

The Unbreakable Bond

Why Sinhalese-Muslim relations have stood the test of time

By Asiff Hussein

The relations that have existed between the Sinhalese and Muslims of Sri Lanka since time immemorial may be cited as a unique example of ethnic harmony in pluralistic, multi-ethnic societies. This inimitable relationship between the country's majority community comprising of over 70 percent of the population and a minority of less than 10 percent is certainly an eye-opener for all those who think that majority-minority relations has necessarily to be ridden by conflict. Of course we have to understand that this is a longstanding relationship formed over a thousand years. As such it has stood the test of time and has been able to withstand the numerous attempts made by various colonial powers and chauvinistic racist elements to destroy it.

Most of us are aware of the special symbiotic relationship that has existed between the two communities in connection with the economic life of the country. The Sinhalese kings and people, we know, greatly appreciated the contribution made by Muslim traders whose itinerant trading activities took them to the remotest parts of the country. These enterprising traders who painstakingly penetrated into the deepest interiors of the country are known to have taken with them for trade and barter commodities suited to the simplest needs of the villagers including clothes, jewellery and foodstuffs such as dried fish, an important protein supplement, which were not easily procurable in those days given the travails of travel. Less known however are the other aspects of this close relationship which included intermarriage and adoption of a number of cultural traits of the host culture.

Intermarriage

Sinhalese-Muslim amity is an established historical reality and has been so for at least the past thousand years or so when Arab merchants and settlers began peacefully trickling into the country for purposes of trade and settlement. Many of these Arabs, being good Muslims, do not seem to have harboured any racial prejudices and freely intermarried with the daughters of the land, thus giving rise to the present-day Sri Lankan Muslim community (meaning that community known as the Moors who form over 95 percent of the Muslim population in the island). Such intermarriage seems to have lasted several centuries and has even continued to the present day.

Many factors would have contributed to this attitude. For one thing, the Arabs who resorted to the island would have found it difficult to control their natural urges, particularly when away so long from home where they would have had wives. A second marriage being permissible in

Islam would have been looked upon as an ideal way out of this predicament. Further, those Arabs who had chosen to settle down here permanently would have had little recourse but to espouse local women. Secondly, since the Arabs have traditionally reckoned descent from the paternal line, even the more ethno-centric among them would not have been too concerned about co-habiting with non-Arab women since their offspring would still be recognised as Arabs by the larger community. What must also be borne in mind is that the Arabs, beginning from the early days of Islam were not averse to marrying non-Arab women. The Prophet Muhammad himself is known to have taken a Coptic woman from Egypt known as Māriya through whom he had a son named Ibrāhīm. We also come across instances of Arab men espousing Greek or Byzantine women in mediaeval Arabian literature such as the Kitāb Al-Aghani and the Alf Layla Wa Layla. Indeed, even royalty was no exception and this was especially true of the Abbasids, a house that traced its ancestry to Abbas, an uncle of the Prophet. Several Abbasid princes, we know, were born of Greek, Persian or Turkish women.

There is ample evidence to show that a good many Sri Lankan Muslims have a considerable infusion of Sinhalese blood. The Muslims of Akurana trace their descent to three Arabian mercenaries who espoused Kandyan Sinhalese women during the reign of King Rajasinha II (1635-1687) (A Gazetteer of the Central Province of Ceylon.A.C.Lawrie.1896) while The Gopala (Betge Nilame) clan, a well known Muslim clan domiciled in Getaberiya in the Kegalle district likewise claim descent from Arab physicians (*hakims*) who arrived in the country from Sind during the reign of King Parakramabahu II (1236-1270) of Dambadeniya and espoused Kandyan women (The Muslims of Sri Lanka. One thousand years of ethnic harmony. Lorna Dewaraja.1994). James Emerson Tennent mentions in his monumental work Ceylon (1859) that in the mountains of Ooda-kinda in Western Oovah is a small community known as the Paduguruwas who profess Islam, but conform to Kandyan customs, while H.W.Codrington (Glossary of Native, Foreign, and Anglicised Words. 1924). gives Guruva as “a man of a mixed race of Sinhalese and Moor descent and of the Muhammadan religion in Uva”. The Guruwo are also said to have been found in Dibburuwela in the Udasiya Pattu of Matale South (See Lawrie.1896).

Less known is the fact that this intermarriage between Muslim and Sinhalese was also in evidence in the south and is known to have continued until fairly recent times, for E.B.Denham Ceylon at the Census of 1911.1912) observes “ Amongst the Moors in Colombo and Galle at the present day there must be a fairly considerable infusion of Sinhalese blood; the number of Sinhalese women married to or living with Moors is fairly large”.

In fact, the Muslims of the Sinhalese areas have tended to bear a certain resemblance to the Sinhalese amongst whom they live, which may perhaps indicate some admixture of Sinhalese blood since at least the Kandyan period. James Cordiner, a keen observer of peoples who spent five years in the country (1799-1804) could hardly distinguish a Muslim from a Sinhalese in his

Description of Ceylon (1807), where he refers to the country's Muslims as "the Cingalese who profess the religion of Mahomet". Another authority, John Davy (An Account of the Interior of Ceylon.1821) says of the Muslims "In dress, appearance and manners, they differ but little from the Singalese".

Such intermarriage has benefited the community in two ways. For one thing it has paved the way for a greater understanding between the two peoples, for there is no tie stronger than the bond of blood, except for faith. Also important is the fact that this miscegenation or racial intermixture has given vigour to the community. Sri Lanka's Muslims are often described as an intelligent and enterprising people and this we can be fairly certain is to a great extent attributable to their mixed ancestry. As convincingly shown by Curt Stern in his Principles of Human Genetics (1960), hybridization between different races enhances the vigour of the resultant offspring, a process known as heterosis or hybrid vigour. That this process has been in play among local Muslims is evident from their robust physique and intelligent countenances.

Conversions

Sinhalese blood may have also entered the Muslims by way of conversions which seems to have even taken place during the days of Portuguese colonization when Christian missionary activity was at its height. Fernao de Queyroz in his *Conquista Temporal e Espiritual de Ceylao* (1687) says that the Muslims have a Cassis (Perhaps Quazi or Cleric versed in Islamic Law) to teach them and to propagate their sect among the Sinhalese. He adds that the licence of the sect was very inviting to the Sinhalese and the favour which they found with the Portuguese also induced them to embrace it. He notes that once when a Franciscan preacher preached to these heathens to become Christians, they replied that they would rather become Moors "for if they became Christians, the Portuguese would not on that account cease to tyrannise over them and to treat them like slaves, which was not done to the Moors, rather they did them many honours, giving them the posts of vidanas, and canacapoles in their villages, letting them come into their houses and treating them like lords".

Also interesting is the fact that the Muslims of old are known to have purchased children of other communities from their parents so that they could be brought up as Muslims. G.A.Dharmaratna (*The Kara-Goi Contest*.1890) observed in the latter part of the nineteenth century that "the Moors add to their number poor Singhalese boys and girls who are duly received into their community" while Paul E.Pieris (*Ceylon. The Portuguese Era. Vol.II* 1914) observed in the early part of the twentieth century: "The purchase of boys from parents who are too poor to maintain them, for the purpose of bringing them up as Mohammedans, is still a popular practice among the Moors". He adds that such converts are known as *Maulas*. This term which conveys the meaning of 'client' or 'ally' is often applied to freed slaves in Arabic literature. These *Maulas*, it is obvious, were assimilated into the community, so that it is possible

that they too contributed a significant infusion of Sinhalese blood to the Sri Lankan Muslim community. This would also suggest that there are Muslims whose Sinhalese ancestry has been acquired not only through the maternal line as seen earlier, but also in the paternal line.

Sinhalese ge-names

We also know that many Muslims of the Kandyan districts have had definite hereditary patronymics of the *vāsagam* type found among the Sinhalese. This is the *ge-* or *gedara-nama*, a Sinhala term meaning ‘house name’. For instance, one could still find among the Kandyan Moors patronymics like Araccige, Lekamge, Galgedara, Lindegedara, Kandedgedara, Vedaralalage-gedara, Gurunehelage-gedara, Muhandiramla-gedara, Vidanalage-gedara, Kali Mudiyanse-lage-gedara, Yahakugamhala-gedara, Kotmale Adappala-gedara and Nagahadeniya-gedara.

This type of surname precedes one’s Arabic personal name. Thus we find names like Alakoladeniya Gedara Yusuf Lebbe, Kurugoda Vidanalage Gedara Abdul Hamid Wahabdin and Kandedara Abdul Gafur Sitti Nafiya. Such ge-names seem to have been in existence for a considerable period of time, for among the names of 17th, 18th and 19th century Kandyan Moor physicians given by Mohamed Sameer (Personages of the Past. Moors, Malays and other Muslims of the past of Sri Lanka.1982) we come across names like Meegahayate gedere gurunanalage Uduma Lebbe, Liyamagaha Kotuwe Wederale Sulaiman Lebbe, Rajakaruna Behethge Mudiyanse Abdul Qadir and Palkumbure Vaidyatileke Rajakaruna Gopalana Mudiyanse-lage Mohamed Udayar. What is however interesting is that the Moors of the maritime districts like Alutgama, Beruwala and Maggona also formerly bore ge-names which is widely attested in the Dutch Tombos covering the period 1766-1771 where we find such names like Ibrahim Tandellage Ahamadoe Nainde, Daroebesie Lienege Oemoer Lebbe, Iratnewalli Aratjege Oedoema Lebbe, Ismail Mokedonge Oemoer Lebbe, Pawelekodige Sleman Lebbe, Kopeaediaerlage Ibrahim Lebbe, Mamina Marekelage Ahamadoe and Assena Lebbelage Potoema Natja (Sri Lanka National Archives Dutch Tombos 1/3807 & 1/ 3764)

It is possible that such names, at least in some instances, were originally borne by the Sinhalese ancestresses of these Moor families who passed it down to their offspring, thus ensuring its continuity. In the alternative, it would indicate the readiness of the Moors to adopt the salient features of the host culture so as identify themselves more closely with their Sinhalese neighbours with whom they maintained friendly relations. Parallel situations are not lacking elsewhere such as for instance, the Turkic-speaking Muslim peoples of Central Asia who following Russian practice follow their personal names with the names of their fathers suffixed with –ov e.g. Karimov, Sultanov and Rakhmanov. There is reason to believe that at least a few ge-names such as Muhandiram-lāge borne by a number of Moor families were acquired as a result of their ancestors being appointed to the high office of Muhandiram etc by the Kandyan

kings. The same may hold true of names like Vidanalage 'House of the Village Head-man'. Vedaralalage 'House of the Physician' indicates that the folk bearing this name are descended from medical men.

The Muslims of the Eastern Province are also known to possess kudis or matrilineal clans among them with names of Sinhala origin, namely, Ranasinga Mudaliyar Kudi and Verrisinga Aracci Kudi, Sinhalese derived names meaning 'Clan of the Lion of War Chieftain' and 'Clan of Lion Hero Headman' respectively (See Crucible of Conflict. Tamil and Muslim Society on the East Coast of Sri Lanka. Dennis Mc. Gilvray.2008). This may well suggest that the ancestors of these clans were Sinhalese, which is surprising given the overwhelming influence of the Tamil social milieu in the life of the Muslims of these parts.

Adoption of Sinhala Language

The Sri Lankan Muslims who to this day still largely speak Tamil do not seem to have had that strong linguistic consciousness that has characterized Tamil folk such as those of Jaffna. Indeed, we find a situation today where many Muslim youth in the largely Sinhalese-majority areas in the Western, Central and Southern Provinces are gradually eschewing Tamil and adopting Sinhala in its place. This process is largely attributable to education in the Sinhala medium. The majority of Muslim students in the Sinhalese-majority areas receive their education today in the Sinhala medium.

Indeed, the need for education in the Sinhala vernacular was felt about the middle part of the twentieth century or perhaps even earlier, particularly among the Kandyan Muslims. W.A.Dullewe, the President of a village council in Matale could observe well over hundred years ago: "It is worthy of remark, to their credit, that Moors show a greater love of learning than the Sinhalese. The Moormen of the distant village Nikawatawana have got up themselves a Sinhalese school of their own in the village, taking a Kandyan as the teacher" (Reports on the working of village councils.1877. Papers laid before the Legislative Council of Ceylon.1877.1878). The Report of the Kandyan Peasantry Commission (Sessional Paper XVIII 1951) noted of the Muslims of the Central and Uva Provinces: "They realize and consider that their future is so closely linked with the Sinhalese peasantry midst whom they live, that it would be in their future interest and betterment if Sinhalese became their medium of instruction". Instruction in the Sinhala medium has had the effect of gradually displacing Tamil as the home language among the younger generation. M.A.Nuhman (Sri Lankan Muslims. Ethnic Identity within Cultural Diversity. 2007) observes: "There is a growing tendency among the school going generation who study in the Sinhala medium, to use Sinhala as their first language and speak in Sinhala even with their Muslim friends and parents. They do not read and write Tamil, that shows a shift in their mother tongue".

It should also be pointed out that during the 1950's, when the official Language issue was at its peak, Muslim leaders like Badiuddin Mahmud and Razik Fareed did not think it odd to be among the most fervent advocates of the 'Sinhala Only' policy which sought to make Sinhala the sole official language of the country, replacing English, despite the fact that the Moor constituencies they represented were for the most part a Tamil-speaking people. In fact, Badiuddin Mahmud who was to become a powerful Muslim Minister in the 1970's under the left-leaning United Front Government is known to have propagated among his southern co-religionists as far back as the 1950s the need to learn Sinhala and adopt it as their mother tongue (Enkal Talaivar Badiuddin. A.W.M.Hanseer.1989). There are even those who believe that Mahmud was the first Sri Lankan who wanted Sinhala as the only official language in an independent Sri Lanka. As far back as 1938, addressing the Muslims of Galle, he is known to have declared that "Muslims did not get any benefit by accepting Tamil language. Today or tomorrow, we will definitely get independence and Sinhala should be the official language".

Sir Razik Fareed, another well known Muslim political figure is also known to have fervently supported the 'Sinhala Only' policy. He was one among the five members and the only one from the minorities who voted for a motion at the State Council in 1944 to make Sinhala the sole official language. In a fairly lengthy speech on the subject in Parliament on 13th June 1956 he declared in no uncertain terms that he was the happiest man present there, because, he said "the dream I dreamt and the vision I saw 12 years ago are a reality today – that the Sinhalese language be the only official language of Sri Lanka". Among the reasons for supporting the Bill he cited were among others the fact that he was convinced more than ever before that "one language alone will serve us as a unifying factor of the different communities. One official language will be the emblem of ideal homogeneity of a nation and, very logically, it should be the language of the majority, the Sinhalese". He also went on to add that he did not wish to be "part to the political genocide of my race, the Moor community, by another race, the Tamil community, which is stretching its treacherous tentacles to draw us into the whirlpool called the Tamil-speaking nation and thus annihilating a race with history, culture and religion of its own" (Hansard.13 June 1956). Such a policy was no doubt largely motivated by political considerations, prompted by the desire to gain the favour of the majority community and their leaders in a largely Sinhalese-dominated political set-up. Nevertheless the scant opposition to it only goes on to show that the Muslim masses were not too concerned with the issue of the Tamil language being given parity of status despite the fact that at that time they spoke it as their home language and were largely if not solely literate in it.

Today Sinhala has come to figure very prominently in the social life of the country's Muslims, particularly the younger generation. Not only do many opt to study in the Sinhala medium, but they have also adopted it as the preferred medium of communication among themselves. One could even find the *khutbah* or sermon before the congregational *Jumu'a* prayer on Fridays being sometimes delivered in Sinhala in certain areas, particularly in the Western Province.