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'This coconut was the one that finally worked': Cursing for peace and justice in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This article analyses how Sandya Ekneligoda re-purposes cultural and religious cursing rituals to challenge disappearances, impunity, and illiberal peacebuilding in post-war Sri Lanka. Drawing on several cosmologies (principally Buddhist and Hindu), she invokes archetypal female deities/demons for healing and revenge. She uses performances of ritual cursing not only to keep her husband's disappearance in the public eye and to critique domestic justice processes, but also to connect with other families of the disappeared across Sri Lanka's ethnic, religious, and linguistic divides. In January 2022, she performed a cursing ritual against the ruling Rajapaksa clan, which ended with smashing a coconut. Six months later, a popular uprising had ejected the Rajapaksas from power. The article makes an original empirical contribution to the peacebuilding and transitional justice literature, which highlights the need to pay greater attention to (female) cosmological power, negative emotions, and non-liberal forms of resistance to illiberal peacebuilding.

Keywords: cursing rituals, disappearances, peacebuilding, protest, Sri Lanka, transitional justice

Introduction

In January 2022, Sandya Ekneligoda publicly performed a cursing ritual against Sri Lanka's ruling Rajapaksa clan. She appealed to two powerful female deities, Pattini and Kali, to wreak divine/demonic vengeance for the disappearance of her husband 12 years earlier and to challenge the Rajapaksas' illiberal peacebuilding. Six months later, a popular uprising, the *Aragalaya-Porattam* ('struggle' in Sinhala and Tamil) drove the Rajapaksas from power and saw their ancestral home torched. Some credit Sandya's violent curse for the Rajapaksas' downfall.

Healing rituals that are performed to exorcise bad spirits or re-establish social order have gained increasing attention for their role in facilitating transitions from violence. In contrast, ritual cursing is frequently associated with invoking and perpetuating violence. In this article, we re-appraise the role that ritual cursing can play in peacebuilding and transitional justice. In so doing, we make an original contribution to both peace and conflict studies and transitional justice scholarship. We add an important empirical study of women's peace activism channelling female cosmological power. We also highlight the need to pay greater attention to cosmological power and negative emotions when pursuing the 'local turn'. Finally, this article helps lay a further foundation for linking the growing literature on illiberal peacebuilding with resistance studies.

The article proceeds in four sections. First, we look at the role of healing and cursing rituals in the context of the local turn in peacebuilding and transitional justice. Second, we provide a brief historical sketch of Sri Lanka, with a focus on cursing. Third, we examine how the strongest women's movement in post-independence Sri Lanka turned cursing from private ritual into public protest. Fourth, we offer a novel and nuanced analysis of Sandya's ritual cursing in pursuit of peace and justice.

Rituals in Peacebuilding and Transitional Justice

The 'local turn' in peacebuilding¹ and transitional justice² prompted interest in local cosmologies and rituals in war-affected settings, especially in the Global South. This coincided with renewed attention to cosmology, though in ways that shed earlier anthropological 'assumptions about holism and exoticizing hierarchies of cultural perspectives'.³ Cosmologies refer to shared understandings of seen and unseen forces that shape life-worlds.⁴ They are both ontological and practical – that is actors make 'practical uses of cosmologies as resources for sensemaking, in organizations and beyond'.⁵ Cosmologies are frequently embodied and enacted through rituals. Rituals 'are not "symbolic" or "representational" of something else' but rather 'are power'.⁶ Hence, they effect change in the world.

Consequently, some peacebuilding scholars and practitioners have sought to harness cosmological power and rituals to promote conflict transformation, peacebuilding, and reconciliation. For example, Lisa Schirch contends that 'Religious rituals that support peacebuilding ... hold a special role in both bringing human beings back into relationship after the experience of conflict or violence and in bringing back a sense of spiritual wholeness or holiness where humans have suffered a spiritual crisis of meaning or departed from their religious values in the midst of conflict.'⁷ According to her, religious rituals can heal trauma, foster reconciliation, and promote social transformation.⁸

Since the early 2000s, peacebuilding and transitional justice have embraced healing rituals that promote accountability and repair for communities affected by mass violence.⁹ Besides the wider turn towards the local, this reflects a willingness to

¹ See, e.g., Roger Mac Ginty and Oliver P. Richmond, 'The Local Turn in Peace Building: a critical agenda for peace', *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 5 (2013): 763-783.

² See, e.g., Rosalind Shaw and Lars Waldorf, eds., *Localizing Transitional Justice: Interventions and Priorities after Mass Violence* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

³ Allen Abramson and Martin Holbraad, 'Contemporary Cosmologies, Critical Reimaginings', *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* 3 (2012): 35. This shift has been given further impetus by late neo-liberalism, climate emergency, and renewed appreciation for Indigenous worldviews and Southern epistemologies. See, e.g., Arturo Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics: The Real and the Possible* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020); Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Bruno Martins, *The Pluriverse of Human Rights: The Diversity of Struggles for Dignity* (London: Routledge, 2021).

⁴ See, e.g., Allen Abramson and Martin Holbraad, *Framing cosmologies: the anthropology of worlds* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014).

⁵ Götz Hoeppe, 'Practical Cosmologies', *Ethnologies* 40, no. 2 (2018): 88.

⁶ Graham Harvey and Amy Whitehead, eds., *Indigenous Religions* (London: Routledge, 2018): 2:2 (emphasis in the original).

⁷ Lisa Schirch, 'Ritual, Religion, and Peacebuilding' in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*, ed. Atalia Omer, R. Scott Appleby, and David Little (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015): 518.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 519-521; Lisa Schirch, *Ritual and Symbol in Peacebuilding* (Bloomfield, MA: Kumarian Press, 2005).

⁹ See, e.g., Lars Waldorf, 'Local Transitional Justice: Customary Law, Healing Rituals, and Everyday Justice' in *An Introduction to Transitional Justice 2nd edition*, ed. Olivera Simić (London: Routledge, 2021).

move beyond liberal-legal and instrumental rationalities to more affective/emotional, embodied, and aesthetic registers. Healing rituals entail both past acknowledgment (symbolic reparations), present care (psycho-social rehabilitation), and future prevention (guarantees of non-recurrence). They take many different forms: *magamba* spirit healers in Mozambique¹⁰; Dinka *cieng* rituals for reintegrating ex-combatants in South Sudan¹¹; adapted *nahe biti boot* reconciliation ceremonies as part of Timor's truth commission¹²; and Fambul Tok's bonfire ceremonies in Sierra Leone.¹³ Healing rituals vary greatly when it comes to how "authentic" (re-invented), grassroots, and elite-captured they are – factors that necessarily affect their legitimacy and efficacy.¹⁴

The most fiercely debated examples were the changed Acholi rituals used in northern Uganda.¹⁵ Like the Dinka rituals, they were meant to be performances to purify polluted bodies and placate bad spirits so that those who disrupted the social order could rejoin their families, clans, and communities. Despite all the scholarly attention and political controversy they attracted, the reworked Acholi rituals never became widespread practices of accountability and reconciliation: 'Not only did most local people doubt the efficacy of these public performances, many were afraid that they might even backfire; namely, because de-sacralising rituals risks incurring further spiritual affliction – a consequence that would have an effect on the entire society' (Meier 2013).

It is understandable that peacebuilding and transitional justice scholars and practitioners would focus on healing rituals. This partly reflects a tendency to romanticize the local. As Birgit Bräuchler and Philipp Naucke argue:

With few exceptions, the local turn so far meant a half-hearted opening up towards local culture through a selective glorification, adoption and decontextualisation of specific elements and traditions, which can turn 'the local' into a stereotypically idealised and homogenised construction being, e.g. egalitarian, inclusive, consensual and harmonious (or inherently passive or

¹⁰ Victor Igreja and Beatrice Dias-Lambranca, 'Restorative Justice and the Role of Magamba Spirits in Post-Civil War Gorongosa, Central Mozambique' in *Traditional Justice and Reconciliation after Violent Conflict: Learning from African Experiences*, ed., Luc Huyse and Mark Salter (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2008).

¹¹ Alex Namu Kamwaria, 'Dinka Community Case Study: Healing Post-Conflict Trauma Through Ritual' in *Coping Rituals in Fearful Times: An Unexplored Resource for Healing Trauma*, ed. Jeltje Gordon-Lennox (SpringerLink 2022): 113-123.

¹² Dionisio Babo-Soares, 'Nahe Biti: Grassroots Reconciliation in East Timor' in *Roads to Reconciliation*, ed. Elin Skaar, Siri Gloppen and Astri Suhrke (Lexington Books, 2005).

¹³ Laura S. Martin, *Navigating Local Transitional Justice Agency at Work in Post-Conflict Sierra Leone* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

¹⁴ See Tim Allen and Anna Macdonald, *Post-Conflict Traditional Justice: A Critical Overview* (London: London School of Economics, 2013).

¹⁵ See, e.g., Tim Allen, 'Bitter Roots: The "Invention" of Acholi Traditional Justice' in *The Lord's Resistance Army: Myth and Reality*, ed. Tim Allen and Koen Vlassenroot (London: Zed Books, 2010): 242-261; Erin Baines, 'Spirits and Social Reconstruction after Mass Violence', *African Affairs* 109 (2010); Sverker Finnström, 'Reconciliation Grown Bitter? War, Retribution, and Ritual Action in Northern Uganda' in *Localizing Transitional Justice: Interventions and Priorities after Mass Violence*, ed. Rosalind Shaw and Lars Waldorf (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

bad). Local inequalities, power struggles, mechanisms of exclusion and suppression don't fit into that picture.¹⁶

In a similar vein, Tim Allen and Kyla Reid 'challenge the proposition that African justice can be readily adapted so that it deals exclusively with benign forms of social healing' by detailing witch-cleansing among the Madi in northern Uganda. In addition, the focus on healing rituals partly reflects a privileging of positive over negative emotions (e.g. forgiveness over resentment) in peacebuilding and transitional justice. Some scholars, however, have argued for greater attention to how negative emotions (such as anger, indignation, and resentment) might actually serve accountability, trust, and social repair after mass violence.¹⁷ Mihaela Mihai argues that 'the politically transformative power of negative emotions could be tapped and channelled for democratic purposes' through 'safe institutional fora' (such as courts) where people can publicly 'learn – or remember – how to take responsibility for their resentment and indignation and embrace democratic norms of social interaction'.¹⁸

To date, there is very little engagement with witchcraft, sorcery, and ritual cursing in peacebuilding and transitional justice literature. Unlike healing rituals, ritual cursing can be seen as the dark side of hybrid (liberal-local) peacebuilding and transitional justice. It can be seen as an illiberal or non-liberal challenge to liberal peacebuilding's secular, rationalistic, and legalistic rationality. The few scholars to have addressed ritual cursing come mainly from feminist peace and conflict studies, reflecting that sub-field's attention to women's affective, embodied, and performative resistance to androcentric violence and peace.¹⁹ In addition, feminist peace and conflict scholarship 'has unpacked and challenged familiar ... "peace stories"'²⁰ about women's peace activists' support for violence.²¹ Still, it is somewhat surprising that there has not been more attention to how individual women and women's movements employ ritual cursing – a form of spiritual and psychosocial violence – for peace and justice activism. What scholarship does exist focuses on women's naked protests, which are controversial among women activists and feminist scholars.²²

¹⁶ Birgit Bräuchler and Philipp Naucke, 'Peacebuilding and conceptualisations of the local', *Social Anthropology* 25, no. 4 (2017): 422–436. Kiran Grewal argues that transitional justice's 'epistemic violence' closes off spaces and rituals where subalterns may claim political agency. Kiran Kaur Grewal, 'The Epistemic Violence of Transitional Justice: A View from Sri Lanka', *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 17, no. 3 (2023): 336.

¹⁷ Thomas Brudholm and Valérie Rosoux, 'The Unforgiving: Reflections on Resistance to Forgiveness after Atrocity', *Law and Contemporary Problems* 72 (2009): 33–49; Sonali Chakravarti, *Sing the Rage Listening to Anger after Mass Violence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2014).

¹⁸ Mihaela Mihai, *Negative Emotions and Transitional Justice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

¹⁹ See, e.g., Laura McLeod and Maria O'Reilly, 'Critical peace and conflict studies: feminist interventions', *Peacebuilding* 7, no. 2 (2019): 127-145.

²⁰ Hanna Ketola, 'Trauma, Memory and Peacebuilding' in *Routledge Handbook of Feminist Peace Research*, ed. Tarja Väyrynen et al. (London: Routledge, 2021), 240.

²¹ Magda Lorena Cárdenas and Jenny Hedström, 'Armed Resistance and Feminist Activism' in *Routledge Handbook of Feminist Peace Research*, ed. Tarja Väyrynen et al. (London: Routledge, 2021), 148-156.

²² Cárdenas and Hedström, 'Armed Resistance and Feminist Activism', 150.

Ritual cursing can be seen as a ‘weapon of the weak’²³ that is used when other avenues of redress are inaccessible or exhausted. Women activists sometimes turn to ritual cursing during or after war because their cultural experience is one of ‘being disempowered’²⁴ and cursing enables them to tap into cosmological power. Women’s cursing in struggles for peace and justice takes many forms in different parts of the world. Diabate lists women’s use of insurgent nakedness as a ‘mode of conflict management or resistance’ in over 20 African countries.²⁵ The best-known example is how Leymah Gbowee, the Liberian peace activist and Nobel Prize winner, threatened to strip naked in public – ‘the most powerful curse available to African women’²⁶ – to keep the warring parties at the negotiation table and push for a peace agreement.²⁷ Similarly, women in Sierra Leone unleashed ‘the worst curse that can be brought upon anyone’ when they collectively bared themselves to the rebel leaders of the Revolutionary United Front to push for an end to war.²⁸

Women activists also use such cursing as part of justice struggles in post-war states. In their study of naked cursing in northern Uganda, Francis Abonga and his co-authors show how Acholi women protesters tapped into three, overlapping sources of power: biopower, symbolic power, and cosmological power.²⁹ As biopower, naked protests can expose the limits of the state’s biopolitics and necropolitics. ‘Purposeful public nakedness – which reveals bodies as defenceless, unprotected, and uncontrollable – communicates an underlying message of the state’s failure to control its subjects, and the breakdown of ... self-discipline’.³⁰ As symbolic power, such protests trouble expected gender performativity and thereby subvert the gendered social order.³¹ Finally, these women’s protests invoke the cosmological power of naked cursing.³² Whereas biopower and symbolic power are usually short-lived, cosmological power ‘allows the effects of the protest – the possibility of suffering due to the curse – to endure beyond the moment of collective action ... [something] particularly valuable in contexts where protest is often shut down quickly and violently’.³³ In this article, we focus on the cosmological power of ritual cursing.

²³ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

²⁴ Rita Manchanda, ‘Women’s Agency in Peace Building: Gender Relations in Post-Conflict Reconstruction’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 40, no. 44/45 (2005): 4740.

²⁵ Naminata Diabate, *Naked Agency: Genital Cursing and Biopolitics in Africa* (Duke University Press 2020).

²⁶ Allison M. Prash, ‘Maternal Bodies in Militant Protest: Leymah Gbowee and the Rhetorical Agency of African Motherhood’, *Women’s Studies in Communication* 38, no. 2 (2015): 198.

²⁷ Maxwell Adjei, ‘Ending Civil War through Nonviolent Resistance: The Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace Movement’, *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 22, no. 9 (2021): 19–35.

²⁸ Zainab Olaitan and Christopher Isike, ‘The Role of the African Union in Fostering Women’s Representation in Formal Peacebuilding: A Case Study of Sierra Leone’, *Journal of African Union Studies* 8, no. 2 (2019): 146.

²⁹ Francis Abonga et al., ‘Naked Bodies and Collective Action: Repertoires of Protest in Uganda’s Militarised, Authoritarian Regime’, *Civil Wars* 22, no. 2–3 (2020): 198–223.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 207.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 207–208.

³² *Ibid.*, 208–209.

³³ *Ibid.*, 209.

Sri Lanka: An accursed land

In Sri Lanka, cursing as a form of justice has historically been associated with women, particularly when other avenues of accountability fail. Kuweni's mythical curse runs through the island's history, connecting the founding of the Sinhalese nation to contemporary political troubles. According to the historical chronicle *Mahavamsa*, the Sinhalese nation traces its roots back to the union of the Indian prince Vijaya and the *yakka* (demon tribe) princess Kuweni. Kuweni helped Vijaya defeat her tribe and gain power. Vijaya took Kuweni as his consort and they had a son and daughter, but when he later cast her out to marry an Indian princess, she cursed him and all his successors.

Sri Lanka has been seen as labouring under Kuweni's curse ever since.³⁴ After independence, the country experienced multiple communal riots, two insurgencies (1971, 1987-1989), a protracted civil war (1983-2009), and terrorist bombings (most recently in 2019). Following their war victory, President Mahinda Rajapakasa and his brother, Defense Minister Gotabaya Rajapaksa, pursued a triumphalist policy of 'illiberal peacebuilding'. Such peacebuilding is a combination of illiberal norms (anti-individualism, anti-pluralism), illiberal practices (rule by law, shrinking civic space, crony capitalism, corruption), and illiberal actors (authoritarian regimes, uncivil society).³⁵ In Sri Lanka's illiberal peacebuilding, the principal norm is an exclusionary Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism, the main practice is repressive authoritarianism, and the key actors are the authoritarian state, China, and militant Buddhist movements.³⁶ In this article, we are mostly concerned with the practice of human rights abuses (principally enforced disappearances) and the attendant norm of impunity.

Successive Sri Lankan governments have disappeared individual human rights defenders, journalists, and other civil society activists. The state first practiced disappearances on a mass scale against Sinhalese-Buddhist youth in the south as part of its counter-insurgency against the Maoist-nationalist *Janatha Vimukthi*

³⁴ See Tilak S. Fernando, 'Kuveni's curse still holds sway', *Ceylon Today*, November 07, 2016, <https://www.lankaweb.com/news/items/2016/11/07/kuvenis-curse-still-holds-sway/>; Neena Mahadev, 'Vijaya and Kuweni Retold: Sri Lanka's Post-War Iconography as an Affirmation of Inter-Community Mixing', in *Multi-Religiosity in Contemporary Sri Lanka*, ed. Mark P. Whitaker, Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake, and Pathmanesan Sanmugeswaran (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021); Savithra Jayasekara, 'Kuveni's Curse, Black July & Ethno-Districts', *Colombo Telegraph* (blog), January 17, 2023, <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/kuvenis-curse-black-july-ethno-districts/>. (accessed 18 October 2023)

³⁵ See Claire Q. Smith, Lars Waldorf, Rajesh Venugopal and Gerard McCarthy, 'Illiberal peace-building in Asia: a comparative overview', *Conflict, Security & Development* 20, no.1 (2020): 1-14; Catherine Owen et al., eds., *Interrogating illiberal peace in Eurasia: Critical perspectives on peace and conflict* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

³⁶ See Malin Åkebo & Sunil Bastian, 'Beyond Liberal Peace in Sri Lanka: Victory, Politics, and State Formation', *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 16, no.1 (2021); Kristine Höglund and Camilla Orjuela, 'Hybrid peace governance and illiberal peacebuilding in Sri Lanka', *Global Governance* 18, no. 1 (2012); David Lewis, 'Sri Lanka's Schmittian peace: sovereignty, enmity and illiberal order', *Conflict, Security & Development* 20, no. 1; Giulia Piccolino, 'Winning wars, building (illiberal) peace? The rise (and possible fall) of a victor's peace in Rwanda and Sri Lanka', *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 9 (2015).

Peramuna (People's Liberation Front) from 1987 to 1991. The state also practiced mass disappearances during and especially at the end of the brutal 26-year civil war, which pitted Sinhalese-Buddhist majority governments against a Tamil-Hindu separatist movement, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), in the North and East. The war ended in 2009 with the LTTE utterly defeated amidst war crimes and crimes against humanity committed against Tamil civilians. Many Tamil Tigers and civilians who surrendered were disappeared.

Sri Lanka has a long history of impunity for disappearances. The post-war transition has seen very little in the way of transitional justice. In 2010, President Rajapaksa set up a Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) that mostly reinforced the state's narrative and was roundly criticised by international and domestic human rights organisations. After the surprising electoral defeat of President Rajapaksa and his political party in 2015, the new unity government quickly co-sponsored a UN Human Rights Council Resolution that promised four mechanisms: an independent and internationalised war crimes court, a truth commission, an Office of Reparations, and an Office of Missing Persons. The first two mechanisms were stillborn and the latter two have made little progress.³⁷ Since 2017, Tamil mothers of the disappeared have been holding continuous protest vigils in several towns in the North and East.

Sri Lanka is not only an accursed land but also a land of cursing. J.P. Feddema is careful to distinguish cursing from sorcery:

[it] involves gods not demons ... it is performed not with actions ... but with words alone, and it uses different specialists. Unlike sorcery, cursing cannot be practiced against innocent people, is done publicly but often without naming any target, and does not, therefore, tend to provoke a cycle of violence. Because of these differences cursing is widely accepted as a way of bringing divine justice or divine revenge. It is considered not as a crime but as an alternative to the courts, which are more expensive and inconvenient ...

Cursing is clearly violent, albeit indirect, and thus difficult to square with Buddhism's fundamental principle of *ahimsa* (non-violence.) Yet, it is widely practiced by Sinhalese Buddhists and accepted by the Buddhist clergy.³⁸ Cursing is rationalised as punishing 'bad people', being the work of gods, and preventing physical violence.³⁹ It also provides a source of income to those monks and shrines that offer their services.⁴⁰

³⁷ See. e.g., Amnesty International, *Still No Answers: An update on the rights of victims of enforced disappearances in Sri Lanka* (2022); Chulani Kodikara, 'The Office on Missing Persons in Sri Lanka: Why Truth Is a Radical Proposition', *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 17, no. 2 (2023): 157–172. For a critique of recent government proposals for a truth commission, see Mirak Raheem, 'Sri Lanka's Commission Addiction', *Groundviews* (August 05, 2023).

³⁸ J. P. Feddema, 'Cursing Practices in Sinhala Buddhism: The Case of Seenigama', *Journal of Ritual Studies* 11, no. 2 (1997), 33.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 26-27, 30.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

Cursing is a form of justice-seeking and dispute resolution that exists alongside formal state law and state justice institutions. As David Engel writes of northern Thai cursing rituals:

They are a means of stepping outside the [state] law – and outside orthodox Buddhism – to enforce customary norms. They also give marginalised people a chance to exercise power over those with higher social status.⁴¹

When state law proves inaccessible, unaffordable, discriminatory, or impotent, Sri Lankan disputants may turn to cursing as another – or perhaps better – avenue for obtaining justice and avoiding murder charges.⁴²

Mothers' curses

In the early 1990s, the Southern Mother's Front appropriated cursing as a collective, political response to the state's enforced disappearance of their husbands, brothers, and sons during the JVP insurgency. The JVP began as a Maoist revolutionary movement in 1965 and attracted large numbers of rural youth in the Sinhala Buddhist south.⁴³ It twice attempted to overthrow the state. Its 1971 uprising was put down by the military and police in about three weeks. The JVP subsequently used the unpopularity of the Indo-Lanka Peace Accord (1987) and the Indian Peace Keeping Force (1987-1990), which were aimed at ending the civil war in the North between the state and Tamil separatists, to champion Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism in the South and launch a second insurgency from 1987 to 1989. The JVP was finally defeated with the capture and killing of its leadership. It is estimated that the government killed 23,000 people and the JVP killed another 17,000 during that second JVP insurgency.⁴⁴

The Southern Mother's Front, which formed in 1990 and eventually counted some 25,000 women, was partly modelled on the Mothers of the Plaza del Mayo in Argentina. It demanded accountability, truth-seeking, and reparations from the United National Party (UNP) government led by President Ranasinghe Premadasa. According to Neloufer de Mel, it was 'arguably, the most visible and potent women's protest movement in the history of post-colonial Sri Lanka'.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the

⁴¹ David M. Engel, 'Blood Curse and Belonging in Thailand: Law, Buddhism, and Legal Consciousness', *Asian Journal of Law and Society* 3, no. 1 (2016), 77.

⁴² Gananath Obeyesekera, 'Sorcery and premeditated murder: The canalization of aggression' in *Placating the Demons: Ritual Practices among Sri Lankans*, ed. Gananath Obeyesekera (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), 132-153.

⁴³ This paragraph is based on: Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri, 'Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and Radical Politics in Contemporary Sri Lanka' in *Political Parties in Sri Lanka: Change and Continuity*, ed. Amita Shastri and Jayadeva Uyangoda (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018), 202.

⁴⁴ Mytili Bala, 'Transitional Justice and the Right to Know: Investigating Sri Lanka's Mass Graves' in *Transitional Justice in Sri Lanka: Moving Beyond Promises*, ed. Bhavani Fonseka (Colombo: Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2017), 258. Remarkably, the JVP subsequently reinvented itself as a more mainstream political party. Dewasiri, 'Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and Radical Politics in Contemporary Sri Lanka', 207-17.

⁴⁵ Neloufer de Mel, *Women & the Nation's Narrative: Gender and Nationalism in Twentieth Century Sri Lanka* (Abingdon: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002): 239.

Southern Mother's Front had fundamental weaknesses: it focused one-sidedly on the state, ignoring the JVP's extra-judicial killings; it missed opportunities to make common cause with Tamil mothers of the disappeared in the north, even though an earlier Mothers' Front had been created in Jaffna; and it became fatefully (if not fatally) co-opted by (mostly male) opposition politicians, most famously Mahinda Rajapaksa, then an ambitious parliamentarian with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party.⁴⁶ The Southern Mothers' Front also never managed to transcend gender roles (women as wives and mothers) or gender stereotypes (women as hysterical)⁴⁷ – though this 'ambivalent maternalism' is also what enabled the Front to challenge a patriarchal regime as much as it did.⁴⁸ The UNP government criticised the organisation, put it under police surveillance, and created its own rival Mother's Front whose menfolk had been killed by the JVP. But, as Malathi de Alwis observes, the state was 'unable to contain the Front through its usual authoritarian practices ... [and] was constantly on the defensive, dealing in counter-rhetoric, counter rallies, and counter-ritual'.⁴⁹

The Front's 'mother politics'⁵⁰ were publicly performed in two contrasting registers: lachrymose lamentation and ritual cursing. The former reinforced a feminine vulnerability and sentimentalised maternalism that fitted comfortably within the patriarchal norms of Sinhalese-Buddhism. As such, it was skillfully, if shamelessly, encouraged and exploited by the opposition SLFP's (mostly male) politicians.⁵¹ By contrast, the mothers' cursing took the SLFP by surprise⁵² and displayed a vengeful maternalism that could not be so easily contained or channelled.

This vengeful maternalism came to the fore in Spring 1992 when the Mother's Front (supported by the SLFP) led marches to the Devinuwara and Kataragama temples. There, women smashed coconuts and cursed President Premadasa and others they held responsible for disappearing their loved ones. The specific ritual curse was a 'des keema' in which a wronged person addresses a prayer for revenge to a deity. Typically, the 'offended party is not in a position of power or wealth to take revenge nor is he able to fight out a lawsuit due to superior power, position, and wealth of the offender. So the only hopeful remedy is to beseech the gods to mete out justice'.⁵³ The Southern Mother's Front transformed what had been individualised, private, religious rituals into collective, public, political spectacles. As de Alwis points out,

⁴⁶ de Mel, *Women & the Nation's Narrative*, 246-249; Malathi de Alwis, 'Motherhood as a Space of Protest: Women's Political Participation in Contemporary Sri Lanka' in *Her Smile Lingers: Malathi de Alwis Selected Essays*, ed. Kanchana Ruwanpura, Caryll Tozer, Chulani Kodikara, Sonali Deraniyagala, and Vraie Cally Balthazar (2022): 95-101.

⁴⁷ de Alwis, 'Motherhood as a Space of Protest', 95; de Mel, *Women & the Nation's Narrative*, 254.

⁴⁸ Malathi de Alwis, 'Ambivalent Maternalism: Cursing as Public Protest in Sri Lanka' in *Her Smile Lingers: Malathi de Alwis Selected Essays*, ed. Kanchana Ruwanpura, Caryll Tozer, Chulani Kodikara, Sonali Deraniyagala, and Vraie Cally Balthazar (2022): 129.

⁴⁹ de Alwis, 'Motherhood as a Space of Protest'.

⁵⁰ de Mel, *Women & the Nation's Narrative*, 238.

⁵¹ Malathi de Alwis, 'The "Language of the Organs": The Political Purchase of Tears in Contemporary Sri Lanka' in *Her Smile Lingers: Malathi de Alwis Selected Essays*, ed. Kanchana Ruwanpura, Caryll Tozer, Chulani Kodikara, Sonali Deraniyagala, and Vraie Cally Balthazar (2022): 117-118.

⁵² de Alwis, 'Ambivalent Maternalism', 134, n. 14.

⁵³ Nandadeva Wijesekera, *Deities and Demons, Magic and Masks* (Colombo: Gunasena, 1987), 174.

such 'use of curses as public protest not only had no precedent in Sri Lanka but it could also circumvent emergency laws enforced by the state that were applicable to standard forms of political protest such as demonstrations and rallies'.⁵⁴

The Southern Mother's Front followed up those marches with a visit to the Kali Kovil in Modara to perform a *dewa kannalawwa* and smash coconuts on Premadasa's birthday in June 1992. De Alwis describes how 'oblivious to the presence of police, press, politicians, and curious onlookers, the mothers dashed coconuts on the ground, lit lamps, tore their hair, struck their heads on the ground, and wept and wailed as they beseeched the goddess to find their "disappeared" and punish those who had brought such suffering upon their families'.⁵⁵ One mother chanted 'Premadasa, see this coconut all smashed into bits. May your head too be splintered into a hundred bits so heinous are the crimes you have perpetrated on my child'.⁵⁶ Another mother cursed Premadasa not for the 10 months that she had carried her child but for 'ten eons'.⁵⁷ The President was fearful enough that he sought to counter those curses by appealing to the Goddess Pattini, performing the *Kiriamawarunge Dane* ritual and offering alms to 68 mothers. Premadasa's counter-ritual failed to protect him: He was killed by an LTTE suicide bomber before he reached his next birthday. Some of the grieving mothers credited their curse. The one who had wished his head splintered said, 'He died just like the way I cursed him'.⁵⁸ Another stated, 'We believe that we won our fight for justice when President Premadasa was killed. The gods and the Buddha helped us through'.⁵⁹ By contrast, the Southern Mothers' Front leader, Dr Manorani Saravanamuttu, said: 'I too want justice for my son [the assassinated journalist Richard De Soyza], but not this way. I want a democratic process to convict the guilty'.⁶⁰

The Front's 'ambivalent maternalism' was controversial among activists and scholars. As Neloufer de Mel observed:

Whether mothers should appropriate hysterical weeping and revengeful curses as a public political strategy became a topic of debate. The unease expressed was on the grounds that these images reinforced a stereotype of women as hysterical and crazy. ... The counter argument to this was that sorcery, charms, and supplication of gods and goddesses were always within Buddhist practice, and that the mothers were drawing on indigenous cultural forms for protest. These had proved highly effective, particularly against a superstitious President and his regime.⁶¹

Malathi de Alwis offered a 'contingent reading' of the Southern Mothers' Front that looked 'beyond the more familiar binaries of essentializers versus empowerers, victims versus agents, through which such movements are frequently assessed' to issues of context and efficacy:

⁵⁴ de Alwis, 'Ambivalent Maternalism', 138.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 131.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 131.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 131.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 133.

⁵⁹ Quoted in de Mel, *Women & the Nation's Narrative*, 260.

⁶⁰ Quoted in de Mel, *Women & the Nation's Narrative*, 250.

⁶¹ de Mel, *Women & the Nation's Narrative*, 254.

One could read the practices of the Mother's Front then as engendering a fraught maternalism that was domesticated yet not respectable, that was demonic and threatening yet also sentimental and pathetic In a context where an autocratic government and a nationalist militant movement had silenced left and feminist voices, it was the mobilisation of such a fraught maternalism that not only appropriated and defined a particular political space but succeeded in winning the support of the Sinhala public and media.⁶²

We adopt a similarly nuanced reading in our discussion of Sandya Ekneligoda's 'ambivalent maternalism'.

Sandya Ekneligoda's pursuit of peace and justice

Sandya Ekneligoda has gained national and international attention as a human rights activist campaigning for her missing husband, Prageeth Ekneligoda, and other disappeared in Sri Lanka.⁶³ Prageeth was an investigative journalist and political cartoonist who was looking into sensitive issues around the end of the war and corruption surrounding the Rajapaksas. He faced intimidation and was warned off his investigations. In August 2009, he was briefly abducted by a white van – the insidious hallmark of state security forces. He was disappeared on 24 January 2010, two days before Sri Lanka's 2010 presidential election, which saw the re-election of Mahinda Rajapaksa.

Sandya has relentlessly pursued justice through domestic courts despite military obstructionism, judicial delays, and personal threats⁶⁴ – as well as the 2016 storming of the courthouse by the extremist Buddhist monk Galagodaatte Gnanasara Thera and his followers in *Bodu Bala Sena* (Buddhist Power Army).⁶⁵ In February 2010, she and her two sons filed a writ of habeas corpus with the Court of Appeal in Colombo, which subsequently referred the case for investigation to the Magistrate's Court of Homagama. There, the case languished until 2015 when, after Mahinda Rajapaksa lost the presidency, the Inspector General of Police ordered a fresh investigation into Prageeth's disappearance. By October 2015, nine suspects had been taken into custody. The following month, the Magistrate finished his inquiry and the Attorney General indicted nine military intelligence officers. One confessed that he had heard that Gotabaya Rajapaksa had ordered Prageeth's disappearance.⁶⁶ In

⁶² de Alwis, 'Ambivalent Maternalisms', 139.

⁶³ For Sandya's personal history, see Chulani Kodikara, 'Dissident Memory and Democratic Citizenship: Sandya Ekneligoda and Her Struggle for Justice', *Polity: Social Scientists Association* (2022), <https://ssalanka.org/dissident-memory-democratic-citizenship-sandya-ekneligoda-struggle-justice-chulani-kodikara/ssalanka/> (accessed 18 October 2023)

⁶⁴ Amnesty International, '*Only Justice Can Heal Our Wounds*': *Listening to the Demands of the Disappeared in Sri Lanka* (2017), 5-6, 20-21; Ruki Fernando, 'Sandya Ekneligoda: 5,000 Days of Struggle for Truth and Justice', *Groundviews*, October 4, 2023, <https://groundviews.org/2023/10/04/sandya-ekneligoda-5000-days-of-struggle-for-truth-and-justice/>.

⁶⁵ Here, we draw on the detailed account provided by Kodikara, 'Dissident Memory'.

⁶⁶ That confession was later retracted. Zulfick Farzan, 'PCoI witness claims CID officers pressured him to make statement on Ekneligoda', <https://www.newsfirst.lk/2020/08/25/pcoi->

November 2019, the Colombo Special Trial-at-Bar served indictments on those intelligence officers. That same month, Gotabaya Rajapaksa was elected President and one of his first acts was to create a new Commission on Political Victimisation to block criminal cases against the Rajapaksas and their interests.⁶⁷ As Sandya stated: 'This commission turned the investigators and witnesses of [Prageeth's] case into the accused. It violated orders of the High Court and obtained statements from witnesses only to, in the end, recommend the military suspects of the case be released and acquitted of all charges'.⁶⁸ Sandya filed a fundamental rights challenge to the Commission in the Supreme Court. The trial of the nine officers, which started in September 2020, is still proceeding in fits and starts.

Sandya has also sought to pressure the Sri Lankan government through various United Nations human rights bodies, including the UN Committee against Torture, UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances, UN Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances, and UN Human Rights Council. In September 2022, she spoke at the opening of the 23rd session of the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances (CED) in Geneva. There, she detailed her difficulties in obtaining justice from the Sri Lankan courts and mentioned how:

None of the judges first appointed to hear the case now remain. One new judge appointed to hear the case in fact is a former member of a military court connected to the Sri Lanka Army. CID [Criminal Investigation Department] officers who carried out investigations have now been removed from service.⁶⁹

She also detailed the harassment and pressures she faced from some quarters of the state, Buddhist clergy, and society. Finally, she called attention to other mothers of the disappeared who are in a less privileged place than herself: "Can you imagine the harassment these Tamil-speaking Mothers must face given the harassment I myself had to go through despite being a Sinhalese-speaking woman?"⁷⁰

Smashing coconuts

Sandya's campaign for justice creatively intertwines liberal-legalist and rights-based approaches with cultural and religious rituals. 'But as truth and justice has been denied to her by one government after another, Sandya has increasingly invoked the

[witness-claims-cid-officers-pressured-him-to-make-statement-on-ekneligoda/](#) (accessed on October 18, 2023).

⁶⁷ Centre for Policy Alternatives, *A Commentary on the Presidential Commission of Inquiry and the Special Presidential Commission of Inquiry on Political Victimization*, April 2021: 69-71, <https://www.cpalanka.org/a-commentary-on-the-pcoi-and-the-special-pcoi-on-political-victimization/> (accessed on October 18, 2023).

⁶⁸ UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances, 'Search for journalist continues 12 years after his disappearance', October 21, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2022/10/search-journalist-continues-12-years-after-his-disappearance> (accessed on October 18, 2023).

⁶⁹ Sandya Ekneligoda, 'Space of Tribute to Victims', Committee on Enforced Disappearances, September 12, 2022, 3, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=INT%2FCED%2FSTA%2F23%2F34326&Lang=en.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

*amma*n (mother) goddesses such as Kali and Pattini in public, while foregrounding her rage and vengeance against those responsible for her husband's disappearance'.⁷¹ Like the Southern Mother's Front, Sandya has used various forms of lament and cursing. With each, she invoked archetypal female figures for mourning and grief on the one hand, and righteous anger and revenge on the other. She uses performative rituals and cosmological power to keep Prageeth's disappearance in the public eye and critique the justice system. Sandya has deftly avoided the Southern Mother's Front key mistake by making connections across Sri Lanka's ethnic, religious, and linguistic divides with others whose loved ones were disappeared.

For several years now, Sandya has increasingly appealed to Pattini and Kali in ways that draw on the shared cultural sphere of Sinhalese Buddhists and Tamil Hindus. Both figures were initially Hindu-Tamil goddesses, but they are now incorporated into Sinhalese Buddhism: Pattini as the only female Buddhist deity and Kali as Pattini's demon servant. '[W]hile Pattini is an approximation of the mother in her affective role, Kali is the cruel maternal imago'.⁷² Pattini is the deification of Kannaki whose husband was unjustly executed by the King of Madurai on suspicion of having stolen the queen's anklet. Pattini broke the anklet (revealing it as her own) and then tore off her left breast and threw it at Madurai – causing the city to be consumed by flames. For Rohan Bastin, that conflagration 'is a destructive female fire of a regenerative and creative potential'.⁷³ While Pattini is mostly associated with chastity (as symbolised by her anklet), fertility and healing, she also represents a wronged wife's demands for justice and revenge. Pattini has become increasingly popular since the end of the war: 'As a sorrowing yet resilient woman – transformed into a goddess – who punishes but also offers succour to multitudes, Kannaki-Pattini is a symbol of hope to many wives and mothers of the "disappeared" and missing, war widows, and women-headed households'.⁷⁴ Kali is one of the most powerful goddesses in Hinduism, associated with destruction and death. Sinhalese Buddhism mythology recasts her as a demon who was tamed by Pattini.⁷⁵ Kali has many forms but the most fearsome is Sohokali when:

She dances on the corpse of her dead consort Siva at the end of time with her tongue, red with blood, protruding. Sohokali demands blood sacrifice and will kill a devotee's enemies.⁷⁶

⁷¹ Chulani Kodikara, 'Disappearances, Dissident Memory and the (Dark) Art of Cursing', *Memory Studies* (forthcoming), 8.

⁷² Gananath Obeyesekera, 'The spirits of the dead: A psycho-cultural exegesis of a case study of an exorcism' in *Placating the Demons: Ritual Practices among Sri Lankans*, ed. Gananath Obeyesekera (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), 125.

⁷³ Rohan Bastin, 'The Regenerative Power of Kali Worship in Contemporary Sinhala Buddhism', *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice*, no. 40, 1996: 69.

⁷⁴ Malathi de Alwis, 'Divine eyes on the sorrows of Lanka: Post-war devotion to Pattini-Kannaki' in *Multi-Religiosity in Contemporary Sri Lanka*, ed. Mark P. Whitaker, Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake, and Pathmanesan Sanmugeswaran (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021): 73

⁷⁵ Bastin, 'The Regenerative Power of Kali Worship', 62.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

According to Bastin, Kali's wrath 'shatter[s] the demonic illusion of absolute power' and 're-establishes the encompassing order of the divine'.⁷⁷ Kali's association with righteous vengeance attracts growing numbers of Buddhists to practice ritual cursing at her shrines.⁷⁸

In July 2011, Sandya wrote an impassioned public letter to Shiranthi Rajapaksa, Mahinda Rajapaksa's wife. In that letter, she invoked Mahinda Rajapaksa's earlier support to the Southern Mother's Front:

He lent his unstinting support to parents, wives and children of those who involuntarily disappeared [during the counter-insurgency against the JVP] ... With them, he smashed coconuts at the Kali Amma Temple, recited *Vas Kavi*, ground pepper at the Seenigama Devalaya and prayed to the Kataragama Gods, invoking divine retribution against the wrongdoers.⁷⁹

She then reminded Shiranthi Rajapaksa of the consequences of such cursing:

I don't think Sri Lankans have forgotten how President Ranasinghe Premadasa's life on this earth came to a sudden and violent end. I remember, on that day too, people served Kavum [celebratory sweet cakes] and *Kiribath* [milk rice] in several parts of the country. I clearly recall, many also lit crackers, rejoicing in his death.

There is a lesson to be learnt here... the curse of the victims cannot be washed out, even with several pots of milk [as Premadasa had attempted]. ...⁸⁰

Sandya then talked about the brutality of the civil war and how journalists, like Prageeth, who exposed that brutality 'also became victims of the war'. She then returned to the theme of cursing:

Prageeth never wished ill on anyone. He didn't smash coconuts and invoke divine vengeance on those who were against him. ... Yet, people who didn't believe in dissent took Prageeth away from me and smashed the joy out of my two children's lives.

...

I too go to the temple, hold religious ceremonies on behalf of Prageeth and smash coconuts invoking the curse of Goddess Kali on those who are responsible for his fate. I tell my woes to the gods and plead for answers. I know, like me, many mothers and wives invoke divine assistance and divine vengeance.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 81.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 59; Feddema, 'Cursing Practices in Sinhala Buddhism', 25.

⁷⁹ Sandya Ekneligoda, 'Restore the lost light; give me back the father of my children – Sandhya writes to Sri Lanka's First Lady', *Lanka Standard*, July 26, 2011, <https://www.lankastandard.com/2011/07/restore-the-lost-light-give-me-back-the-father-of-my-children-sandhya-writes-to-sri-lankas-first-lady/>

⁸⁰ Ibid.

Honourable First Lady, will not the gods respond to our tears and tales of woe one day?⁸¹

At the end of her letter, Sandya made a final appeal to the First Lady as one mother to another, but never received a response.

In the years since, Sandya has repeatedly called on Pattini and Kali for justice and revenge against the Rajapaksa brothers as part of highly public performances of smashing coconuts.⁸² As Chulani Kodikara observes:

In making a direct appeal for divine intervention to account for injustice, she also asserts her own agency. Unlike in the courthouse where she is reduced to a victim wronged by the state and a mute witness of representations made on her behalf by her lawyer or the prosecution, in these rituals which she presides over, she is the master of ceremonies invoking the elemental powers of the universe to right wrongs.⁸³

Typically, the smashing coconut ritual is practiced in specific shrines, such as the Modara Kovil in Colombo, which we visited in September 2022. It was early evening and there was a line of people who were receiving coconuts that were topped with lighted camphor tablets. With their coconuts held at chest level, people would circumambulate Kali's statue several times before going one by one to a more private corner of the shrine. There, they would raise their coconut high and then dash it against the floor. 'If they manage to smash the coconut, the petition they are making to the gods is strengthened, including a wish to harm an adversary'.⁸⁴ As Bastin explains:

For many devotees, the nut broken in sorcery [cursing] is the intended victim, the act of smashing the nut is a violence against that person. ... Kali, the embodiment of the demonic destruction of the demonic, the destruction of the chaotic and dislocating, is the focus of these fundamentally regenerative actions.⁸⁵

The smashing is usually done without onlookers but Sandya chose to make it highly public.

In 2015, Sandya publicly performed a ritual curse on the eve of the presidential elections. She addressed President Mahinda Rajapaksa directly:

How much gold you present to goddess Pattini, how many lives you give to Kali Amman, you cannot escape from my curse. I without guilt, who have been searching for my husband, who have silently endured the insults hurled at me by your acolytes. As the cart must follow the cow, my curse will follow you until

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² This is sometimes referred to in the anthropological literature as the *pol gaheema/gahanawa* ritual.

⁸³ Kodikara, 'Disappearances, Dissident Memory and the (Dark) Art of Cursing', 12.

⁸⁴ Feddema, 'Cursing Practices in Sinhala Buddhism', 25.

⁸⁵ Bastin, 'The Regenerative Power of Kali Worship', 70.

truth and justice is done. It is my belief that neither goddess Pattini nor Kali will forgive you. That is universal law.⁸⁶

In a surprise upset, Mahinda Rajapaksa lost the election to his former Minister of Health Maithripala Sirisena for whom Sandya had campaigned.⁸⁷ Sirisena appointed Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister and formed a national unity government between Sirisena's faction of the SLFP and Wickremesinghe's UNP. They called themselves the *Yahapalana* ("good governance") government and promised accountability for the gross human rights violations and corruption committed by the Rajapaksas. The new government quickly co-sponsored a UN Human Rights Council Resolution that pledged transitional justice.⁸⁸

Hopes for meaningful accountability soon waned and, by 2019, they had positively curdled.⁸⁹ It was in this context that Sandya held a ritual cursing, a *Kali yadinna*, in front of the Presidential Secretariat on 24 January 2019, the ninth anniversary of Prageeth's disappearance. Kodikara, a feminist activist and scholar who was there at Sandya's invitation along with other activists, described the preparations and cursing:

First, we hung an image of Kali in her incarnation as Sohokali – around six feet by four feet ... In this image Sohokali is in her 10-armed and 10-legged form, wearing a skirt of human hands and a necklace of skulls. Her eyes are glowing and her ruby red tongue is protruding out of her mouth. She is dancing on the corpse of her consort Shiva and carrying in her many hands a trident, a sword, a bow and arrow, and a bowl among other symbols of her power. A banner that was hung next to the image announced that Sandya was appealing to Kali for justice, to mark the ninth anniversary of Prageeth's disappearance by the 'Rajapaksa twosome'.

...

Sandya ... also scattered on the floor, banana leaves and white paper inscribed with the verses from the curse that she was intending to chant, so that the wind will carry not just her voice, but these inscriptions to the cursed. ... Sandya then began the repetitive chanting of the bespoke imprecatory verses that was composed especially for the ritual that day [and which included the lines:] 'always feel fear/struck by lightning that splits the sky/... murderers fall dead'.

...

⁸⁶ Quoted in Kodikara, 'Disappearances, Dissident Memory and the (Dark) Art of Cursing', 12.

⁸⁷ Kodikara, 'Dissident Memory'.

⁸⁸ UN Human Rights Council, "Promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka, UN Doc. A/HRC/RES/30/1 (14 October 2015).

⁸⁹ See, e.g., International Crisis Group, *Sri Lanka's Transition to Nowhere* (2017); Amnesty International, *Flickering Hope: Truth, Justice, Reparations and Guarantees of Non-Recurrence in Sri Lanka* (2019).

In a final offering to the *amman* goddess, Sandya lit nine cotton torches doused with kerosene and smashed nine coconuts, repeatedly chanting “*saapa wewa, sappa wewa, saapa wewa!*” (be cursed, be cursed, be cursed!).⁹⁰

The curse did not seem to work. The *Yahapalana* government’s failure to deliver good governance and accountability, coupled with their catastrophic failure to prevent the Easter 2019 terrorist attacks, paved the way for the return of the Rajapaksas and their new party, the Sri Lanka People’s Front (SLPF), in the November 2019 presidential and August 2020 parliamentary elections. This time around, Gotabaya Rajapaksa was President and Minister of Defense while Mahinda Rajapaksa was Prime Minister.

‘The coconut that worked’: Sandya’s 2022 curse

The twelfth anniversary of Prageeth’s disappearance, 24 January 2022, coincided with ominous portents for the Rajapaksas’ regime: a collapsing economy, food shortages, and scattered protests by farmers, trade unionists, and mothers of the disappeared. On this anniversary, Sandya adopted the literary form of *Sandesha Kavya* as a channel to carry a message from Pattini to Kali. Traditionally, *Sandeshas* offer appreciation of nature, rulers, and loved ones. Controversially, Sandya’s employs the style of *vas-kavi*, a form of ritual cursing written as a poem with specific meter and style, which, when sung with the right diction, is believed to inflict evil or injury on the cursed. As Obeysekere explains:

The most deadly form of sorcery practice [cursing] in Sri Lanka is known as *vas-kavi* (*vas* meaning “ritual danger,” “poison,” or “malignant action” and *kavi* meaning “songs”). *Vas-kavi* are songs constructed on the basis of highly elaborate astrological and other calculations; each song is designed for the specific needs of the client. These songs are then sung a prescribed number of times (generally 108 times or multiples thereof) before the image of some dominant deity...⁹¹

Vas-kavi are frequently used to recover lost belongings, cause confusion against other parties in lawsuits, and get rid of political enemies.⁹² Sinhalese view the *vas-kavi* done by a reputed sorcerer ‘as effective and deadly as hiring a paid assassin, or even more so’.⁹³

Typical of the *Sandesha* form, Sandya uses an animal as her messenger between the goddesses, and, appropriately for the *vas-kavi* content, she enlists a cobra. In her poem, called *Naga Sandeshaya* (the Epistle of the Cobra), Pattini appeals to Kali for divine justice for Prageeth’s disappearance and the impact it has had on their family. The cover graphic depicts Mahinda Rajapaksa’s trademark *sataka* (scarf) transmogrified into a cobra that is caught between Pattini’s ankle bracelet (the symbol of her chastity) and Kali’s trident (the symbol of creation, order, and

⁹⁰ Kodikara, ‘Dissident Memory and Democratic Citizenship’.

⁹¹ Obeysekere, ‘The spirits of the dead’, 135.

⁹² Nandadeva Wijesekera, *Deities and Demons*, 173-174; Obeysekere, ‘The spirits of the dead’, 135.

⁹³ Obeysekere, ‘Sorcery’.

destruction). The initial stanzas describe Prageeth's disappearance, Sandya's quest, and how 'the abductors [i.e. the Rajapaksas] have become the Monarchy'. The succeeding stanzas are a series of appeals to 'Mother Kali' for vengeance against Prageeth's abductors and the Rajapaksas:

O Mother Kali!
Indicate to the world that justice is done
By breaking necks, hands and legs of
Kumararathne, Eranda, Prabhodha,
Upasena, Ranji, Rajapaksha,
The pack of blood-sucking mercenaries
Who were instrumental in abducting my son.

O Mother Kali!
Before you dismember limbs of their bodies
Forget not to pierce their necks and suck their blood.

Oh Mother Kali!
By punishing the most poisonous toxic serpent among them,
Mahinda, imposing ten types of archaic torture ...

...

O Mother Kali!
Before you kill and crush into pieces
The head of that blood-sucker, Gotabhaya
Who deprived my son on that fatal night of
Twenty fourth of January two thousand ten,
Make him jump out of his skin and get frenzied
In every other minute.

The *Sandeshaya* also seeks vengeance against all those who supported the Rajapaksas:

O Mother Kali!
Let atrocious thunder explode and scorch the earth
In order to part asunder the head skulls,
With gushing blood sprouts,
Of everybody who hails the abductors with three cheers.
Fright them shock them never ever dare to
Abduct the sons of the people.

Here, Sandya re-appropriates the Rajapaksa's populism by cursing their many (mostly Sinhalese) supporters in the name of 'the people'. Inflicting widespread suffering on those supporters is seen as the only way to overthrow the Rajapaksas:

O Goddess Omnipotent!
Transform this land presently
Governed by Gota's regime

Into a land forsaken with famine
And wounds of hunger,
Wrecked with pandemic and pandemonium.
Then only this regime explodes into smithereens.
Then only the people living therein become secured and alive.

...

O Mother Almighty,
Mutilate their limbs while masses
Watching the spectacle.
O Mother Almighty,
Persuade the people to dethrone them and
Boot them, damn them, doom them.
O Mother Almighty,
Grab the whole family by their necks and
Huddle them right into the center of Medamoolana Manor
And set fire to them alive.....⁹⁴

This curse was to prove more successful.

Sandya ritually recited the *Sandeshaya* at Pattini Devalaya in Nawagamuwa on 24 January 2022 and then presented the poem along with typical offerings of fruits, flowers, and incense. The following day, she took a vow by carrying out a ritual performance of dressing in red and black (the colors of Kali), shaving her head, and immersing herself in the sea.⁹⁵ Shaving her head symbolised letting go of her ego to pursue justice for her husband. Immersing herself in the sea and floating the first lock of hair wrapped in a betel leaf was an act of surrendering herself to female power. As for her dress, Sandya explained that the black is to express 'anger and opposition to those who abducted my husband, and also to mourn Prageeth's loss. The red represents that my heart is still alive'.⁹⁶ Having taken the vow to maintain this dress and appearance until she finds justice, Sandya performed the traditional puja at the Kali Kovil in Modara while reciting the *Sandeshaya*.⁹⁷ She concluded with the smashing coconut ritual.

Sandya's *Sandeshaya* and public rituals had several audiences. Most immediately, they sought the ears of Pattini and Kali, asking them to rain down divine/demonic justice for Prageeth's disappearance. Relatedly, they targeted the Rajapaksas and

⁹⁴ Sandya Ekneligoda, 'Naga Sandeshaya,' January, 24 2022 (Sinhala copy on file with the authors). Translation done by [name withheld].

⁹⁵ For a description of the ritual for preparing and reciting a *vas-kevi*, see Wijesekera, *Deities and Demons*, 174-175.

⁹⁶ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'Search for journalist continues 12 years after his disappearance', October 21, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2022/10/search-journalist-continues-12-years-after-his-disappearance#:~:text=%E2%80%9Calso%20wear%20black%20to,part%20of%20her%20trademark%20attire>.

⁹⁷ Kiran Grewal notes how *kovils* (Hindu temples) in the North and East have become sites for families of the disappeared to express their suffering and organize. Grewal, 'The Epistemic Violence of Transitional Justice', 335.

their southern supporters who, like President Premadasa before them, believe in sorcery and astrology.

Superstitions have always played a role in Lankan politics, but never so nakedly as under the Rajapaksas. During the tenure of President [Mahinda] Rajapaksa, Sri Lanka gained a royal astrologer who publicly boasted about his involvement in statecraft. The President openly carried a golden-hued talisman.⁹⁸

Sandya plays on these beliefs to strike fear into the Rajapaksas and their backers: 'The Rajapaksas and most of their allies believe in the occult. Therefore I knew the *Vas Kaviya* would deeply upset them'.⁹⁹

Sandya's *Sandeshaya* also sends a message of female empowerment to other mothers of the disappeared and to Sri Lanka's patriarchal society at large. It does so in several ways. First, it invokes powerful female figures: 'I always opted to choose female figures revered by the people who were wronged and suffered for their husbands or sons'.¹⁰⁰ Second, it hearkens back to Kuweni's originating curse. According to Sandya:

Sri Lanka is a cursed nation. The country has been cursed by women ever since the time of Kuweni. Those who assumed political power robbed women of their happiness. Thereafter those women cursed this country when they knew that there's no justice served to them. ... If the country is to be free of these curses, justice should be served to women.¹⁰¹

Third, Sandya's public performance of the *Sandeshaya* recalls the unfinished struggle of the Southern Mother's Front, Sri Lanka's powerful women's protest movement. Fourth, the *Sandeshaya*'s targeting of Mahinda Rajapaksa reminds women of the risks of putting their trust in male politicians. Finally, Sandya's rituals make common cause with Tamil and Muslim mothers of the disappeared. As she stated: 'I was inspired to shave my head by the Tamil mothers looking for their missing sons'.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Tisarane Gunasekara, 'Superstition, violence and power', *Daily FT*, June 16, 2015, <https://www.ft.lk/Columnists/superstition-violence-and-power/4-433271>; AFP, 'Wheel of fortune turns for Sri Lanka's political soothsayers', April 14, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220414-wheel-of-fortune-turns-for-sri-lanka-s-political-soothsayers>

⁹⁹ Roar Media, 'Did One Woman's Curse Vanquish Sri Lanka's Rajapaksa Dynasty?', August 11, 2022, <https://roar.media/english/life/identities/sandya-ekneligoda-rajapaksa-dynasty>

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Kamanthi Wickramasinghe, "If We're to Forgive, Those Who Committed Abductions Should Come Forward and Apologise" - Sandya Ekneligoda', *Daily Mirror Online*, December 30, 2022, <https://www.dailymirror.lk/opinion/If-were-to-forgive-those-who-committed-abductions-should-come-forward-and-apologise-Sandya-Ekneligoda/172-251269>

¹⁰² Roar Media, 'Did One Woman's Curse Vanquish Sri Lanka's Rajapaksa Dynasty?' She is sometimes joined in her public performances by Sithy Ameena, whose son Mohammed Akheem was disappeared in 2009. Kodikara, 'Disappearances, Dissident Memory and the (Dark) Art of Cursing', 2; Amnesty International, "Only Justice Can Heal Our Wounds", 20.

Sandya's *Sandeshaya* was also a call to arms to the Sri Lankan people to remove the Rajapaksas: 'Persuade the people to dethrone them'. As she later remembered: 'In January, when I delivered my epistle ... there was no uprising against the regime. The people had not even thought of coming out onto the streets'.¹⁰³ By July, a popular uprising, the *Aragalaya-Porattam*, had chased the Rajapaksas from power. Reflecting on these events, Sandya stated:

It was startling to see Gotabaya Rajapaksa and others being driven out by the people, and how he had to go from place to place in search of a safe haven. I watched in shock as their ancestral home in Medamulana went up in flames. All this was specifically mentioned in the epistle. ... This might defy logic, but I am now forced to believe my actions have had some effect.¹⁰⁴

Sandya similarly told us that she was 'compelled to believe [in divine justice] after seeing what was happening'.¹⁰⁵ She also stated, 'some say this coconut was the one that finally worked and ... that itself indicates that my struggle has been successful'.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, Sandya's *Sandeshaya* helped inspire other ritual performances against the Rajapaksas at the *Aragalaya/Porattam*'s main occupy site in Colombo.¹⁰⁷

Sandya's cursing was also successful in attracting public support. She stated:

The majority of the people now believe in my struggle. Earlier even regular people gave me a hard time and I faced numerous threats. Tuk-tuk drivers would refuse to take me when they recognised me. But now it has changed. People come up to me and talk to me. They even encourage me to carry on.¹⁰⁸

Sandya now carries on her struggle in the face of renewed repression under the Rajapaksas' former rival turned anointed successor, President Ranil Wickramasinghe. As she told the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances in September 2022:

Can it be expected that the current President [Wickramasinghe] while as Prime Minister in 2017 who irresponsibly claimed "all disappeared persons should be assumed dead or are abroad" will deliver justice? In a country where impunity is the unofficial adopted policy in the midst of poverty, constant pursuit, and intimidation, the only thing the victims can do now is to cry and lament while pursuing their struggle on the country's streets.¹⁰⁹

Mothers of the disappeared will also remember that Wickramasinghe served as a minister in Premadasa's UNP government. At that time, Wickramasinghe criticised the Southern Mothers' Front for its cursing rituals:

¹⁰³ Roar Media, 'Did One Woman's Curse Vanquish Sri Lanka's Rajapaksa Dynasty?'

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Sandya Ekneligoda, interview by xxx and yyy, August 17, 2022.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Nilanjana Premaratna and Lars Waldorf, 'Rituals of Resistance during Sri Lanka's 2022 Occupy Movement' (forthcoming).

¹⁰⁸ Roar Media, "Did One Woman's Curse Vanquish Sri Lanka's Rajapaksa Dynasty?'

¹⁰⁹ Ekneligoda, 'Space of Tribute to Victims,' 3.

If your children have disappeared, it is all right to beseech the gods. ... But if one conducts such *deva kannalawwas* with thoughts of hate and revenge, it could turn into a *huniyam* (black magic) and backfire on you.¹¹⁰

After seeing what happened to Premadasa and the Rajapaksas, President Wickramasinghe might just want to reconsider continuing the impunity for Sri Lanka's enforced disappearances. For the cosmological power of ritual curses last well beyond the moment of performative utterance.¹¹¹

Conclusion

The Southern Mothers' Front and Sandya are potent examples of how women activists deploy motherhood/widowhood, appropriate religious rituals, and harness female cosmological power to promote peace and justice in the public sphere during and after conflict. While the Front's ritual cursing was part of a larger social movement (that also drew in opportunistic male opposition politicians like Mahinda Rajapaksa), Sandya's ritual cursing takes place within a small network of families of the disappeared and their supporters (which cuts across ethnic and religious differences). Whereas the Southern Mothers' Front's 'mother politics' was exclusivist and co-opted, Sandya's mother/widow politics are inclusive and independent. Yet, both practice 'ambivalent maternalism'. Commenting on maternal peace activism more generally, Magda Lorena Cárdenas and Jenny Hedström write:

These claims are vulnerable to gender stereotyping, and ... the roles of mothers can be performed in ways that accommodate, rather than contest, the demands of patriarchal power relations. Another criticism of this field of activism is that it risks perpetuating a restrictive view of gender dynamics in which women are primarily victims ... given their roles of caregivers within society.¹¹²

While these criticisms are valid, we align ourselves with Malathi de Alwis's 'contingent reading' of such activism, which looks 'beyond the more familiar binaries of essentializers versus empowerers, victims versus agents' to context and efficacy. In that reading, Sandya's coconut was indeed 'the one that finally worked'¹¹³ and it helped inspire similar invocations of cosmological power during the *Aragalaya/Porattam* protest movement.

This article makes an original and significant empirical contribution to both peace and conflict studies and transitional justice. First, it provides an important case study of female cosmological power in women's peace activism – an under-studied topic that, to date, has been mostly focused on naked cursing. Second, the article remedies the local turn's romanticized privileging of healing rituals and positive emotions by emphasizing the importance of cursing rituals and negative emotions. Third, it challenges the liberal-local binary in some of the peacebuilding literature by showing how Sandya moves between liberal-legalism in domestic courts and UN

¹¹⁰ de Alwis, 'Motherhood as a Space of Protest', 94.

¹¹¹ See Francis Abonga et al., 'Naked Bodies and Collective Action', 309.

¹¹² Cárdenas and Hedström, 'Armed Resistance and Feminist Activism', 150.

¹¹³ Sandya Ekneligoda, interview by xxx and yyy, August 17, 2022.

fora, and non-liberal ritual cursing in religious and public spaces – akin to forum-shopping for justice. Finally, it draws attention to how civil society in general and women activists in particular resist illiberal peacebuilding – something that has received scant attention in the growing literature on illiberal peacebuilding.¹¹⁴ In so doing, the article helps draw connections between peace and conflict studies on the one hand and resistance studies on the other.¹¹⁵

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¹¹⁴ For an exception, see Elisabeth Olivius, Malin Åkebo, and Jenny Hedström, 'Navigating Friction: Women's Peacebuilding in Hybrid Regimes' (2024) (draft article on file with the authors).

¹¹⁵ One of the few articles to make this connection is Oliver P. Richmond, 'Artpeace: Validating Power, Mobilising Resistance, and Imagining Emancipation', *Journal of Resistance Studies* 8, no. 2 (2022): 50-86. We bring together illiberal peacebuilding scholarship and resistance studies in more detail in a forthcoming article.