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Lion's blood: social media, everyday nationalism and anti-Muslim mobilisation among Sinhala-Buddhist youth

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Sri Lanka has recently seen an upsurge in aggression towards ethnic minorities, and Muslims in particular, by newly formed extremist Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist groups. The politicisation of Buddhism is not new but the development and use of social media for political purposes and for advancing ethno-nationalist agendas is a recent feature of Sri Lankan public and political life. This study explores the parallel emergence of new media technologies and the most recent forms of ethno-nationalism among Sri Lankan youth. A campaign known as *SinhaLe* is used as an entry point to explore broader issues of identity, religion and politics. The article uses an anthropological approach that combines digital ethnography with in-depth interviews and pays close attention to individual narratives. The article concludes that social media is offering a new forum for the expression of identity that not only mirrors 'what is out there' but also provides opportunities to (re)produce viral politics as a form of 'everyday nationalism' created from below.

Keywords: Sri Lanka; social media; Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism; youth; viral politics

Introduction

Researchers have begun to take note of the role played by mobile Internet and social media in modern Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism (Jayasekera 2013, 113) and anti-Muslim mobilisation (Haniffa et al. 2015, 64; Silva 2016, 125), and they have observed how extremist Sinhala-Buddhist groups are making use of new media technologies (Stewart 2014, 241). Internet access and the use of social media by young people in particular have been accelerating in Sri Lanka (Weerasendera 2014; CPA 2016b). Young people are of particular research interest since they so readily embrace new media technologies and use them as tools for exploring and establishing identity. This article therefore focuses on youth and explores the parallel emergence of new media technologies and the most recent forms of ethno-nationalism. Social media has not given rise to the post-war surge in anti-Muslim sentiment, but its role in the development of contemporary Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist discourse is important to understand. This article aims to explore everyday forms of nationalism among Sinhala Buddhist youth, and an ethno-nationalist campaign, *SinhaLe*, that has gone viral on the Internet is used as an example. This campaign is part of a broader

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Sinhala-Buddhist extremist nationalist movement that has gathered momentum online. Here, I shall explore how youth encounter and perceive ethno-nationalist content in social media. Hargittai (2010) points out that young people, born as ‘digital natives’, generally are assumed to be universally savvy with new media and communication technologies but finds that web-skills and use greatly differ and must be critically examined. Of interest here are not only the overt and extreme ethno-nationalist content they access on the Internet, but also less explicit messages. Billig (1995) coined the term ‘banal nationalism’, which has evolved into a subfield of ‘everyday nationalism’ studies, focusing on ordinary people’s agency and lived experience.

The everyday nationalism approach therefore seeks to offer an empirical lens for Hobsbawm’s (1992,10) affirmation to consider the dual aspects of nationalism, which are ‘constructed essentially from above’ and ‘which cannot be understood unless also analyzed from below’, conceived by Hobsbawm as the ‘assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people’ (Knott 2015, 1).

The study on which this article is based used an anthropological approach that combines digital ethnography with in-depth interviews and pays close attention to individual narratives. Data was gathered between October 2015 and April 2016. During this time, *SinhaLe* was being hotly debated by interlocutors and it was prominent in social media flows and public discourse. The study revealed the importance of social media in the everyday lives of Sri Lankan youth and in the shaping of notions of identity and community. In this way, social media also contributes to the (re) production of everyday nationalism from below.

The article begins by framing the inquiry and describing the context of social media and Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism in today’s Sri Lanka. This is followed by a closer look at the *SinhaLe* phenomenon. Two vignettes of the role of social media in the everyday lives of young people are then presented. The article concludes with a summary of findings and reflections for future research.

Social media: making or breaking?

In a TED talk from 2015, Wael Ghonim, the Egyptian Google employee whose anonymous Facebook page helped launch the Tahir Square revolution in early 2011, said

I once said that if you want to liberate a society, all you need is internet, I was wrong ... The Arab spring revealed social media’s greatest potential but also exposed its greatest shortcomings. The same tool that united us to topple dictators eventually tore us apart (TED 2015).

In other words, social media can both make and break community. However, my interest here is not simply to judge whether social media is a good or bad thing or whether it is more divisive than integrative, but rather to better understand the various ways in which it affects our lives. By 2016, the number of people using mobile social media grew by 30%, and by 2017 more than half the world’s population had Internet access (We Are Social 2017, January 24). Many features of the digital (r)evolution have been studied from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, although most studies to date have been influenced by natural scientific methods (see Miller et al. 2016, 11). While digital platforms may be relatively uniform the world over, the cultural contexts in which they are used differ, and this is where the holistic and comparative approaches of anthropology, using in-depth empirical case studies, have a unique contribution to make.

In Boyd’s (2014) detailed study of networked teenagers in the US she proposes that social media has not only provided new ways for youngsters to socialise, but it has also

reconfigured political engagement. She notes that although a virtual social network is not necessarily political, its existence facilitates the sharing of political views among young people (Boyd 2014, 206). “‘Teens’ practices in social media are neither frivolous nor without impact in other parts of public and civic life, whether they are trying to be political or not’ (ibid., 207). This observation is also pertinent to Sri Lankan youth.

Boyd (2014) notes that teenagers are coming of age at a time when virtual social networks are a natural part of their everyday lives, while their parents often worry about the risks. She also borrows Hargittai’s (2010) distinction between digital naïves and digital natives to highlight the fact that ‘just because teens are comfortable using social media to hang out does not mean that they are fluent in or with technology’ (ibid., 22).

Social media has gained considerable ground in the past decade in Sri Lanka¹, and it should be taken into consideration in any attempt to understand contemporary politics, ethno-nationalism and identity. Jayasekera (2013) notes its importance as a rapid, censorship-resistant means of spreading hatred and in the organisation of modern Sinhala nationalism (2013, 113). Some political commentators have announced the arrival of e-democracy (Gunawardene 2015). In a report released in April 2016, the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) in Colombo highlighted the role played by social media in political campaigning in the lead up to the August 2015 General Election: ‘The phenomenon of existing Facebook groups, pre-dating the General Election, being appropriated for party political campaigning and propaganda couched in hate speech is a new development in Sri Lankan social media and politics’ (CPA 2016a, 3). In the January 2016 CPA report, *Consumption & perceptions of mainstream & social media in the western province*, the authors note that media literacy is generally poor in Sri Lanka and that widespread distrust of the media fuels alienation from politics (CPA 2016b, 4). They also note that the shift from terrestrial to online news-casting is increasing citizens’ chances to access information when they want and to share it along with their own opinions. Further, the report states that the 18 to 24-year-old age group accesses mainstream media mainly through smartphones, Facebook and chat apps and also produces its own information flows that complement or contest the mainstream media (CPA 2016b, 4–5). This resonates with the findings of the present study.

Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism in post-war Sri Lanka

The armed conflict in Sri Lanka between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan government that spanned from 1983 to 2009 was often framed as an ethnic conflict, dividing the population along ethnic – Sinhalese and Tamil – lines. During the civil war the LTTE was perceived as the main threat that overshadowed potential others against Sinhala-Buddhist well being (Dewasiri 2016, 6). However, it is suggested that conflict tensions have shifted from ethnicity to religion (see e.g. Herath and Rambukwella 2015; Wickramasinghe 2015; Holt 2016; Sarjoon, Yusoff, and Hussin 2016). Anti-Muslim sentiment has existed since independence but been eclipsed by the Tamil versus Sinhala conflict (McGilvray 2016, 54). In the post-war period, efforts to bring about reconciliation between Tamils and the Sinhalese have been accompanied by the development of extremist nationalism that now frames the Muslim (Moor) minority as ‘another Other’ that threatens the Sinhala Buddhist nation, race and culture. Violence towards Muslims has been motivated by desires to consolidate a strong Sinhala-Buddhist nation (Sarjoon, Yusoff, and Hussin 2016, 1).

Relations between Sinhala-Buddhists and Muslims were peaceful until the end of the nineteenth century. The first major outbreak of violence between these groups occurred in 1915, and since the 1970s several attacks upon Muslims have taken place

(Nuhman 2016, 18). The most recent of these occurred in Aluthgama, Dharga Town and Beruwala in June 2014 (see Haniffa 2016a).

Between 2012 and 2015, hundreds of incidents were documented in which Muslims, their homes, and their places of worship and business were attacked by Sinhala Buddhists who had mounted a public campaign envisaged as a defence of their country and religious culture. Although Christians and their interests were also frequent targets, Muslims bore the brunt of most of the violence (Holt 2016, 1).

A number of Buddhist monks have become involved in this recent surge in antipathy towards minority groups. Activist monks have become engaged in politics, promoting an extreme form of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism and founding new Buddhist organisations, such as Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), Ravana Balaya (RB) and Sihala Ravaya (SR), which have attracted attention for their aggressive behaviour towards both Muslim and Christian groups² (Dewasiri 2016, 12). The most influential of these organisations, the Bodu Bala Sena, was formed to combat supposed threats to Buddhism due to the purported failure of politicians to protect the culture and religion of the Sinhalese majority (Stewart 2014, 245–246). The founder of the BBS, the Venerable Galagoda Atte Gnana-sara, has been involved in several controversial incidents and in June 2014, he delivered an inflammatory speech at a rally in Aluthgama shortly before anti-Muslim riots broke out. The Sinhalese Jathika Balamuluwa (SJB) – popularly known as *SinhaLe* – is the most recent addition to this kind of organisation, and it too is led by Buddhist monks. Farzana Haniffa observes that the ways in which Muslims have been portrayed in the post-war period as a threat to the Sinhalese, and the way the Sinhalese are encouraged to react to this, represents Sinhaleanness and its entitlements in a qualitatively different way from before (Haniffa 2016b, 125).

Gravers (2015) suggests that

Today's xenophobic Buddhist nationalism seems to contain a combination of the traditional Buddhist cosmological imaginary of a decline in the doctrine – a dark age of moral chaos, and a modern globalized imaginary of other religions – Islam and Christianity in particular – attempting to wipe out Buddhism (Gravers 2015, 1).

However, it is important to note that there are various renderings of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism and its formulation, means and goals are contested. Not all are equally hostile towards minorities, though, as Johan Holt (2016) notes, it is unhelpful to dismiss the BBS and the like as simply aberrations from true Buddhist tradition since we need to understand how they have acquired their power as critics, whom they speak to and why Muslims have been cast as the new threat at this time (Holt 2016, 93). It is against this historical background that I explore the ways in which activist monks and new Buddhist organisations are using new media technologies and how this impacts on the evolution of everyday nationalism among Sri Lankan youth.

Sinhale: Harmless sticker fad or politically driven xenophobic agenda?

SinhaLe first came into the spotlight in the latter part of 2015. A couple of young boys posted an image of a lion with a sword that was taken from Sri Lanka's national flag with the words *Sinha* (lion) written in yellow and *le* (blood) in red together as *Sinhale*. This alludes to the tale of Vijaya, the first king of Sri Lanka, and the belief that the Sinhalese are descendants of this mythological king.

In January 2016, Sampath, a Sinhala-Buddhist in his early twenties said in interview that the *SinhaLe* phenomenon started with an image posted on Facebook showing an arm tattooed with this sign. Sampath said that many people found it beautiful and started to make use of it in their own ways:

Everyone sees it now. It is on Facebook and it is widely shared. People make printouts to put on their motorbikes and vehicles. Once it got onto Facebook, it took on its own life. Now it is both a fashion trend and political, I think. Some say it is racist but I do not think that is true. They say the 'le' means blood, but Sinhale is one word, not two. Sinhale was the first name of Sri Lanka as a nation. It's meaning is simply Sri Lanka.

However, although some interpret the term *SinhaLe* in these less xenophobic and violent ways, the notion plays upon ancient notions of Sinhala-Buddhist unity and supremacy and evokes a discourse about 'pure-blood'. *SinhaLe* rapidly gained currency online and various *SinhaLe* Facebook groups, with anonymous or vague origin, began cropping up. People began posting selfies brandishing the *SinhaLe* symbol alongside patriotic memes and *SinhaLe* products such as caps, t-shirts and stickers could be purchased or downloaded free of charge. These type of posts appeared among more extreme Sinhala-Buddhist and sometimes aggressively anti-Muslim ones. The symbol continued to evolve as well. For example, stickers appeared showing blood dripping from the red text and sub-texts such as 'the lion is asleep, if it is woken you will be sorry', or 'it's not a wave, it's a revolution'.

Initially, there was no organisation, no single 'sender' or source of origin, rather a multitude of creative expressions, all were not explicitly anti-Muslim or had the aim to advance a particular political agenda. However, on 6 January 2016, a group calling itself the 'Sinhale Jathika Balamuluwa' (SJB) announced its formation and endorsed the *SinhaLe* campaign. It stated that its aim was to 'safeguard the identity of the Sinhala people and to regenerate the supremacy and pride of the Sinhala people' (Daily Mirror 2016, January 6). On 23 January, the SJB organised a motorcade from Colombo to Kandy and posts from the event were spread on *SinhaLe* Facebook pages. The SJB was thus formed when the *SinhaLe* phenomenon had already been in existence for some time. The organisation therefore contributed to the discourse but did not initiate or control it and the *SinhaLe* Facebook groups and online materials the informants engaged with were diverse in nature and origin. The Deputy Secretary of the SJB, Jathika Balamuluwa Aruna Jayaratne, told the *Sunday Observer* on 31 January 2016 that the *SinhaLe* campaign had not been launched by any organisation but that the SJB offered it leadership in an organisational format. He had uploaded the *SinhaLe* image as his Facebook profile image and begun sharing it: 'I was impressed when I saw some pictures of the *SinhaLe* sticker on a vehicle, which had been sent to me by my Facebook friends who had stressed the need to spearhead the sticker campaign'. He then started promoting the campaign through his Facebook page more systematically, calling upon people to spread the idea on behalf of the nation rather than just pasting stickers on their vehicles. He explained: 'Currently, over 43,000 people have joined my Facebook page. *SinhaLe* is not my concept. It originated from the people themselves' (Kumarasinghe 2016, January 31).

SinhaLe thus evolved into what John Postill has called a political viral i.e. 'digital contents of a political nature that spread epidemically across online platforms, mobile devices and face-to-face settings' (Postill 2012, 178). Postill notes that this kind of campaign raises questions about 'the methodological challenges of studying the techno-political contexts that foster and inhibit the spread of virals and about the extent to which virals strengthen or undermine public discourse' (Postill 2012, 179).

Since January 2016, some *SinhaLe* Facebook pages have disappeared, others have changed name and new ones have emerged. Two groups were examined in this study though they are no longer active³. More males than females were active in these groups. Their posts presented extremist nationalistic content that portrayed Muslims as immoral and as a threat to Sri Lankan Buddhism and Buddhists. They included items such as video clips from rallies and speeches, Buddhist moral memes and anti-government material mixed with selfies and groupies showing how people use the *SinhaLe* symbol. The post that was shared most in January and February 2016 was a video of a woman wearing a burqa and a caption saying that Muslims should be eradicated from Sri Lanka, that the Sinhalese should resist the growth of the Muslim population and that if they see someone wearing a Burqa, they should have the courage to remove it. In the *Sunday Observer* 31 January 2016, journalist Sanjana Hattotuwa wrote that the campaign is essentially racist, mixing elements of violent xenophobia, Islamophobia, racial slurs and hate speech in what is promoted as a campaign signifying love for country and patriotic zeal. The fans and followers create echo chambers, where radicalisation is fostered by the production, publication, dissemination and discussion of deeply racist material (Hattotuwa 2016).

Nationalist activist and blogger Malinda Seneviratne, in 2016, January 29, notes that *SinhaLe* is somewhat confusing and that it is not the sticker that is problematic but rather its association with racist and intolerant organisations and groups. He writes that the word itself is problematic in its ahistorical break, i.e. Sinha-Le instead of Sinhale, with 'le' meaning blood, and its portrayal in red which leads to associations of violence (Seneviratne 2016).⁴ Broader debate also concerns whether recently formed extremist movements should be considered temporary and peripheral or as part of an organised hegemonic Buddhist social order with influence upon Sri Lankan public-political life (Dewasiri 2016, 1). *SinhaLe* activities have waxed and waned, both online and in society at large, and other Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist actors and virals have emerged. *SinhaLe* is therefore one example of how a contemporary viral campaign evolves and resonates with the everyday lives of young social media users.

Fieldwork and methodology

This article is based upon two months of fieldwork, conducted in two periods, one in late 2015 and one in early 2016. Interviews and participant observation were carried out in a rural area in southern Sri Lanka and in Colombo. Altogether, 35 individuals were interviewed and 42 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with young adults aged between 17 and 30 years. The data also included informal observations and conversations. Two research assistants in Colombo and an interpreter in the South helped with data collection and translation. The article is based mainly upon material gathered in the rural South. Interlocutors were contacted using networks established during earlier research that I conducted in Sri Lanka (2004–2008) and a snowball method. I have known some of the people interviewed for almost ten years and some were interviewed on several occasions. Others were new acquaintances whom I met through friends and colleagues. Although contexts differed, the same interview guide was used in all interviews. Some of the informants assumed that as a western academic, I would be critical of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. However, the people in the village in the South knew from my earlier research that I have a long-standing interest in Buddhism and this was to my advantage. It meant people felt more comfortable expressing their opinions to me and this made for 'thicker ethnography'.

I agreed to become Facebook ‘friends’ with those of my interlocutors who requested it. This gave me a chance to access another layer of ethnography and to remain virtually ‘present’ even after leaving Sri Lanka. I examined two Sinhala-Nationalistic Facebook groups to see which posts had the greatest number of ‘shares’ in January and February 2016. I noted the content of these posts and the gender balance of those who had commented or responded positively to them. I make no firm distinction between people’s online and offline worlds but treat both as part of their everyday lives. As Horst and Miller write: ‘Not only are we just as human within the digital world, the digital also provides new opportunities for anthropology to help us understand what it means to be human’ (Horst and Miller 2012, 4).

Ethnographic vignettes

The following ethnographic vignettes focus on two young men from the rural South.⁵ They were selected for presentation here since they were outspoken and active on social media and expressed nationalistic views.⁶ I was fortunate in enjoying good rapport with both of them, and this helped me move beyond simply examining the nature of their online activities and enabled me to contextualise their Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism within their everyday lives.

Sampath

Sampath is in his early twenties and lives in a small rural village in southern Sri Lanka. The village is situated on the outskirts of a popular tourist destination, though it does not attract many tourists itself. The difference between the village and the tourist site is evident in the environment and in the way people live. As you walk from the tourist area towards the village, you first pass a myriad of small business and hotels, tourists in bathing suits and surfers with boards on their scooters. It is noisy and bustling. Gradually the pace slows and hotels and tourists give way to private homes and villagers going about their everyday chores.

Sampath has finished his A-levels and is now taking a course in computer software engineering. Neither of his parents have any higher education, but they run a family business that is doing well and they pursue a traditional way of life in the village. The family is better off than most of the villagers and has a large, modern house. Sampath was one of very few in the village who acquired a personal computer in his teens. He soon became computer literate and was quick to adopt new media technologies. Apart from his interest in computer skills, he spends a lot of time with his friends. He is also active in the local branch of the Young Men’s Buddhist Association (YMBA), is a fan of several extreme Sinhala-Buddhist Facebook groups and shares *SinhaLe* material on his Facebook page. He is outspoken about his support for Budu Bala Sena (BBS) and he voted for them in the 2015 election when they contested for Buddhist People’s Front (BJP). He tells me that his interest in politics was sparked some years ago when he began seeing Facebook posts by BBS about ‘the Muslim issue’. This was a turning point for him: ‘Budu Bala Sena started it. So now people understand this problem and have started to post and share things about this and about what is happening in other countries. In that way, I got interested’ (Interview 151101). As Suren Raghavan observes, BBS uses modern tactics and their Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Wikipedia pages are very active (Raghavan 2016, 103–104).

Sampath’s parents do not agree with his engagement and do not support BBS. On the contrary, they worry about his aggressive attitude towards minorities and his reluctance to

follow in his father's footsteps and work in the family business. Sampath prefers to spend time with his friends online and he is almost constantly logged onto social media sites on his smartphone. He spends most of his time on Facebook but uses other social media platforms as well. When he talks about politics and religion, it is clear that his interest in these issues has been kindled and amplified by social media. He jokes about how young village boys go to the phone shop and ask to buy 'a phone with Facebook'. He says that most youth in the village are gullible and uninformed about Internet and social media: 'They use it, but they don't know really know how it works'.

Sampath seems to inhabit a very different world from that of his parents, who find it hard to understand his values and knowledge about the Internet. What is important to him is not important to his parents and vice versa. He expresses frustration about the current situation in Sri Lanka and the lack of opportunities for youth, even for the educated. He says that the only thing that matters in Sri Lanka is having connections and consequently, he is anxious about his future. He dreams of a secure, well-paid job in the telecom sector, but he says that to get one you have to know or bribe a politician.

If I can dream and get a chance to move from the village I would do it and go to Europe of course [sarcastic tone]! But perhaps it is possible for me to go to Colombo. But you know, Sri Lanka is the best country in the world. There are some problems, okay, but there is no other country like Sri Lanka. The main problem is peoples' mind-set. They need to change! Some people here never change, no matter what happens! They have an old mind-set and they do not see what is happening in the country and change accordingly (Interview 151030).

Sampath says that many of his friends became interested in the nationalist cause in the same way as he did and they share his opinions. However, he also says that some disagree with him and say there is no 'Muslim issue', and that people like him are breaking the country apart and will start another civil war. Sampath says he is not worried about their criticisms and is convinced that increasing numbers of people will come to understand, just as he has.

In Sri Lanka, the people who have started to use social media understand the problem. The people who are not on social media just blame us and say the BBS is bad and wrong. But they actually don't know the inside of the problem. People who are on Facebook and see the posts and videos understand the problem. They understand that it is not about putting another religion down but that we have to be careful about our own religion. If Muslims were the top people in Sri Lanka the culture would be very different. In that case we can't even have Buddhist books. That is not allowed in Muslim countries, they will whip a person for that (Interview 160207).

Sampath's engagement in anti-Muslim activities, such as anti-halal and kill-no-cows campaigns, and his Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist stance were evoked by information he found online rather than by anything he experienced in his local community. He has come to fear not only expansion of the Muslim community but the threat he believes is posed by the Tamil and Christian minorities. He is convinced that the mainstream media is not covering this issue properly and that it is therefore the responsibility of BBS and campaigns such as *SinhaLe* to tell the truth and alert the Sinhala people to need to defend their religion. Despite the fact that the current government is generally considered to permit greater freedom of speech than the previous one, Sampath complains that there is less freedom of speech now. He has never experienced any problems with the Muslims in his own community but frames this as a general threat and says that the problems have thus far occurred elsewhere in Sri Lanka.

I do have Muslim friends. But there are some things in their culture, some Muslims are involved in these bad things and some are willing to do anything to spread their religion. I am not talking about all Muslims. I have a good Muslim friend. He can talk Sinhala. We are sometimes talking about this. He is against Muslim racism, against extremism in Sri Lanka. There are groups trying to recruit here, he is talking about this too. Some say that we are trying to throw out the Muslims from the country but you can see every day on the news that there are problems with Muslims all over (Interview 160207).

Sampath describes the ‘Muslim threat’ using the slogans and rallying cries of organisations such as BBS. He cites claims that Muslims have many children and says this is a deliberate strategy for taking over the country. He thinks that Sinhala Buddhists should therefore be encouraged to have more children. He sees Islamic practices, such as halal slaughter and dress codes, as incompatible with Buddhism and he fears that they will be forced upon the Sinhalese if they do not safeguard their culture. He says that Muslims destroy other religious sites and are willing to kill for their religion. As Farzana Haniffa explains: ‘For a section of the Sinhala Buddhist population that follows the BBS, hating Muslims became one of the ways in which they could perform their ethnic and gender identities’ (Haniffa 2016b, 123).

In conversation, it seems as though Buddhism is of utmost importance to Sampath, but he does not follow the traditional Buddhist practices of visiting the temple and observing rituals. Although he claims that he is Buddhist by birth and that his Buddhist heritage goes back many generations, when I asked him what else made him Buddhist, he had difficulty responding. His use of Sinhala Buddhism as a marker of identity seemed to be accompanied by a deep-seated insecurity with regard to practice and doctrine. He said he wanted to be a ‘good Buddhist’ but this was manifested in his engagement in the Sinhala-Buddhist discourse in social media rather than traditional religious activities at the local temple.

Sampath argues that most Sinhala Buddhist youth do not care about their religion and do not understand that it is under threat. He sees this partly as a failure of the older generation to teach children about morality and religion. He says he respects the fact that Muslim youth, by contrast, are more dedicated and disciplined in their religion. The Muslim ‘Other’ is thus cast as both an object of envy and an enemy. Paradoxically, Sampath’s Buddhist identity is both strong and insecure and Muslims are regarded as both commendable and condemnable, but the nationalist discourse he engages with on social media leaves little room for nuances. Moreover, while the post-war hostility towards Muslims in Sri Lanka has been amply discussed (see e.g. Amarasingam and Bass 2016; Holt 2016) the kind of ambivalence that young people like Sampath express is rarely noted.

With us, I mean the Sinhala people, the main problem is that we do not care about our religion. Tamils and Muslims care a lot about their religion, but with us, we have no rules. We are never told you should do this, not do that and so on. That is why people have no fear to do bad things. Muslim youth are praying and going to their mosque. They are respecting their religion. That is why Islam is spreading. Sinhala people don’t care, don’t protect Buddhism. Muslims are not like that (Interview 151030).

Sampath is not alone in identifying a lack of ‘care’ about religion and discipline as dangerous. Other informants echoed this sentiment and identified Islam as an existential threat on several levels. They feared losing not only their culture and identity but also territory. Like Sampath, they described Sinhala-Buddhism as threatened both by influences from the outside and from erosion from within.

Sampath is searching for a sense of identity and meaning and is striving to be a moral person. He wants to do the right thing but is seeking guidance in shaping the future. He has one foot in the village and his parents' way of life, though he sees no future there. Instead, it is the digital realm that offers him hope of the freedom to search for and create meaning on his own terms. The Sinhala-Buddhist extremist nationalist online discourse has offered him a sense of agency, community and purpose.

Madu

Madu is another young man from the same village as Sampath. He is 22 years old and is one of the few among his friends who found employment after finishing school. He works in a computer hardware shop in the closest town and dreams of starting his own business one day. His father works as a caretaker for a foreigner who owns a holiday home in the neighbourhood and his mother passed away some years ago (Interview 160201).

Madu describes his village as a good place to grow up although he admits that there are also some negative aspects and says one has to stay on the right track. He has no intention of leaving and would like to remain in the village. He feels that living conditions have changed a great deal and that people of his generation are more knowledgeable than their parents.

We know about what is right and wrong and what is good and bad. We have a good understanding. I don't get help from anybody. From my age you are free, when you are a child your mother and father tell you that this is good this is bad, then now who is telling? Nobody. I have to decide on my own (Interview 160201).

Here, Madu touches upon themes of morality, norms and values that recurred frequently in conversations with others too. Young people who are active in social media forums have to identify norms and moral boundaries in a fluid social and moral landscape. Like Sampath, Madu also expresses concerns about Sinhala Buddhism and he says that Buddhism is very important to him. He is online for about 10 hours a day on his smartphone, checking for friends' updates and posts relating to religion and politics. Madu was one of the few informants who spoke explicitly of being politically engaged online. He was also involved in political campaigning in his local community before the previous election. He says he believes that social media affected the election outcome and that it is gaining ever more power.

I told my friends, vote like this! In the future Internet will be more like that, forcing people to think in a certain way. More about politics and campaigns like that. The Internet is a place where you can see everything that happens in society. But Facebook is also for fun. I post, share and like. When I think that this is good, not a joke, not a fake, then I share it with my friends. I post things that I think are good for people and what is good for me (Interview 160201).

Madu was not alone in believing that the outcome of the 2015 elections and the defeat of the then president Mahinda Rajapakse were due to the influence of social media. Many informants had noticed an unparalleled political activity online. They said that people had, in an unprecedented fashion, openly put forward their preferred candidate or posted defaming information about those they did not favour. They said they believed that this had had a notable effect on the election.

When talking about *SinhaLe*, Madu said it was some boys who had originally made the logo and that it was not originally a political phenomenon.

It was for the Sinhala people. The meaning of the logo is that the Sinhalese people will always stay together. We will not back down. Even Muslim boys are wearing the *Sinhale* T-shirt; they just think it is a fashion. They think it looks good. But now they are going to stop this. The Muslims are putting an image or text from their religion on their vehicles. And now the government will stop it. They believe that this will divide people and start a conflict. So they will stop it. There is a risk, I know. (Interview 160201).

When we discussed what were hot topics online, Madu mentioned the Muslim issue and he said he is very active in Sinhala-Buddhist groups on Facebook.

There are a lot of postings about the Muslims now. For the Muslim people, religion is their life, they are always with their religion. We are not like that. Someone has said that in the end there will only be Buddhism, all people of other religions will die and only the Buddhists will remain. I like the FB pages on Buddhism; I am always there. A lot of important news is coming from these pages. The things I see and read on Facebook are very important for my life. I believe that within ten years there will be a big fight between Sinhala people and the Muslims. This problem is becoming bigger every day (Interview 160201).

While Madu and Sampath were explicit about their support for the *SinhaLe* campaign and connected it to a cause, there were also ‘supporters’ who wore stickers and liked *SinhaLe* posts but who endorsed the campaign in a less obvious way. They saw these symbols primarily as aesthetically pleasing markers of identity or as simply part of a fashion that has no deeper meaning for themselves or society. As one of my assistants noted, ‘you can see stickers of Bob Marley and Che Guevara at the back of three wheelers all over Sri Lanka, but if you ask the driver why and what it stands for, he might not have a very good idea’. Nevertheless, the symbol represents a particular way of framing Sinhala-Buddhist identity and it is contributing to a form of everyday nationalism.

Like many of the young people in this study, Madu describes social media, and Facebook in particular, as an important part of his life that opens a new space for socialising, expressing personal views and accessing news and information. But these young people also encounter new moral and social dilemmas online and they are aware that people use false accounts, post fake news, engage in sexual harassment and immoral behaviour. They are trying to chart out their identity and worldview by navigating a digital landscape that their parents know little about.

Disparity between the worldviews of parents and teenagers is common in many countries and is not peculiar to Sri Lanka. However, the gap between them tends to widen when parents are illiterate in digital technology and have no experience of social media. Many Sri Lankan youth are active in a context in which there is very little adult control or guidance. The tension youth feel between, on the one hand, the freedom and values they acquire online, and a sense of moral disorder on the other, was evident in conversations with them. They were both deliberately testing boundaries and challenging norms while also waiting for someone to (re)set the moral rules.

Many informants recognised the paradox inherent in enjoying greater freedom of expression while realising that this allowed hatred and immoral behaviour to flourish. Some saw ethno-nationalist campaigns like *SinhaLe* as positive because they exposed social problems and strengthened the sense of community among Sinhala-Buddhists, but others saw them as deepening ethnic and religious divisions in Sri Lanka as a whole. Some also said that although they disagreed with the nationalist message, it is good that these issues are raised and that social media exposes politicians in a new way.

Many of the young people in this study explore these novel ways of communicating simply out of curiosity and they would click to share things their friends had posted without putting a great deal of thought into it. This resulted in some inconsistencies. For instance, on Facebook, a person might simultaneously be a supporter of the political opposition, post Buddhist memes of non-violence and also aggressive anti-Muslim propaganda. In other words, just as they do in ‘real life’, people may express contradictory views in different contexts. However, when this happens online, their opinions becomes explicit, visible and enduring. Conversations about the digital trajectory tended to give a more nuanced picture that shed light on extremist and conflicting views. Peer pressure is also a factor and a ‘like’ on Facebook may represent a token of support for a friend rather than for the content of their post. ‘Liking’ and ‘sharing’ posts may be a way to express identity, but they also function to build and sustain social networks so their content is not always the most important factor. For this reason, care should be taken in drawing conclusions based only on digital content and activity. As meaning-making beings, people’s behaviour is more nuanced than their ‘algorithmic selves’ necessarily reveal.

Summary and discussion

John Postill writes that ‘One question for future research is whether we are witnessing the coming of an era in which political reality is framed by virally shared digital contents – an age of viral reality’ (Postill 2012, 13). The reports of ‘fake news’, ‘a war on media’ and ‘twitter politics’ after Donald Trump’s election in 2016 and with neo-nationalism and high-tech populism gaining ground around the world, this question has become more pertinent than ever. This article has offered insights into the recent surge in ethno-nationalist and anti-Muslim sentiment in Sri Lanka by examining the *SinhaLe* ethno-nationalist campaign and young social media users. The ethnography shows that it was through social media, particularly Facebook, that the *SinhaLe* campaign made its way into the everyday lives of youth. It is unlikely that the informants interviewed would have become so aware of these extremist ideas if they had not been active users of social media. Those who support *SinhaLe* and the BBS believe they have access to a ‘truth’ of which others are ignorant. The nationalist material that they are exposed to plays into their identity formation and worldviews. They express a fervent Buddhist identity that seems to veil a deep-seated insecurity – a fear that Buddhism is being both eroded from within and threatened from the outside by other religions. However, the threatening ‘Muslim Other’ is not only condemned by these young people but is also commended for showing greater piety than the Buddhists they see in their own community. It is not always the nationalistic contents of online posts that prompt young social media users to like or share them; these may simply be ways to consolidate relations in the virtual world. The digital content is thus not the only factor to consider in studying young people’s online behaviour. Social and emotional factors are also relevant.

The *SinhaLe* symbol has gained momentum both online and through various public, private and commercial channels. The way it spread so rapidly by inviting people to participate simply by pasting stickers, sharing memes and posting private pictures, has led one Colombo blogger to describe it as ‘a meme gone wild’ (INDI.CA 2016). But it has also entered the forum of ‘politics proper’ in the form of a political organisation. The extent to which online support for *SinhaLe* contributes to Buddhist-Muslim tensions should be taken seriously. Campaigns like this that go viral may at first appear harmless but the ways in which they affect individuals and society are worthy of further scrutiny. This is particularly so in a country like Sri Lanka, that has a long history of ethnic fragmentation, tension and violence.

This article has discussed how social media in Sri Lanka contain and (re)produce a form of ‘everyday nationalism’ that is created from below. This contributes to new norms concerning what it means to be Sinhalese and encourages participants to view their world through a particular lens. Social media not only reflects ‘what is out there’ but also constitutes a forum in which reality is constructed. As early adopters of new media techniques, Sri Lankan youth are not yet fluent in digital skills yet their ability to engage with others online is generating a new kind of freedom for them, new intergenerational contests over authority and new social and moral dilemmas.

The article has used in-depth ethnographic research to explore current developments in social media and everyday nationalism in Sri Lanka. A greater understanding of how these trends generate inter-ethnic tensions, particularly among various youth groups, is called for, not only in Sri Lanka. Much can be gained by studying new media technologies in relation to politics and identity formation in their specific cultural and historical context and by paying close attention to individual narratives. This kind of study enhances our understanding of the relationship between individual stories, which are rooted in a particular time and place, and the global flows of information that fuel grand narratives.

Notes

1. The social media landscape in Sri Lanka is a fast changing scene and figures should be regarded as indicative of broader trends. In February 2017 there were approximately 5 million Sri Lankans on Facebook and during the year 2016 Sri Lanka’s Internet penetration increased to 30% (Digital Marketer 2017). The annual digital growth trend for active social media users in 2016 was + 50% (We are Social 2017). Facebook is the most popular social media platform and one recent trend are communities which shares opinions and jokes. On Facebook electronic media channels have far more followers than the print media brands (Digital Marketer 2017).
2. Dewasiri (2016) further writes that violent acts of these groups have been well documented by e.g Centre for Policy Alternative 2013 and that they enjoyed a privileged position under the previous government, the Rajapaksa regim. ‘The public perception that these organisations command strong government backing was a major factor in driving away votes of non-Buddhists from the Rajapaksa-led UPFA coalition in the recent elections’ (2016, 12).
3. The Facebook groups were, Sinhale +, and Island nation of Sinhale, both had about 35,000 followers in February 2016.
4. Variations in English spelling varies in social media, print media and also in more academic texts; Sinhale, SinhaLe, Sinha-le, Sinha-Le. In my own writing I have chosen to use SinhaLe but in references and quotes I use the spelling of the particular source.
5. Pseudonyms are used for names of persons and places.
6. They could be seen as representative for the group of informants from the south with similar views but as this is a minor explorative study not generalised beyond that.

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