

## **Blood rhetorics: Donor campaigns and their publics in contemporary Sri Lanka .**

### Abstract

In this article, I focus on an aspect of voluntary blood donation that has received relatively little attention, namely the spaces – public, moral and political – that connect individual donors with the recipients of blood. More specifically I focus on five distinct but related modalities of blood donation – internationalism, Buddhism, familism, nationalism and anti-commercialism. These rhetorics are highly significant, yet they are often missed in accounts of the the link between donor and recipient and how individuals to account for and justify their actions within wider, shared imaginings of family, community and nation.

[keywords: Blood donation, Sri Lanka, Bio-economies, Rhetorics, Publics].

Some years ago Lawrence Cohen used the term ‘ethical publicity’ to describe the arguments that are sometimes used in India to justify the buying and selling of kidneys for transplantation [1999 :147]. These ‘rationalisations’ present the transactions between poor vendors and rich clients as arrangements in which everyone appears to come away with something that they want; typically, a handful of money which might eliminate past debt or pay for a future marriage for the vendor or a kidney which might save or prolong life for the buyer or the person they represent. The idea of ‘ethical publicity’ is used to capture something of the irony that surrounds a purely commercial transaction which is often far from ethical. It is part of the rhetorical justification that is created around kidney ‘donation’ and what makes it seem to be an intentional and autonomous act rather than one that is

exploitative and potentially injurious to donors' long-term health. Specifically, it captures something of the contradictory and perhaps oxymoronic in the way that strategies operate to encourage people to put parts of their bodies into circulation as social, economic and moral objects, be these in the form of tissues, organs or, as is the focus here, blood. On the one hand, ethical action is not usually thought of as being stimulated by something as base and instrumental as 'publicity'. Yet, on the other, it is clear that in many countries a considerable amount of energy goes into creating rhetorics of voluntarism and corporeal magnanimity aimed at persuading people to imagine lives that might be lost, suffering that might be reduced and grief that might be avoided through their acts of pre-mortem and, sometimes, post-mortem donation. The use of the term rhetoric here is close to Hauser's definition as 'the symbolic inducement of social co-operation' [Hauser 1999:13]. As such these rhetorics allude to benefits that might be gained from such donations. Typically these are rewards that are not merely financial but often introduce ideas of spiritual and social credit in which can be glimpsed a sociality that seeks to connect potential donors with recipients who are likely to be strangers who will remain unknown to the donor. Speaking of ova donation in the UK context, Konrad has referred to the envisioning of these connections as transilience, [Konrad 2005]. The term, taken from geology, suggests an arching across from one stratum to another. In the context of corporeal donation, it suggests a connection which can never be known as such: donors do not know who the recipients of their gifts are and nor will recipients ever be in a position to pay back directly the debt which they have incurred. Participation in such exchanges has the potential to move the idea of society from abstraction to immanence in ways that financial transactions can never do. Paying for a commodity implies a connection which divides and thereby obscures the sociality and morality of the transaction – why should a person be concerned

for another's problems beyond the exchange of money for goods or services. Conversely, in the space of non-connection which voluntary donation creates, these might briefly be given form – a person becomes a voluntary donor precisely because they wish to countenance another's problems. This space of non-connection, how it is created and what goes on within it, suggests a powerful social imaginary in the sense used by Charles Taylor [2004] and points us toward a realm beyond the ethics of individual choice and into a morally normative realm of rights, obligations and duties: 'the way people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met and the deeper notions and images that underlie these expectations' [Taylor 2004: 23]. More specifically, I am concerned with the relationship between the social imaginary and its more active expression as the moral imagination, that is, the way that ideas of solidarity, shared values and collective identity are promoted in practice [Fernandez 2009, also see Beidelman 1983]. Thus, when International NGOs, governments, hospitals or community organisations set about persuading people to give blood, tissue or organs we can glimpse a variety of moral imaginations at work and in which are evident what Wuthnow has referred to as 'formulaic expressions of ourselves', that is, emergent, yet stable narratives of oneself in relation to others [Wuthnow 1991:41, Healy 2006].

The moral imagination as used here is to be distinguished from the moral order or a moral code in that it focuses on the 'complexities and contrarities of comportment challenged recurrently by the vicissitudes of the sentiments of solidarity or lack of them' [Fernandez 2009:157]. By this I take Fernandez to mean that, in the flux of personal life, what is moral is not always clear and how to act morally is often the subject of ambiguity and

contestation. Furthermore, what it is to act morally cannot be read off and followed as one might from a set of instructions; there is a good deal of figuring out to be done. Arriving at particular positions, views, feelings or 'comportments' involves not just introspection but an engagement with various processual forms – Fernandez, for example, draws attention to poems, stories, riddles, dramas, metaphors – which help shape what actions are taken when confronted with a range of possible choices. All of these forms contain propositions about how individual people might demonstrate their moral intentions and particularly how the personal significance of these acts becomes part of the currency of collective sentiments and values, that is, they come to be thought of as part of the wider domain of public life. In this essay, I wish to extend this argument by considering five modalities of blood donation as projected into this domain. Four of these are to be found in the publicly displayed visual materials which invite and exhort citizens to give blood in contemporary Sri Lanka. In recent years, blood donor posters have appeared all over the island; on walls, hoardings, in newspapers and magazines. They are produced by international organisations such as the Red Cross as well as by Government agencies such as the National Blood Transfusion Service but also by a plethora of community and religious organisations which seek to mobilise their own constituencies to give blood. Using a variety of rhetorics, these advertisements seek to persuade people to attend blood donation sessions in hospitals, temples, places of work and public buildings. The 'publicity' used seeks to connect would-be donors with persons who they will never know. It also suggests trajectories for such connections in which corporeal gifts will have profound consequences, not just medical, but also political and economic. As such, the posters and advertisements locate personal experience as a donor beyond immediate family and community, that is, in the 'imagined [and yet to be imagined] communities' built out of religious, ethnic, class or regional identities and ultimately in

conceptions of people and nation [Anderson 1983:6-7]. In this sense, the publicity I describe invites reflection upon, and participation in, some powerful social imaginaries – the world, the state, the economy, the family, the religious community and so forth. Through these imaginaries people act out of a sense of shared and sometimes contradictory moral purpose as, for example when world citizenship, state citizenship and the obligations of kinship pull in rather different directions. The fifth modality, in contrast to the previous four, considers a very different kind of public visibility for blood donation. Here the insights are drawn from a recent controversy over moves to open up the collection and storage of blood to private hospitals. For some, this move was a harbinger of privatisation and commercialisation of blood collection and distribution services. Here attention was drawn to the threat posed by the purchase of blood to social imaginaries built on voluntarism and altruism. The example shows how some sections of society mobilised to ensure the protection of the ‘gift’ and the values that acts of voluntary donation enshrined for them.

### **Five modalities of blood donation.**

In Sri Lanka, blood has flowed freely and excessively in recent years. The Tamil separatist war went on for twenty five years resulting in a conflict that created thousands of military and civilian casualties on both sides. Add to this the demand for regular blood transfusion among those suffering from thalassaemia [De Silva *et al* 2000]; high levels of road traffic accident [Dhamaratna and Stephenson 2004] and the growing routine demand for blood in advanced medical procedures and it is clear that demand far outstrips supply. Under such circumstances, a variety of ways of persuading people to donate come into play. Just what these are became apparent during field work carried out over a number of years into the

reception of new reproductive and genetic technologies in Sri Lanka. This work did not set out to study blood donation practices directly but, because it was concerned with doctors, biomedicine and the ethics of corporeal donation [eggs, sperm and embryos] it appeared that blood – its collection, storage and use – frequently figured in my research. In what follows, I outline five modalities of blood donation in contemporary Sri Lanka; these draw on rhetorics of internationalism, religion, familism, war and anti-commercialism respectively. These modalities are by no means discrete but tend to blur into one another to produce a field of symbolic and moral propositions for would be donors to contemplate and, possibly, to act upon. In taking action, the donor, lying passively whilst blood flows from an outstretched arm, becomes a further proposition: dutiful citizen, devotee of Buddhism, patriot, humanist, vendor?

### **The haemato-global assemblage.**

The National Blood Centre [*jātika rudira madhyasthānaya*] in which the National Blood Transfusion Service [NBTS] is housed is located in purpose-built premises in the suburbs of Colombo [Figure 1]. The premises were to a large extent funded by the Japanese Bank for International Co-operation which also provided infra-structural support by way of equipment, materials, training and personnel for the eight provincial blood banks and sixty-four regional blood banks that make up the national service. Along with other international support, the project has enabled the staff of the NBTS to achieve high levels of conformity with global aspirations of the WHO in relation to quality management, training, voluntary donor recruitment, international networking, education and programme monitoring. The NBTS is the primary collector and custodian of the nation's blood supplies and guarantor of parity with international standards. As such, it is part of what I have elsewhere called the

haemato-global assemblage [Simpson 2009]. That is, the NBTS aspires to levels of service that, in terms of standards, values and procedures, are made to look like blood donation services anywhere else in the world. Connection with the global imaginary is reinforced by publicity which emphasises the act of giving blood as a gift, the same the whole world over, for which, as argued by Titmuss, there should be no remuneration [Titmuss 1971]. The projection of blood donation as a universal social good in which all might participate, irrespective of country or creed, is evident in events such as the annual World Blood Donor Day which is celebrated on the Island.<sup>i</sup>

Within the internationalist rhetoric of blood donation, however, local inflections are clearly evident. An electronic, revolving hoarding outside the National Blood Centre offers, in English, the proposition 'Your blood could save a life' [Figure 2]. The international nature of the message is underlined by the fact that the advertisement is sponsored by the Country's premier mobile phone network provider which enables people to register as blood donors via their mobile phone. Their motto reads: 'committed to serving the nation'. Blood, like money it would seem, is a currency that is the same everywhere and commerce in either is a national service. It is perhaps no accident that both money and blood are stored in a 'bank' [cf Copeman: 2009a:177, Strong: 1997].

Being part of the global haemato-assemblage connects the staff of the NBTS with a ready supply of images and tropes that encourage people to give blood like people do, supposedly in any other part of the world. They become, in short, part of Titmuss' classic project for the moralisation and, by extension, the civilisation of blood donation. However, moving beyond the appearance of international conformity and 'gifts' that are as abstract as they are altruistic, the ethical publicity of blood donation becomes increasingly cast in local idioms

and necessarily ones that invoke more specific appeals to social obligation. The next two modalities each reveal evidence of a distinctive moralisation of the rhetoric of donation first drawing on a complex of Buddhist ideas about charity and alms-giving and the second on ideas about family obligations.

### **Buddhism and the morality of corporeal donation**

The postcard below was one distributed by the Service [Fig 3]. It shows a cartoon of a smiling and surprisingly white looking young man passing a drop of blood to an equally white looking nurse. Both are standing before a hospital bed in which there is a poorly looking heap of bandages attached to a drip. The legend reads ‘save a life that is slipping away [*milina vana* captures the idea of ‘closing’, as in a flower]. For blood that is given thank you’. The trope is a widely used one. The gift of blood, here a droplet that may be passed by hand from one person to another, will be used to save the life of someone unknown. However, the moral imagination at work in the act of translation locates the act of giving within particular idioms of the gift. The verb ‘to give’ used here is *dān denavā* which is neither the simple notion of giving (*denavā*) used in the title of the national service [*jātika lē dimē sēvaya*], nor of donating (*parityāga kirīma*) but one which is rooted in the idea of *dān* which suggests acts of charitable giving in general and alms giving in particular. This is not then an appeal to mere altruism but an invitation to give which is located within a particular repertoire of exchange relations in which the giver might expect to contribute to the wider social good at the same time as gaining merit [*pin*] for what is offered.

In the next image, the Buddhist idiom is expressed more strongly [Figure 4]. The poster was displayed in the grounds of Kalutara Mahā Vihāra, a large Buddhist temple some 30 miles south of Colombo in the grounds of which the blood donation camp would take place. The



poster once again shows a drop of blood held in the hands. This time, however, the image is a photograph of a real pair of hands and they are cupped in the way that is typical of those making offerings at shrines or when handing an offering to a priest. The legend reads: 'giving blood [as alms] is an exalted gift [*utum tyāgayakī*]' and as if to emphasise this, the drop of blood drop is rendered literally as a gift and tied with a rather incongruous bow. The poster goes on to inform the reader that they should 'save a life and feel great joy' [*jivitayak bērā ē satuṭa obat vindaganna*] and further on, 'a voluntary, regular blood donor is a national treasure' [*svecchā akhanda rudhira dāyakayā jātika sampatika*]. Significantly, the word that is used for 'donor' in this context is *dāyakayā*. This word has the general meaning of someone who contributes or supports through work or money but is also the same word that is used to refer to the body of regular supporters of the temple, that is, those who are responsible for making offerings of flowers, food and money to the monks. Indeed, the temple *dāyakayā* are those whose hands might frequently be cupped in the ways captured in the poster as they offer up their alms. The poster thus appears to align the trajectory of the moral imagination such that blood, alms-giving, the daily transactions that underpin temple life and legitimate participation in the larger project of nationhood are metonymically connected.

The insertion resonates at a number of different levels. First, within Theravāda Buddhism, the act of donating body parts is recognised as a special category of giving and referred to as *dāna paramitta*. This form of donation is often captured in the popular formula 'eyes, head, flesh and blood' [*aes his mas lē*] which summarises the parts of the body that have traditionally been seen as partible and which were offered up by characters in folk tales known as the Jatakas describing Buddha's previous lives [Simpson 2004]. As another's life

might depend on such a donation, this form of giving is said to be considered second only to giving one's life for another; it is a particularly exalted form of meritorious activity [*punya karmaya*]. The invitation to 'give' blood in the temple is thus an invitation to engage in a particular kind of meritorious activity. Second, temples are typically the setting for the transfer of merit in ceremonies collectively known as *pinkama*, literally, acts of merit [for example the poster in figure 5 refers to *lē dān dīme mahā pinkama*, that is, a 'blood (alms) donation great act of merit']. In the powerfully rhetorical space of the temple [*pansa*], the visible act of giving blood, underscores commitment to public virtue whilst privately accruing the karmic benefits of charitable giving. Not surprisingly, monks themselves are highly visible as donors at these events. In terms of impact, meritorious and otherwise, temple blood camps are given a kind of value-added by being conducted on important Buddhist festival days such as Vesak.

In figure 6 is provided a further example of the morally imaginative embedding of blood donation within Buddhist ideas of virtue and devotion. The poster was located on a wall near a large college in Galle. The poster was sponsored by a local tutor in political science, and, I was told by a local doctor who assisted in its interpretation, was probably aimed at attracting students to his class, as much as recruiting blood donors. In language that is both flowery and poetical the invitation begins: 'with a pious heart stay on the meritorious pathway' [*pujanīya hadavataṭa raendemu pinkāra vū maṇṭalāvaka*]. The reader is asked to 'give a drop of blood'. Significantly, the word used here for giving is *pudumu*, which is usually used in the context of offerings of flowers in temples. This is followed by a further invitation 'let's make a beautiful tomorrow' [*tanamu lassana heṭak*]. The poster appears to take blood donation beyond a general appeal to the charity of the gift and locates it

metaphorically in the realm of devotional offerings of a kind associated with Buddha and the gods.

### **Families and kinship – parents and children**

When the electronic hoarding outside the National Blood Centre rotates its message, the conditional proposition ‘your blood could save a life’ is replaced with a rather more direct entreaty designed for Sinhala speakers [figure 7]. The bottom line reads ‘carry out your responsibility’ [*obat obagē vagakīma iṭukaranna*] and the main text instructs the reader to ‘give [as alms] a drop of blood’ [*lē bindak dān dī*]. These entreaties do not invoke an unspecified other as in the mobile phone advertisement, nor parodied suffering as in the cartoon of the hospital patient; they are linked to an image of a small child with a covered wound on her, or more likely, his head, who is in the process of receiving a blood transfusion. The image invites the viewer into a narrative of sorts. There has been a calamity in which the child has been injured but is now seen to be reasonably content and is sucking his or her fingers. Presumably the trauma is passed and the child, with the aid of donated blood, has been saved from further pain or worse. This outcome is achieved with the help of a mere ‘drop’ of blood. The reader of the image is invited to make a morally compelling substitution as that of a parent faced with the pain and distress of their own offspring. The question posed by the image is, would they want others to donate if they were that parent. Furthermore, would they donate if they were that other?

The image that is used in this picture is a well-known one that has been used for over a decade to encourage people to attend blood donation camps all over the country. The image was selected as a result of a national poster competition which was won by the Sri

Lanka Insurance Corporation Buddhist Society. The image usually appears along with a poem,

mā wani bilinda  
maruwa yaida kanda  
anē ae hinda  
denna lē bindu māma naenada

A small child like me  
Will death call me away?  
Oh, please then  
give some drops of blood uncle and auntie.

The visual narrative is thus reinforced with a poetic one [figure 8]. The first line is taken from a classic Sinhala poem composed by Totagamuwa Sri Rahula in the Kotte period of the fifteenth century [Godakumbare 1955]. The poem was composed by this well-known scholar monk for King Parakramabahu VI who ruled at that time and who was also the monk's mother's brother. Rahula was adopted by Parakramabahu following the death of his only son. The poem is believed to have been composed when Rahula was a child and is thought to capture the way that he was moved by the care and attention that the king bestowed on him. Suffice it to say, the 'mā wani bilinda' opening echoes frequently in contemporary popular rhyme and song, evoking a relationship of child-like vulnerability in the face of adult benevolence. The lines which come later in the blood-donor version of the poem reinforce this aspect of the appeal as it is directed towards 'uncles' and 'aunts'.

Within the Sinhalese system, the terms *māma* and a *naenda* are used narrowly to refer to a mother's brother and a father's sister, but in a classificatory sense they can refer to all those who make up the extended kinship system of which viewers might think themselves a part. The empathy elicited in the viewer of the image is not that of any adult to any child but to a child that is potentially related and, as such, one to whom there are heightened obligations.

In another poster, the rhetorical appeal draws on a different but no less powerful kinship relation, namely that between a son and his mother:

*baehae budu pute dennam mata ivasanna*

*haekinam māranayen mā beraganna*

*mē vage duk susum mavakage sanasanna*

*ādara puteku lesa aevidin lē denna*

*lē hinga nisā ada oppala vi inna*

*asarana ledun gaena sita yomu karalanna*

*dān di lē binduk ē aya goda ganna*

*ādara puteku lesa aevidin lē denna*

I cannot tolerate anymore my Buddha son

if you can, save me from death

with the misery of a mother like me, please help

come like a loving son and give blood

because blood is scarce I am ill  
let us think about helpless patients  
donate a drop of blood to save them  
come like a loving son and give blood

The poem plays upon the deep bond between a mother and a son in Sinhala culture in general and in Buddhist Jātaka stories in particular. In one such story the Buddha in a previous life was in a boat with his mother when a storm blew up and they were shipwrecked. Though he could have easily saved himself the future Buddha would not leave his mother behind and, despite her protests, he took her on his back and swam to the shore. For this brave gesture his mother predicted that her son would attain Buddhahood, one of the most powerful sentiments that a mother can extend to her son. Out of this story comes a strong sense that a son will always help his mother in a crisis. In an echo of this folk story, the blood donor poster implores the son to come forward to help his suffering mother, not only as a loving son [*ādara putek*] but also as a son who is given the honorific of Buddha [*budu puta*].

### **Helping the war effort**

Whilst taking the photograph of the poster in figure six, a man appeared at my side. He pointed at the poster and said that he had given blood seventeen times, adding at the end ‘for the soldiers’ [*hamudāvunṭa*]. The war in the north of the Island has resulted in enormous demand for blood and appeals for blood for the armed services have in recent years become widespread and given rise to some very different rhetorics of voluntarism from those described in the previous three sections. The response to these appeals, which

are often organised by community groups, generate large and enthusiastic responses.<sup>ii</sup>

Enquiries as to why this was the case were mostly expressed in terms of a public contribution to the war effort. As a physician working in Galle general hospital put it: 'poor people can't give money but they can give blood'. Giving blood is thus an act of solidarity with the armed forces which recognises the sacrifice that soldiers are making in fighting the war which many believe to be about their own security and protection and the more general preservation of the Island's geographical unity and a Sinhala Buddhist hegemony.

For example, in figure five the call is for the 'heroes of the three armed-services [army, navy and airforce] and the police' [*trividha hā mudāve saha polīsiyē ranavirun*]. The poster collapses giving blood as a merit-making activity with support for the armed-services in a very explicit way. As Copeman has suggested, in societies that claim adherence to religions based on non-violence, giving blood in this way may be a kind of covert military participation; a way of contributing to the war effort without actually setting foot on the battlefield [Copeman 2008:290]. In a rather more spontaneous appeal, medical students at a provincial medical school had initiated their own campaign [figure 9]. Set at the entrance of the college, their poster states in starkly nationalist terms to whom the blood is being given: 'For the heroes who without fear fight for the mother country [*mawbīma*], we offer with honour [*upahāraya*] our blood'. The letters of the words 'give blood' are in red and drip down onto a soldier's helmet and stacked rifles, all of which are dripping in blood.

At one level, giving blood in response to these elicitation is a statement of solidarity with the armed forces of the government of Sri Lanka in their efforts to combat what has been seen as the scourge of the nation for over two decades, namely the LTTE. However, the familiar exchange of blood freely donated by civilians in return for the sacrifices of military

personnel also contains elements that are novel. The publicity deployed seeks to mobilise publics in different ways. In a society that has become highly militarised in response to Tamil secessionist pressures, the relationship between civilians and the military has been increasingly cast in a debt relationship. The armed services are widely portrayed as the 'defenders of the nation' who have put their lives at risk so that others might enjoy freedom and prosperity. In ways that are reminiscent of debates about the military covenant in the UK in relation to military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, there are attempts to make the public more aware of the costs and the consequences of armed conflict.<sup>iii</sup> A powerful illustration of this is to be found in the '*api venuven api*' [rendered as 'be together for all']. This welfare campaign elicits donations to fund housing and other projects for soldiers who retire or are invalided out of the armed forces. In title - *api venuven api* - the pronominal substitution [literally 'we for we'] that lies at the heart of this highly successful campaign is crucial – they [soldiers] are not separate from us [civilian society] and the all-inclusive 'we' is a marker of the higher unity of a nation which has been under threat of fragmentation for over two decades. As if to emphasise the close connection between society and the military, the promotional films for the campaign show servicemen and women interacting with their children, with their parents and with members of their communities; the emphasis is not on their distance from society [that is, fighting in remote jungles wearing black bandanas and bullet belts as soldiers as appear in the Rambo-esque posters that now adorn many Colombo streets] but their closeness [that is, smartly dressed, healthy young men and women seen eating, playing, helping and otherwise interacting warmly with family and community].<sup>iv</sup> In this chain of substitutions, which sees civilians identifying with the military who in turn are proxy for the nation, blood donation has come to occupy an important position. Giving blood becomes a powerful demonstration of assent to, and



participation in, the new imaginary: a militarised nation state in which all must take responsibility for the preservation of 'freedom' and 'unity'.

### **The Vulnerability of the Gift**

In each of the above modalities it appears that blood is given as a gift which is imagined to be whole: literally a 'drop' of blood that goes direct to a needy recipient. Yet, blood is rarely transfused whole but is broken down for purposes of transfusion into its various components: red blood cells, white blood cells, platelets and plasma [and its derivatives]. It would seem therefore that blood as a 'gift' – whole and passed from one person to another, or at least to a category of others [for example, kin or soldiers] – is part of the rhetorical work of blood donation publicity and one which bears little relation to the actual trajectories of donated blood. In this section, I consider a set of circumstances in which people, confronted with the realities of collection, storage and distribution of blood and the opportunities for privatisation that this presents mobilised various anti-commercial rhetorics in defence of voluntarism and the social imaginary it was believed to represent. Suggestions of commodotisation and misappropriation generated suspicion, skepticism and mistrust which served to highlight what I have referred to as the vulnerability of the gift [Street 2009:207, Waldby and Mitchell 2006].

In recent years the NBTS has undergone a series of travails that reveal some of the ways in which blood donation connects with deeper social and political schisms. These connections were fully apparent during a field trip in November 2008 when certain developments began to pre-occupy the doctors, health activists and blood donor staff with whom I was working. The account which follows is in part assembled from their accounts of these developments and from newspaper and magazine coverage at the time.

In July 2008 a scandal had begun to break. The director of the National Blood Bank of Sri Lanka, Dr R.M Bindusara and several other doctors at the Centre were suspended by the Health Ministry for having authorised the use of out of date plasmapheresis kits. These sterilised kit packs are used each time donors come to the Centre to donate blood products. Using this technology means that blood is not so much given as loaned whilst a centrifuge machine removes plasma and other vital constituents before passing most of the blood back into the body. The kits cost over \$100 dollars each and enable the process to take place with minimal risk of contamination as a new one is used for each procedure. Allegations were made that kits had been used that were out of date and which could have put patients at risk. Photographs of out of date labels on kits that were in use were supplied to a newspaper. Despite strenuous denials, the Director was held to be directly responsible and was indicted by the Ministry on the grounds of negligence and mismanagement. The media reporting and the events that followed had a significant effect on the service and on the careers of those named as being responsible.

The Director of the Centre responded with her own media campaign in an attempt to clear her name and, as she saw it, protect the long term future of the NBTS. In a press conference held by Dr Bindusara she stated that the conspiracy was mobilised by people with vested interests in discrediting the work of the Service [Daily News 16/ 07/ 2008]. Among the immediate consequences of the allegations she claimed that there had been a sharp decline in donations with voluntary blood donor sessions at the main Centre 'totally deserted without a single donor'. Mobile blood donation camps had been similarly affected. This, in turn, she pointed out, meant that there was a blood shortage that would affect urgent supplies needed for the Nation's 'war heroes' injured in action fighting against the

LTTE. At the time the controversy broke, the war had entered a particularly deadly phase and numbers of casualties were high. The article about Dr Bindusara's press conference featured a statement by a man who donated 85 times: 'this is a crucial time as our armed forces are about to win the war. It is the country's youth who donated blood. That is how they can make a contribution. Therefore the whole country should oppose and reject these fabricated media campaigns'.

Such concerns were considerably amplified when links began to be made between the longer term future of the NBTS and the promotion of a government Bill concerned with regulation and monitoring of blood transfusion services which was to be put before Parliament shortly after the scandal over the plasmapheresis kits broke. The National Blood Transfusion Bill would pave the way for a new act governing collection, governance and supply of blood in Sri Lanka. Although the Bill commenced with statements about blood being freely donated and distributed through a system with the NBTS at its centre, much of it was about how to enable private medical institutions to set up their own blood banks. Hitherto, private hospitals had been dependent on the NBTS for their blood supplies and there was much concern that the voluntary sector was being exploited by the commercial sector. One newspaper reported that a private hospital had charged 100,000 rupees for two pints of blood which would have been received from the NBTS for a nominal fee of 300Rs [Island 22/07. 2008]. The private Bill would sever this link but in ways that favoured the private hospitals rather than the NBTS. Concerns were also expressed that private blood banks would be difficult to monitor when it came to blood safety. In this regard, it was pointed out by the Director and others that the NBTS has been something of a model in the region when it comes to safe blood supplies and low risks of transmission of disease and

particularly HIV [see editorial Sunday Island 04/08/2004]. Several medical trade unions including the left-wing, nationalist, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna [JVP] affiliated All Ceylon Health Services Union, began to alert the public of the dangers of these developments and started a campaign for the withdrawal of the Bill. This particular alliance would normally have made the issue of plasmapheresis kits a cause celebre, highlighting possible corruption in high places and compromised patient safety. However, as one of the leading activists opposing the Bill pointed out, there was a danger of playing into the media's hands and hastening the very thing they were trying to prevent, that is, further denigration and disintegration of the NBTS. Bizarrely, the affair landed the Director of the NBTS and some of the more radical trade unions on the same ground in opposing the perceived threats to the NBTS.

In response to protest and representation from various quarters, the health minister, Nimal Siripala de Silva, withdrew the Bill pending further consultation and established a committee to manage the consultation [Island 07/12/2008]. An investigation by the WHO into the plasmapheresis scandal was also initiated which later reported that there had been no harm caused to patients despite the allegation that out of date kits were used.

Nonetheless, the Director of the NBTS was redeployed and subsequently attempted to sue the Ministry for the 'embarrassment' and 'mental stress' caused by their allegations and her subsequent 'punishment transfer' [Island 28/08/2008]. Also, despite the Bill being withdrawn, many health activists were pessimistic about their ability to resist private hospitals developing their own licensed blood banks. As one doctor centrally involved in the campaign put it: 'there may be other battles ahead'. In his view, the consequences of a continuing drift towards free-markets and privatisation were likely to be far-reaching: a

two-tier service, increase in purchase and sale of blood, the demise of voluntary donation and even the break-up of the NBTS itself. He pointed out a certain irony in the fact that, at a point where the Island's blood transfusion service had achieved a reputation for high standards in the region, the organisation could be fragmented with the result that safety would be more difficult to maintain and blood borne infections and disease would increase.

A particular theme that several interlocutors returned to in recounting their views on the affair was that buying and selling blood denied people the opportunity to carry out meritorious acts in general and to help the war effort in particular. The scandal at the NBTS was thus not just about risk and safety in plasma retrieval, but revealed a challenge to a widely shared social imaginary: the potential for people to express themselves as citizens, kin, patriots and otherwise moral persons.

## **Conclusion**

Although operating within the same 'globalised blood donation ecumene' [Copeman 2009a:2], I have described how various forms of ethical publicity are drawn upon to persuade people to give blood. The tropes that are used typically draw on emotive symbols and narratives intended to inspire people to give freely of this vital substance. I have outlined five distinct but related modalities of blood donation operating in contemporary Sri Lanka. Four of these these modalities draw on positive rhetorics: internationalism, Buddhism, familism and militaristic nationalism. My purpose has been to provide insight into the rhetorics of voluntarism and the moral imagination that these inspire, whereby a potential giver is connected to unknown others by means of anonymous, philanthropic skeins. The fifth modality features as an emergent counter-domain, a negative rhetoric that forms as resistance to the use of 'blood as commodity' and which is portrayed as

threatening a tradition which has valorised 'blood as gift'. This rhetoric is drawn from various imaginings: socialistic, nationalistic and Buddhistic, all of which are deeply rooted in the contemporary context. Although, it is likely that a black-market in blood and its products has long been in existence in Sri Lanka, what the episodes described here reveal is a political response to the attempts to legitimise such markets in line with the Country's wider programme of neo-liberalisation and privatisation. The continuing display of posters inviting people to give blood that will save lives, earn merit or pay a debt to soldiers injured on the battlefield, figures as a powerful motivator and distinctively local mobiliser of individual donors. Not all who give their blood might understand the full implications of the commodotisation of blood supply but, in responding to these various rhetorics, they are nonetheless demonstrating their commitment to a social imaginary in which imagined obligations and reciprocal dependences are realised through the moral act of giving blood voluntarily and without remuneration.

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> See <http://www.wbdd.org/> also see Valentine 2005 and Strong 2009.

<sup>ii</sup> Giving blood as a mark of solidarity in times of war or national crisis is a widely noted phenomenon. See for example Starr 1998 and Rabinow 1999: 84.

<sup>iii</sup> For example see the British Army website <http://www.army.mod.uk/join/terms/3111.aspx> [accessed 19/05/09]

<sup>iv</sup> For example see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KiWOrO8Lhig&feature=related> [accessed 19/05/09].