhist idiom, which they called *dāna* (gift). All three women gave food to monks at the local Buddhist temple at least once a month and to orphanages and elders homes less frequently. They also gave blood whenever a donation drive was organised in Maradana and, having heard about the opportunity in the media, Mangalika told me about an aspiration to donate her body on death. Citing Buddhist teachings, she recognised *dāna upa pāramitā*, the giving of body parts, and *dāna paramaththa pāramitā*, the sacrifice of the body itself, as the most meritorious forms of

dāna available to her (cf. Simpson 2009, 2017). These explicitly Buddhist gift practices differed from help practices by how the women assumed the former was motivated by a selfless ethic and as such would accumulate merits, while the latter was motivated by a degree of mutual interest and so would not.

The third sphere of giving took place at the greatest distance between givers and receivers – when people assumed the bonds of kinship and community either were not present, or found it necessary to deny their existence. In Waseer Watte, a claim of the absence of kinship enabled residents to avoid relationships of mutual help, usually because they stood to gain little from the connection. Such claims also allowed help to passage across community boundaries, by voiding assumptions of mutuality and spiritual common cause. In those cases, a rhetoric of kinship and community transformed into a rhetoric of 'humanity' (Tamil: *maṉitanēyam*; Sinhala: *manuṣyatvaya*). A Muslim resident, Saleem, aged 47, explained her reasons for helping others when asked. In her account, she moved through a series of rationales from the religious to the strategic to the empathic. 'I don't give for blessings, that's taken for granted [that I'll receive God's blessings]. But it could happen to you one day, so I like to help . . . It's human [Tamil: *maṉitaṉ*] to give.'

When I asked people in Waseer what they meant by 'it's human to give', they usually told me that giving was simply something that we all, as people who share a common humanity, are inspired to do. As human beings we think and feel alike, we can imagine the sufferings and hardships of others, we can imagine ourselves in similar situations, and this motivates us to do what we can to help others in need. Again, Muslims and Buddhists understood such claims of common humanity differently. Like their counterparts across Sri Lanka more widely, my Muslim interlocutors were conscious of Buddhist complaints that the rules attached to Islamic charity excluded non-Muslims from receiving help (Osella 2017). Although this was a charge with little basis in reality (Buddhists, like many Muslims, might be excluded from *zakat* but not *sadaqah*), the growing animosities shown by Buddhists towards Muslims was enough for many of my Muslim interlocutors to take such matters seriously. To that end, referencing the obligations that arose from humanity released givers and receivers from identifications and obligations of community or kinship that risked reprisals.

The three spheres of giving as I have outlined them, from kinship to the humanitarian, turned on and reinforced notions of social attachment and detachment across the watte. My interlocutors imagined a moral community made up of concentric spheres of diminishing mutuality and debt, starting from persons and households in close association, threading through neighbourly and religious communities, and ending with an anonymous 'humanity'. If, as Anne-Meike Fechter (2019) has argued, a concern of citizens involved in aid and humanitarianism is the creation of proximity and 'connection' across national and local borders, in Waseer Watte there was a contrasting concern to create disconnection and distance – disinterested detachment, in other words. Obligations of kinship and community created flashpoints of tension and possible violence (the unreciprocated offer of help between friends and neighbours; accusations levelled against Muslim *zakat* and Buddhist *dāna* of communal favouritism); obligations of humanity created anonymity and hence space for peace.

Re-signification through Strategic Detachment

The ability to deploy humanitarian claims to re-signify gifts from the religious to the secular, and from the realm of the vernacular and political to the universal and apolitical, has been noted in other post-war contexts where communal identities remain deeply contested. Across the former Yugoslav states, for instance, Čarna Brković (2016a) has shown how appeals to recipients' inner 'humanness' helped to construct Serbs and non-Serbs alike as comprising an apolitical 'core' wrapped in other identity markers which could, if so wished, be removed. By appealing to a range of qualities that everyone agreed that all good, moral and caring people shared, regardless of ethnicity and religion, political risks of association with one community or another could be avoided. More broadly, Torsten Kolind (2008) noted how Bosnian Muslims sought to compartmentalise their national and religious identities by stressing their adherence to forms of worship that his interlocutors considered in keeping with the national character. Kolind argued how being a Muslim 'was about being a decent human being, behaving properly, taking care of one's family and fellow man and so on'. Demonstrations of knowledge of 'traditional' or transnational Islam were less important than sticking 'to what they regarded as the typical Bosnian way of practising religion' (2008: 229). Similarly, the experiences of Muslims in South and South-East Asian countries where Muslims comprise a minority have been similar to those in the Balkan states. Across Myanmar, Jammu-Kashmir, India, Thailand, as well as Sri Lanka, Muslims have debated among themselves the expediency of avoiding overt expressions of Islamic faith, including styles of worship and dress, and of ways of aligning national identities with belonging in the global *ummah* (McGilvray 2011; Schissler et al 2017; Smith 2009). In Sri Lanka, Muslim businesses responded to Buddhist efforts to ban the production and sale of *halal* goods in the island by highlighting the export value of Sri Lankan *halal* products to the national economy (Haniffa 2017).

Thus what I have termed relational spheres did not terminate in a non-relational space, but a form of relationality marked by what might be called 'studied detachment' (Candea et al 2015). I argue that reconceptualising efforts towards 'disinterestedness' through secularising and depoliticising efforts as 'detachment' opens space for reconsidering of how ideologies of humanitarian 'purity' – for example, tensions between 'interested' and 'disinterested' giving – themselves emerge from, and speak to, very specific relational understandings. In *The powers of distance: cosmopolitanism and the cultivation of detachment*, Amanda Anderson (2001) explores the emergence of 'cultivated detachment' as an aspect of Victorian scientific, philosophical and aesthetic cosmopolitan practice and thought. Sharing a clear kinship with the Victorian humanitarian ethos of disinterestedness, cultivated detachment came to represent the best and the worst of the Enlightenment and Age of Reason, the Scientific Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. If detachment allowed for the development of objective knowledge and civilisational progress, it also risked disenchantment, alienation and societal collapse.

Here, I approach detachment less as an aesthetic than a political strategy, to encompass the distance sought between ordinary watte people as well as humanitarian elites seeking to avoid the inherently mutualistic spirit of their gifts. I call this *strategic*

detachment, in the sense that my interlocutors only created distance through apparent disinterestedness when they felt under particular compulsion or threat to do so. In Waseer Watte, strategic detachment was what allowed everyday life to proceed in relatively calm and quiet terms when the attachments and demands of mutuality might have proven too great to bear. However, strategic detachment also proved essential for Muslim and other minority humanitarians operating at national level. In the examples I explore below, minority deployment of strategic detachment took place in an environment marked by strong Buddhist efforts towards a counter-cultivation of national attachment. Humanitarians of all communities, minority as well as majority, navigated questions of identity and belonging through rhetorical claims that drew attention to their attachment to the Sri Lankan state, and detachment from ethnic and religious identity.

Strategic Detachment among Minority and Majority Humanitarians

Operating in the eye of a national government sympathetic to and often directly supportive of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, wealthy Tamil and Muslim humanitarians in Colombo engaged in practices of strategic detachment. To counter the threat posed by nationalist governments not just to their ability to engage in charity but to do business without fear of harassment, some minority-owned firms have adopted approaches that explicitly deny any claim to minority ethno-religious identity when framing and directing their development interventions. For example, LankaComm, a Muslim-owned company that had established a low-cost health service across poor communities in Colombo as an expression of *sadaqah*, reframed their gift in the secular terms of 'corporate social responsibility' and 'social enterprise', in so doing appealing to a broad base of customers for their health service (Widger and Osella 2021). More generally, Muslim- and minority-owned businesses in Sri Lanka have been careful to represent their humanitarianism within the language of Buddhist nationalism, and direct their support towards Sinhala and Buddhist causes championed by ruling politicians – giving rise to a field of what I have called 'philanthronationalism' (Widger 2016a, 2016b, 2017, 2022).

When we met during the midst of the communal violence of 2012, these tensions and concerns animated my conversations with Rameez, the chairman of a national Muslim youth organisation. With its origins in a loose network of local youth associations dating back to the early 1900s, the national body was established during the 1950s with the aim of combining 'upliftment' of the island's diverse Muslim communities alongside a commitment to shared post-colonial nation-building projects by contributing towards efforts to cultivate a unified 'Sri Lankan Muslim' identity. According to Rameez, the ambition was the creation of 'a Muslim leader for the community, for the country, with Islamic values. The [organisation's] motto goes "unity, faith and discipline"'. However, the war years had pushed the organisation's commitment to forging Muslim unity within an encompassing Sri Lankan unity to its limits. Muslim communities were victims and bystanders during the thirty-year conflict, which ended in 2009.[4]

Marking the end of the war, the then president Mahinda Rajapaksa gave a speech in parliament encouraging the abandonment of 'majority' and 'minority' identities. Taken at face value, the president's speech called for the creation of a post-ethnic Sri Lanka at ease with, and accommodating of, its diversity – a 'cosmopolitan' Sri Lanka, in other words. Yet at the same time, it was clear to many observers that the president and his government were actively involved in the creation and encouragement of Buddhist animosity and violence against Muslims. Reflecting with irony on the president's message after three years of growing anti-Muslim sentiment, Rameez told me: 'The president said in parliament, "there are no minorities in this country" . . . I take him very seriously. I am an equal citizen! Told so by my president! In parliament!' The trouble, the chairman pointed out, was that 'when you are born in Sri Lanka, you become . . . *ethnic* . . . If you are born in the US, and you are Chinese or an Indian, you are still an American. Here, you are either Tamil, either Sinhalese, either Muslim, from birth you are stuck!' Unwilling to accept the inevitability of such division, Rameez told me how the organisation would 'spend our Muslim money for the benefit of the non-Muslims'. A second irony, however, was that by framing the organisation's activities in this way, the organisation merely reaffirmed Muslims' minority status – the perils of what Gayatri Spivak called 'strategic essentialism'. As Rameez put it, 'we need to share it [our community's resources] because we are a minority, although we are not a minority officially . . . We must be united, but even if we can't be united, we must not divide ourselves.'

My research with prominent Tamil and Catholic humanitarians revealed similar concerns over the positioning and delivery of their generosity. For example, Perumal, the chairman of one of Sri Lanka's largest Hindu organisations, which had raised funds from overseas to support educational and child welfare programmes in Tamil communities, described the strategy he developed for avoiding government interference. Perumal himself was a well-known figure in the financial sector, had held a series of executive positions in quasi-public bodies and moved within elite circles of Sri Lankan society. Nevertheless, the LTTE had been highly successful at securing financial support from the Tamil diaspora and the flow of money from Europe, North America and Australia to Sri Lanka, whether remittance or charity, government authorities had always treated with suspicion. Perumal was clear that 'we've had to be careful' in the work the organisation did, for example by stressing they promoted 'inclusive services' that benefited 'the deserving poor' without regard for ethnicity or religion. For that reason, the board included Buddhists, Christians and Muslims alongside Hindus, and the organisation had always worked 'in partnership' with local government officials for programme delivery.

Likewise, Father Matthew, a Catholic priest running a long-established charity in north Colombo, stressed the importance of what he called 'inclusive humanitarianism'. A mutual acquaintance introduced Father Matthew as 'someone who only speaks in English, never Sinhala or Tamil, and spends most of his time in Rome' – a claim that I took originally to mean he belonged to the Anglophone elite, but later came to realise was also supposed to be understood as a marker of detachment from his Catholic community. As a man more accustomed to operating in the transnational Catholic Church than the local world of Sri Lankan communal politics, Father Matthew was well posi-

tioned to provide charity free from pre-existing sectarian constraints. Following in the footsteps of the charity's founder, Sister Lucy, Father Matthew explained that while his charity was rooted in his Christianity and love of God, his commitment was to nothing but 'humankind' in its fullest sense. His organisation's inspiration and model was, he told me, 'the Red Cross . . . We do charity not development . . . [W]e protect those affected by the economic system.' That meant serving all downtrodden communities in the part of north Colombo he operated – 'Christian, Buddhist, Muslim and Hindu, we help them all.'

Father Matthew's detachment from an exclusive Christian humanitarianism permitted the development of an inclusive humanitarianism that extended also to the expectations he held for those who would come and work for the organisation. He demanded more than pity or empathy towards the poor – he also demanded love and respect. As he explained, 'I don't want a priest coming who only has sympathy for the poor. Everybody has sympathy for the poor. First the priest should have respect for the poor, then you can love him.' For Father Matthew, respect and love would derive from paying attention to the poor as human beings whose suffering was heard in their own words. 'Why should one human being come here and ask for help?', Father Matthew asked. 'He's not even ashamed to come. We have broken him. We've smashed him up. You should never ask him why he came to ask for help. He'll answer in your words. You must respect him in his own words, not your words.'

Buddhist Exceptionalism

Strategies of inclusiveness and distancing adopted by minority-owned businesses and foundations stood in contrast with the activities of those that were Buddhist-owned. An example that has received regular criticism is the Sampath Bank, which has never shied away from claims that it operates for the Sinhala Buddhist community (Kemper 1993, 2001; Widger 2016b), and which actively excludes minority customers (for the most recent allegations, see *Tamil Guardian* 2020). However, even those Buddhist-owned companies advocating a more cosmopolitan approach have often done so from a position of Buddhist exceptionalism. In April 2013, at a moment of spiralling tensions between Buddhists and Muslims, a Buddhist-owned pharmaceutical company ran an advert in national newspapers urging the creation of a more compassionate society.[5] Drawing its lesson from the Buddha's teachings, and under the heading, 'It's Just a Label', the advert cited an extract from Walpola Rahula Thero's (1974) famous book, *What the Buddha taught*:

> People are so fond of discriminative labels that they even go to the length of putting them on human qualities and emotions common to all. So they talk of different 'brands' of charity, as for example, of Buddhist charity or Christian charity, and look down upon other 'brands' of charity. But charity cannot be sectarian; it is neither Christian, Buddhist, Hindu nor Moslem . . . Human qualities and emotions like love, charity, compassion, tolerance, patience, friendship, desire, hatred, ill-will, ignorance, conceit, etc., need no sectarian labels; they belong to no particular religions.

As a humanitarian call to arms, the advert tried to separate a sense of an inclusive humanitarian practice from past misdeeds and brought the private and charitable sectors into line with non-discriminating practice. At the same time, however, the advert reflected the religious disposition and ethical privilege of the company. The text chosen was a classic in 'rational' Sri Lankan Buddhism – a devotion to equanimity through the words of the Buddha. In itself, this was a statement of identification. The company did not turn to Muslim, Hindu or Christian theology. Even while, then, the advert broadcast its message of unity plainly, it did so from a specific position – a position that the company did not feel any need to detach from by employing the secular language of corporate social responsibility, for example, or to quote from the Bible or Koran.

As a final example of Buddhist engagement with the humanitarian ethos, I offer the example of Red Lotus – which describes itself as a 'national Buddhist organisation for humanitarian services'. The impetus for Red Lotus arose following the 2004 tsunami, during which the activities of international aid agencies, including the Red Cross, came under serious scrutiny in Sri Lanka following multiple allegations of malpractice and corruption. In March 2005, a conference of international Buddhist organisations held in Colombo concluded there was need for a Sri Lankan – vernacular – Buddhist humanitarian organisation built on the Four Noble Truths that would represent Buddhist humanitarian principles. The name 'Red Lotus' was chosen with the specific intention of signalling the creation of a distinctive Buddhist approach to humanitarian action, which was thus also to be distinguished from the Red Cross and Red Crescent, understood as Christian and Muslim organisations.

At the time of my research, Red Lotus shared office space in central Colombo with its parent organisation, the Dharmavijaya Foundation (DVF), itself established in 1977. The founder-chairman of both organisations was Olcott Gunasekera, a retired civil servant and development consultant. Olcott explained his guiding ethos as based on the principle of the 'total development of man'. This would include the four fields of education, health, economy and, most importantly, morality. Olcott was keen to stress that the government's focus on post-war development through economic progress was likely to bring about worse problems later on. As he explained, 'with the government's policies concentrating more on economic development now, what we have been saying is that if you want to make Sri Lanka "The Asian Miracle," you have to think of the moral aspect . . . Without the moral base, we consider that no development is sustainable'. Instead, Olcott stressed the 'moral dimension' of development must be premised on the Five Precepts – no killing, no stealing, no lying, no sexual misconduct and no intoxicants.

This is not to say, however, that Olcott considered either organisation as exclusionary of other religions in outlook or approach. Like others I spoke with, Olcott was keen to stress his overarching commitment to a universal humanitarianism: 'In our services what we consider is humanity. It's not so much the Buddhism. We are not promoting Buddhism'. Even so, Olcott immediately qualified this statement by adding, 'what we say is being a Buddhist country, we want to maintain that culture'. Olcott had also listened to the president's speech in parliament during which he had stressed the importance of abandoning 'majority' and 'minority' labels. During an interview with

the Berkeley Centre for Religion, Peace, & World Affairs at Georgetown University, Olcott described the challenge as 'building confidence among all groups living in Sri Lanka and to develop a new ethos as Sri Lankans'. He went on, 'you may have heard the President of Sri Lanka when he spoke at the end of the war in May 2009. He said that there were no longer minority or majority groups in Sri Lanka; the only divisions are those who love the country and those who do not.' If for Rameez the president's call had been met with ironic bemusement, for Olcott it was not only to be taken seriously but meant ensuring Buddhist humanitarianism was granted a space to develop and flourish.

It was specifically with this goal in mind that Olcott had led the development of Red Lotus. The purpose of the organisation was to help promote better coordination between international agencies and local communities, via the DVF's network of temple-based Dharmavijaya Associations, and to promote Buddhist teachings in disaster prevention. The relationship of the Red Lotus to the Red Cross was, as such, ambivalent. Olcott described the Red Cross as being involved in 'war situations', while the focus of Red Lotus would be on 'the prevention of disaster'. For Olcott, 'most of the disasters in this country are manmade – landslides, droughts, everything is due to the loss of vegetation and all'. The official aim of Red Lotus was thus 'to be of service to humanity at times of disaster with thoughts of loving kindness, compassion, appreciative joy and equanimity and to promote the earth friendly Buddhist way of living *as the only means* of minimizing and understanding such disasters' (emphasis added).[6] Yet when he was asked 'what is your relationship with the International Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies?', Olcott replied, 'We do not yet have an official relationship . . . Once we are on our own feet, we can discuss with them on equal terms'.

Olcott's insistence on the supremacy of Buddhist humanitarianism coupled with his hesitancy to pursue a relationship with the Red Cross until the Red Lotus was 'on equal terms' betrayed what historian K. M. de Silva (1998) has called the 'minority complex' of the Sinhala majority. A legacy of Sri Lanka's colonial history and difficult post-colonial relationship with neighbouring India, which is many times larger and more dominant in international affairs, the Sinhala minority complex has in several ways been linked by scholars to the causes of ethno-religious conflict in the island (Daniel 1996; Kapferer 1988; Obeyesekere 1995; Tambiah 1997). Within the nationalist viewpoint, Sinhala Buddhism is inherently superior to all other ethno-religious traditions *and* rendered historically insignificant following the collapse of the medieval civilisations of its origination. Buddhism is at once destined to be the ethno-religious community that rules the island of Sri Lanka *and* at continual risk of displacement by hostile forces emanating from within and outside the Sinhala Buddhist body politic. In just the same way, Red Lotus was superior to *and* insignificant in the face of the internationally established Red Cross.

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored the ways Muslim, Tamil and Christian minorities in Sri Lanka deploy humanitarian rhetorics as forms of strategic detachment from their

own ethnic and religious identities as a means of appeasing confrontational Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. I also showed how some Buddhist humanitarians cultivated national attachment as a means of encouraging minority humanitarians to engage positively with government calls for a united Sri Lanka free of 'minority' identities. One common thread unifying the different examples I provided was a keen sense of the national and vernacular and the cosmopolitan and universal as possible categories of ideology and action. It was precisely by detaching from or attaching to one or the other that minority and majority humanitarians, as well as a government facing accusations of war crimes, could navigate the perils of community, national and international politics. That is to say, engagement with the rhetorics of the vernacular and the universal was itself highly charged.

I suggested that strategic detachment shared a conceptual space with the underpinning ethos of universal humanitarianism in the sense that both sought to evade accusations of bias. Within international humanitarian discourse, as within international aid, the counter-gift is effectively rendered obsolete because the parties involved are in theory (and often in practice) unknown to one another; an anonymous beneficiary cannot return anything to an anonymous benefactor (Hollenbach 2013; Korf et al 2010; Stirrat and Henkel 1997). Anonymous action relies on a feeling of empathy for, but not a political commitment to, the unknown victim. Critics have thus charged that humanitarianism's pursuit of anonymity as an ethical good depoliticises intervention, rendering humanitarianism powerless to address the causes of suffering, inequality and conflict in the world (Bornstein 2012; Fassin 2012; Ticktin 2014; Trundle 2014). Anonymity itself is made possible by the Enlightenment origins of the person imagined by international humanitarianism discourse, which stands as a universal legal subject before a set of universal laws (Barnett 2010; Haskell 1985a, 1985b; Ticktin 2014).

The examples of strategic detachment I explored in this article highlight the fundamentally relational and political nature of vernacular humanitarianisms in post-war Sri Lanka. But they also remind us to be 'mindful of . . . [the] . . . implicit power imbalances' (Fechter and Schwittay 2019: 1769) that continue to be present in vernacular humanitarianism, and of the need to avoid romanticising local humanitarian traditions as worthy alternatives to universal humanitarianism. While readers will come to their own conclusions about the political and moral value of strategic detachment, the premise that anthropologists often start off with, that the relational is inherently positive and the anti-relational, non-relational or detached is inherently negative (Candea et al 2015; Strathern 2020; Widger 2022), receives further challenge from the experiences of minority humanitarians in Sri Lanka. Those stories that I have reported here offer further reason to take seriously the political and social possibilities of detachment and disinterestedness beyond a Maussian frame.

Jock Stirrat's observation 'that competition of various forms . . . is inherent in the structure of humanitarian relief' (2006: 11) is a useful one to consider here. For Stirrat, competition between humanitarian actors and agencies each seeking to be and do 'better' than each other emerged from 'a basic contradiction at the heart of philanthropic approaches to relief and rehabilitation' (2006: 11). Stirrat's contention was that humanitarian organisations, charged with the responsibility of distributing donors' funds in the most 'equitable', 'impactful' and, or, 'disinterested' ways, necessarily come into

competition and conflict with one another, thus rendering their work deeply interested. While Stirrat (2006) was applying a Maussian reading of the humanitarian ethos to help in which gifts can never be 'free' (Douglas 1990; Laidlaw 2000; Parry 1986), the examples I discussed above highlight the variability and complexity of the humanitarian ethos as it manifests within and between different relational, ethno-religious and societal spaces and levels. Such variability and complexity shifts the ethical and moral framework that people may use to distinguish 'disinterested' from 'interested' action, and hence to mobilise competitive claims, towards a new set of terms derived from 'vernacular' and 'universal' rhetorics and ideologies. In those cases, the 'basic contradiction' that Stirrat identified as integral to humanitarianism owed less to a Maussian problematic of the (dis)interested gift than it did to how *majority* Sinhala Buddhist humanitarians could wear their ethno-religious identity openly, while *minority* Christian, Tamil and especially Muslim humanitarians concealed them as a form of strategic detachment from their own identities. That is to say, concerns over interested versus disinterested giving motivated humanitarian action and politics less than did concerns over identifying with an ethos of 'universal' (cosmopolitan) and 'vernacular' (nationalist) giving.

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Notes

1. People in Waseer Watte spoke Sinhala and Tamil and so, in reflection of this, where relevant I include terms in both languages.
2. I have written about the (in)evitability of kinship in Sri Lanka elsewhere (Widger 2012).
3. *Zakat*, an alms-tax, is incumbent only on those holding financial assets above a certain value – few if any Muslims living in Waseer Watta would have been wealthy enough to pay. Neverthe-

less, poorer Muslims freely used the term when describing their charitable giving (for a fuller discussion of this, see Osella and Widger 2018).
4. For an account of Muslims' situation and experiences during the war, see Thiranagama (2007, 2011) and McGilvray (2008).
5. I have developed a fuller analysis of the advert in Widger (2017).
6. See https://redlotus.lk/about-red-lotus/

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Le nationalisme religieux, le détachement stratégique, et la politique de l'humanitarisme vernaculaire en Sri Lanka de l'après-guerre

Dans cet article, nous analysons la rhétorique de l'humanitarisme utilisée par les différents groupes ethniques et religieux en Sri Lanka à l'époque contemporaine. En étudiant plusieurs exemples tirés d'une communauté située au centre-ville, des fondations humanitaires, et du gouvernement national, nous montrons les stratégies menées par les différents acteurs pour adapter la rhétorique cos-

mopolite, nationaliste et humanitaire. Leur but est, à la fois, d'obfusquer les prétentions concernant les crimes de guerre et du favoritisme communal, et d'encourager l'allégeance à l'identité nationale de Sri Lanka. Nous proposons un concept dit 'strategic detachment' (le détachement stratégique) pour illuminer les façons dont les minorités cherchent à cultiver la distance par rapport à leurs identités ethniques et religieuses, et en même temps de redéfinir clairement leurs pratiques humanitaires en termes non-partisans.

Mots-clés : charité, humanitarisme, nationalisme, philanthropie, Sri Lanka