

An Integrated Approach to Caste in Sri Lanka

Dominic Esler¹

Abstract

In this article I argue that Sri Lankan caste research has been inhibited by the widespread popular assumption that caste manifests in Sri Lanka in the form of parallel and incommensurate ethnoreligious caste systems. In other words, while scholars working elsewhere in South Asia approach caste per se as an important comparative topic, in Sri Lanka caste is usually enclosed and circumscribed within a framework of essentialised Tamil Hindu or Sinhala Buddhist identities that precludes similar comparative investigations. I begin with a review of Sri Lankan caste scholarship, demonstrating its post-Independence division into two ethnic streams with varying thematic foci and levels of attention to caste, before interrogating the three underlying principles of the ethnoreligious theory and their assumptions about the nature of caste, religion and ethnicity. After historicising the theory, I offer a critique that draws on empirical evidence and theoretical debates from Sri Lanka and elsewhere. In doing so, I set out the foundations of an integrated and comparative anthropology of caste in Sri Lanka, one which is not restricted by the assumption that caste is ultimately an epiphenomenon of ethnicity, but which is nevertheless attentive to the role that this popular perception plays in the relational dynamics of local identity formation and caste practice.

Keywords

Caste, Sri Lanka, Ethnicity, Tamil, Sinhalese, Religion, Discursive Enclosure, Ethnoreligious Theory of Caste

Introduction

Despite the large amount of research that has been conducted on caste in Sri Lanka, only rarely has the study of caste itself been the subject of critical reflection (Esler, 2025; Rogers, 2004; Silva, 2018). In this article I propose that the absence of such analysis, and the ways in which caste research is usually conceptualised and

¹Assistant Professor of Anthropology, Lahore University of Management Sciences
E-mail: dominic.esler@lums.edu.pk

conducted, are the result of a largely implicit theory of caste that has become accepted orthodoxy among the majority of caste researchers. While this theory derives from the widespread popular view of caste as a Hindu institution, in the Sri Lankan context caste is considered to have become, via the ethnicisation of religion, an inherent property of ethnicity. The ethnoreligious theory of caste, as I will refer to it, therefore holds that caste manifests in Sri Lanka in the form of separate and independent Tamil Hindu and Sinhalese Buddhist caste systems. If caste in India has, as Mosse has argued (2020a, 2020b), been discursively ‘enclosed’ within the categories of religion and politics, in Sri Lanka it has been enclosed within ethnicity, and Sri Lanka itself is viewed as relevant only as the geographical space within which parallel but sealed ethnoreligious caste systems coexist.

While the ethnoreligious theory of caste is certainly not the only factor in the development of Sri Lankan caste research, which has also been strongly affected by changes of research foci during the war and the popular view of caste as irrelevant to contemporary Sri Lankan society—a view that will be very familiar to caste researchers across South Asia—it is my contention that the theory’s largely unrecognised and unchecked acceptance has restricted and hindered Sri Lankan caste research in vital but overlooked ways. First, it has resulted in the partitioning of research into studies of caste among either Tamils or Sinhalese, without attentive comparative analysis to justify this division, consideration of factors that cannot be reduced to ethnicity or religion, or interrogation of the categories of ethnicity and religion themselves. Second, it has resulted in an ethnographic literature that is empirically patchy and increasingly theoretically disengaged, especially from the debates that have occurred in the vast literature on caste in other parts of South Asia and beyond. Caste is considered to be already understood in its totality, even if its local specificities remain uncertain: a topic of curiosity and potential controversy, but one of little relevance to contemporary Sri Lanka. Even the resurgence of interest in caste immediately following the civil war appears to be fading, as attested by the absence of new ethnographic research projects. In other words, I contend that the ethnoreligious theory of caste is the key reason for why what is, after India and Nepal, the third largest collection of regional caste scholarship has not developed into an integrated, comparative, and self-reflexive field. Until that happens, Sri Lankan caste scholarship will remain less than the sum of its parts.

In this article I not only identify the ethnoreligious theory, its origins and consequences, but also set out a critique of the theory and suggestions for how caste in Sri Lanka might be reconceptualised in the future through an integrated approach. This does not mean trying to produce a new *theory* of caste, nor will I argue that caste is somehow the same everywhere in Sri Lanka. Neither does it mean that previous caste research has not made valuable contributions to the anthropological understanding of Sri Lanka. What it does involve, however, is rethinking the assumptions about religion and ethnicity that underpin the ethnoreligious theory, and instead treating these factors not as transhistorical essences that can only act unilaterally upon caste but as changing, historically contingent factors that only explain part of the Sri Lankan context. In order

to do this, in the following pages I provide a rereading of the work on caste in Sri Lanka, drawing out similarities, differences and connections across the boundaries of the putative ethnoreligious caste systems. This approach has two broader benefits. On the one hand, I foreground and critique the customary ethnic division that runs throughout Sri Lankan research more broadly. On the other, I open the possibility of revitalising the abandoned task of drawing Sri Lanka into discussions of caste across South Asia, one that has been made increasingly difficult by the challenge of comparing Sri Lanka's assumed ethnoreligious caste systems with the incommensurate nature of what is frequently presumed to be the national caste system of 'Hindu India'.

Sri Lankan Caste Research

Until my 2025 overview of caste research in Sri Lanka there had been no attempt to bring the Sinhalese and Tamil caste research together, and in this section I revisit and expand upon the earlier bibliography to demonstrate the role that ethnicity has played in the production of this scholarship. As in India (Fuller, 2017), British anthropologists had little interest in the topic of caste in Sri Lanka until after Independence, and during the period of British colonialism (1795-1948) caste research was similarly conducted by government officials, missionaries or Sri Lankans themselves. Unlike its Indian equivalent, however, this work received less attention from continental European scholars as described by Fuller,¹ and colonial attitudes towards caste also differed significantly between the two countries. While caste was increasingly central to statecraft in India during the second half of the nineteenth century, in Sri Lanka the colonial state took a contrary path, deciding to cease intervening in caste in the 1830s—most importantly by abolishing caste-based compulsory labour—and later discouraging discussion of caste in official spheres. I will return to this topic later, but some of the key outcomes of this divergence, and their relevance for subsequent caste scholarship, must be highlighted here. In contrast to India, there was in Sri Lanka no attempt to systemically classify castes or produce an all-Sri Lanka caste hierarchy, no collection of information about caste in Sri Lanka's national censuses when they began in 1871, and no caste-based legislation comparable to the Criminal Tribes Act or reservations. In this context, it is unsurprising that there was also no state-supported research on caste, and therefore no works comparable to those such as Risley's *People of India* (1915), Thurston and Rangachari's *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (1909), or Ibbetson's *Panjab castes* (1916).

The research on caste that was published in colonial Sri Lanka was conducted independently and on a much smaller scale, and mainly appeared in the following formats: 1) occasional essays and journal articles, such as Koorundu (1833), Johnston (1833), Casie Chitty (1834, pp. 227–251; 1855, 1865, 1886), Hartshorne (1876), Codrington (1909, 1921), and Kapuruhami (1948, p. 2); 2) observations and numerical

¹Although it is notable that Hocart's *Caste: A Comparative Study* first appeared in a French translation in Paris in 1938, with a short preface by Marcel Mauss, twelve years before its English edition was published.

data scattered throughout a series of handbooks about individual districts and provinces written by senior officials and published between 1888 and 1921;² 3) observations in monographs on a range of other topics, such as Armour (1842), Codrington (1936), Cordiner (1807), D'Oyly (1929), Davy (1821), Denham (1912), Hayley (1923), and Tennent (1860, vol. I, pp. 421–428), a category to which we can also add earlier texts from the Dutch period (1640–1796) by Knox (1681) and Valentyn (1726); and 4), a very small number of texts dedicated specifically to caste: de Saram (1888), Casie Chitty (1992), *Caste, in the Island of Ceylon* (1853) by the American missionaries Meigs, Poor and Howland, and Hocart's *Caste: A Comparative Study* (1950). Apart from the last category, however, the discussions of caste in these publications are usually brief and rarely detailed, lacking theoretical and empirical depth in comparison with contemporary Indian scholarship.

Besides published texts, there is also a wealth of references to caste in other sources, such as the Administrative Reports (compiled for each district from the 1860s onwards) and other official records, diaries and letters (see for example Balmforth, 2025; T. Gunasekera, 1994; Meyer, 2014); newspapers (Balmforth, 2025; Pfaffenberger, 1990); the memoirs left by Dutch Governors for their successors (many of which have been translated into English, e.g. Van Rhee 1915), Dutch laws (Mutukisna, 1862; Schrikker, 2007; Wickramasinghe and Schrikker, 2019), and the population registers known as thombos (Bulten, 2023); missionary archives (Balmforth, 2020; Esler, 2020); and other local sources such as *vitti pot* (Sinhalese for 'books of events') (Obeyesekere, 2015, 2019) and the caste histories and polemics that became popular in the late nineteenth century (Dharmaratna, 1890; A.P. Kannangara, 1993; Roberts, 1982). However, as P.D. Kannangara noted in 1988, there remains much to explore. This, in conjunction with the ahistorical nature of the ethnoreligious theory, is perhaps part of the reason for why contemporary post-Independence anthropology on caste is largely disconnected from both published histories and pre-Independence sources (exceptions being Esler, 2020; T. Gunasekera, 1994; McGilvray, 2008; Pfaffenberger, 1990; Whitaker, 1999). The most notable oversight is Hocart, whose work has not had a significant impact in Sri Lanka (although see McGilvray, 2008, pp. 84, 136, 182; Stirrat, 1982, p. 31), despite becoming a central pillar of post-Dumontian caste theory in India and Nepal (Dirks, 1987; Quigley, 1993; Raheja, 1988). For example, an important 1989 article by Yalman advanced a strongly Hocartian argument about the deification of kings without referring to Hocart at all.

A small number of historians have worked on caste among Tamils in Jaffna: Arasaratnam (1981) and Pfaffenberger (1990) have written about Vellalar dominance, Balmforth (2025) about activism against caste discrimination between the 1920s and 1950s, and some scholars have also recently turned to the relationship between caste and

²The works concerned the districts of Batticaloa (Canagaratnam, 1921), Jaffna (Horsburgh, 1916), Mannar (Boake, 1888; Denham, 1906, 1916), Nuwara Eliya (Le Mesurier, 1893), Puttalam (Modder, 1908, 1917), Trincomalee (Muthukrishna, 1916) and the Vanni (Vavuniya and Mullaitivu) (Lewis, 1895; Unknown 1916), as well as Central (Lawrie, 1898), North-Central (Ievers, 1899) and Uva (White, 1893) Provinces.

slavery (Balmforth, 2021; Schrikker, 2007; Wickramasinghe, 2020; Wickramasinghe and Schrikker, 2019). However, most historical research has involved topics focused on Sinhalese. First, investigations into the influence of caste, or presence of caste-like formations, in the first millenium C.E., drawing evidence from epigraphy, the chronicles and later commentaries (P.V.B. Karunatilaka, 1983, 1988, 2001; Nicholas, 1950), and archaeology (Coningham and Young, 2007). Second, a handful of topics focused on the Kandyan Kingdom, the last part of Sri Lanka to fall under colonial rule in 1815, concerning migrant Brahmins (Obeyesekere, 2015), state ritual and labour organisation (Dewaraja, 1988; Peiris, 1956; Seneviratne, 1978). Third, the influence of caste on the institutional development of Theravada Buddhism (Kemper, 1980; Liyanagamage, 1982; Malalgoda, 1976). Fourth, the colonial impact on caste with regard to administration, official appointments and compulsory service (Arasaratnam, 1981; Bastiampillai, 1988; M.U. De Silva, 1992/1993, 1993, 2005, 2015), as well as the state's withdrawal from caste and the new forms of social classification that emerged at this time (Rogers, 2004a, 2004b). Fifth, caste formation, mobility and status claims, largely after the changes of the 1830s (Gunasekera, 1994; Jayawardena, 2000; Roberts, 1982; see Dewasiri, 2008 for a discussion of the Dutch period).

As I have previously noted (2025, p. 385), social scientific research on caste in Sri Lanka after 1948 can be divided into three broad stages, a framework that I continue to employ here. However, while my earlier essay focused on key themes in contemporary research, more pertinent to my argument here is the way in which this scholarship displays varying thematic foci and levels of attention to caste in relation to ethnicity. The first stage began with Ryan's 1953 monograph *Caste in Modern Ceylon*, which remains the standard reference for Sinhalese caste matters today. In contrast to the work on localised caste dynamics emerging from the first village ethnographies being conducted in India at the same time, Ryan's work went some way to filling the gap left by the absence of the kind of colonial glossaries of caste which were never produced in Sri Lanka (e.g. Risley, 1915), although an earlier article about Sinhalese castes by Gilbert (1945) had done something similar using secondary sources. Beginning with descriptions of individual castes, *Caste in Modern Ceylon* then turns to examples of villages in different areas of the country and broader observations about national caste dynamics, although without significant ethnographic data on caste praxis.

While later work among Sinhalese tended to move away from this kind of multicaste approach (a prominent exception being Yalman, 1971), almost all subsequent scholars followed Ryan in focusing on caste within a single ethnicity, exceptions being (again) Yalman (1971), later research by Piyaarachchi (2018, pp. 147–189) in Panama (one of Yalman's fieldsites), and two studies that consider the relationship between the Veddas, caste and Sinhalese and Tamil identity, respectively (Brow, 2011; Dart, 1985).³ However, from *Caste in Modern Ceylon* until its end in the 1980s with the

³It has usually been thought that Sri Lankan Muslims do not practice caste, even if one caste-like group, the endogamous Osta 'barber-circumcisers', exists among them (McGilvray 2008,

beginning of the civil war, the first stage of Sri Lankan caste research witnessed the greatest interest in caste, pursued through the widest range of topics. Village studies did appear, and were found mainly in Sinhalese research, although they were never as popular nor as ‘holistic’ as their counterparts in India, with the earlier ethnographers in Sri Lanka prioritising kinship and land use, and caste being a largely secondary concern. The villages studied were primarily inhabited by ‘upper-caste’ Sinhalese Govigamas (Gamburd, 2009; Leach, 1961; Obeyesekere, 1967; Robinson, 1975; Ryan, Jayasena and Wickremesinghe, 1958; Tambiah, 1954), and relatively little detail about intercaste relationships was provided (although see U.A. Gunasekara 1965; Senaratne 1970; Spencer 1990; Yalman 1961, 1962, 1971). Other Sinhalese research considered caste in relation to topics such as agrarian relations (T. Gunasekera, 1994; Gunasinghe, 2007; also see essays in Brow and Weeramunda, 1992 and Morrison and Moore, 1979), politics and the JVP (Jayantha, 1992; Jiggins, 1979; Obeyesekere, 1974), Buddhism (Gombrich, 1971; Kendrick, 1992; Kemper, 1980; Seneviratne, 1978), Catholicism (Stirrat, 1982), and ‘low-caste’ ritual and craft specialists (Raghavan, 1957; Kirk, 1992; Simpson, 1984, 1997; Winslow, 1994). There was also one longer study of a coastal caste, the Karava (Raghavan, 1971).

Tamil research in the first stage addressed a smaller number of themes but tended to foreground caste through more expansive explorations of ideology and intercaste relationships (especially Banks, 1957, 1961; David, 1973, 1977; McGilvray, 1982, 1983, 2008; Somasundram, 1954; Whitaker, 1999). It shared with the Sinhalese research an interest in kinship, but was less concerned with land ownership (although see Ishak Lebbe, 1979). In addition, there were studies of caste and Hinduism (McGilvray, 1982, 1983, 2008; Perinbanayagam, 1965, 1982; Pfaffenberger, 1982; K.S. Ryan, 1980; Whitaker, 1999), gender (Skjøsberg, 1982), language (Suseendrarajah, 1970), caste identity among the Tamils working in Hill Country tea plantations whose ancestors came from India in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Hollup, 1993, 1994; Jayaraman, 1964, 1975, 1981), a detailed analysis of Paraiyar specialists (McGilvray, 1983), and a book-length study of Hindu Karaiyar fishers—a caste analogous to the Karava—unusual for its focus on Tamils living in Puttalam, a Sinhalese majority area (Tanaka, 1997). The Tamil scholarship also displayed a greater sense of cumulative focus that was related to its keener sense of regional specificity. For this reason, these studies can also be organised according to research conducted among Tamils in Jaffna, the east coast, and the Hill Country.

What is notable about the first stage, even if it remained a secondary concern, is that there was a greater interest in caste as a theoretical issue, and in related debates outside Sri Lanka, than in subsequent research (especially Leach, 1961; McGilvray, 1982; Stirrat, 1982; and Yalman, 1961a, 1961b, 1962, 1971). While Spencer commented in 1990 that ‘Early clarity [about caste] has been steadily replaced by confusion and obscurity’ (p. 187), in retrospect the 1950s–1980s produced some of

pp. 308–310). However, Faslan (2025) has recently proposed that the Muslims in southern Sri Lanka are divided into five castes, of which the Ostas are one.

the most insightful research, raising many important questions that were dropped in the second stage, which lasted from the start of the civil war to its end in 2009. During these years, caste research appeared only sporadically, addressing a much narrower range of topics, and mainly focused on Sinhalese. These changes were due to growing academic attention to ethnicity and religion in the context of the civil war, as well as the severe difficulty of conducting research in the war-affected Tamil majority areas of the north and east. There was some consideration of the relationship between caste and Sinhalese identity (M. W. A de Silva, 2009; Silva, 1999; Uyangoda, 1998), and of the 'subterranean' role of caste in politics (Uyangoda, 1998, 2000a, 2000b), but the majority of Sinhalese publications now focused on specialist castes, sometimes building on prewar research (P. de Silva, 2000; Reed, 2002; Simpson, 1997; Sykes, 2018; Winslow, 2003). This trend demonstrated a growing attention to caste inequality (especially Uyangoda, 1998, 2012; Weeratunga, 1988), including in Buddhist contexts (Samuels, 2007b), and was exemplified by Silva, Sivapragasam and Thanges's 2009 collection of four studies of caste discrimination across Sri Lanka. However, there was no research on 'upper-caste' Sinhalese Govigamas at all during this period.

Among Tamils in the north and east, caste research only began again during the 2002–2007 ceasefire (Bremner, 2013; Derges, 2013; Gaasbeek, 2010; Jeeweshwara Räsänen, 2015; Madavan, 2011), although Pfaffenberger (1990) and Hellman-Rajanayagam (1993, 1994) published investigations of the relationship between caste, politics, nationalism and Tamil identity in the early 1990s, the former drawing on prewar ethnographic research and secondary sources, the latter on local wartime publications and interviews conducted in Sri Lanka and India. Two anthropologists also considered caste in new projects in Hill Country tea plantations (Bass, 2013; Jegathesan, 2019, 2021), and the first dedicated monograph on caste for several decades (and based on several decades' work) was published (McGilvray, 2008).

The third stage, which brings us to the present day, began with the end of the war in 2009 and has been largely distinguished by new projects among Tamils in northern Sri Lanka conducted by doctoral researchers, some of which remain unpublished (Bruland, 2015; Esler, 2020, 2021; Hollenbach, et al. 2020; Kadirgamar, 2017; Kuganathan, 2022; Sanmugeswaran, 2020, 2023; Silva, 2020; Sritharan, 2025; Thanges, 2018; Thiranagama, 2018). If a key theme connects this scholarship, it is the effect of the war and its end on caste practice and ideology. The smaller body of Sinhalese research that has emerged since 2009 largely builds on topics from stages one and two: caste-identified names and identity (Heslop, 2015; M.W.A. de Silva, 2018), caste in the JVP movement (Moore, 2021) and contemporary electoral politics (Peiris, 2021), and the persistence of caste inequality in the context of normative denials of caste experienced by low-status Kinnaras (Douglas, 2017, 2019). Abeyasekera (2021) has also brought a long-overdue attention to 'upper-caste' practices, in this case through marriages in Colombo's middle class.

The Ethnoreligious Theory of Caste in Sri Lanka

The following quotations are statements of what I have called the ethnoreligious theory:

The Sinhalese and the Tamils each possess a caste system peculiar to their own nationality. The Tamils, being in a minority and sharing the social stratification of their fellow nationals in India, are not considered in this paper except where they show relationships with the Sinhalese. (Gilbert, 1945, p. 69)

Ceylon possesses two caste structures, the Tamil, no more than a regional variant within the South Indian pattern, and the Sinhalese, a self-contained emergent arising from diffuse Indian influences and historically unique situations. (Ryan, 1953, pp. 4–5).

In Ceylon, in contrast to India, there were no necessary links between the traditional status system and the traditional religious system. In India the status of each caste was evaluated in terms of brahmanical teachings; in Ceylon no such explicitly formulated standard prevailed for status evaluation. In India the caste system was maintained and consolidated by the priestly authority of the brahmins; in Ceylon no priestly caste existed. The consolidation and legitimation of caste in Ceylon, therefore, was primarily a secular function mainly in the hands of the political authority, the king. (Malalgoda, 1976, p. 46)

Sinhalese castes have many of the characteristics of the Hindu model, but with some crucial differences. They are ranked, endogamous, hereditary named groups with traditional occupations, but there is no religious sanction for the caste hierarchy, and there are no Brahmins to integrate them. They are castes without a caste system. (Peebles, 1995, pp. 44–45)

In comparison to India, the caste system in Sri Lanka is considered to be mild. Three parallel and more or less independent caste systems prevail in Sri Lanka: Sinhala, Sri Lanka Tamil and Indian Tamil. [...] The caste systems in Sri Lanka can be considered less rigid compared to the Hindu caste system in India because of the secular nature of the hierarchy, a critical doctrinal perspective relating to caste in Buddhism, the predominant religion in Sinhala society, a relatively weak notion of untouchability in caste systems in Sri Lanka and relatively small size of the bottom layer of society. (Silva, Sivapragasam and Thanges, 2009, pp. 1–2)

Caste in Sri Lanka is dynamic in both Sinhalese and Tamil communities, and there are even some parallels between these. For the Sinhalese, caste was not connected to religion—Buddhism is against it—as it is more socio-economic. For Tamils, the roots of caste stems from the Hindu religion where the Rig Veda classifies people according to *Varnastra dharma*, so that caste has a socio-religious base. (Jeeweshwara Räsänen, 2015, p. 65)

I have explained above that Sinhalese and Tamil caste research has been produced in two largely separate streams, and that the focal themes and attention to caste in each

has varied. The central argument of this essay is that the shape of the intellectual history of caste in Sri Lanka is one of the consequences of the fact that scholars have overwhelmingly drawn upon, and continue to reproduce, an ethnoreligious theory of caste which holds that caste manifests in Sri Lanka in the form of separate and independent Tamil Hindu and Sinhalese Buddhist caste systems. In this section I discuss the underlying theory itself, direct expressions of which—such as the examples quoted above—are rare and brief, usually appearing in introductions to the topic of caste and primarily in order to explain the existence of caste among Sinhalese Buddhists, which is assumed to be a paradox. Underpinning the ethnoreligious theory of caste, I propose, are the following principles:

1. Caste derives from Hinduism, and Buddhism is antithetical to it.
2. Caste is a characteristic of Tamil ethnicity due to the Tamil relationship with Hinduism.
3. Ethnoreligious caste systems are essentially different and are impermeable to outside influences.

As can be seen from the extracts above, it is not the case that each of these principles are expressed in every instance of the theory, and in fact they become increasingly implicit: the first principle is the most explicitly stated and elaborated, while the third is indicated by empirical and theoretical absences. It is not my argument that all caste scholars necessarily support the theory, in full or in part, and in later sections I offer some evidence to the contrary. One possible objection to my approach is that an absence of something is not necessarily evidence of the presence of something else, which is one consequence of my arguing for the increasing implicitness of the principles. However, I do think that many scholars of Sri Lanka share the presumptions described below, and if not, at the very least I hope to prompt them to express their thoughts on this subject.

Caste Derives from Hinduism, and Buddhism is Antithetical to it

The assumption that caste is a property of Hinduism is an instance of a widespread popular and academic view with which caste scholars working elsewhere will be very familiar. According to this view, caste is an enduring form of Hindu social organisation whose ancient origins are described in the myth of the sacrifice of Purusha and the creation of the four *varnas* in the *Rigveda*. Its most elaborate and influential theoretical articulation is found in the work of Louis Dumont (1980), who argued that caste derives from a Hindu ideological principle of the opposition between ritual purity and impurity, producing a hierarchy whose extremes are represented by the Brahman and the Untouchable. According to Dumont, the spiritual authority of the Brahman supersedes the temporal authority of the Kshatriya, a situation that arose from a contract that the kings made with the priests in the distant past (Dumont, 1980, pp. 287–313). With regard to members of other religions, Dumont argued that caste can only exist ‘in more or less attenuated forms’ (Dumont, 1980, p. 210), either because certain ideological features are absent even if other characteristics of caste are present,

or because the ideology of the new religion has not yet developed fully (Dumont, 1980, p. 205). Of Sri Lanka, Dumont briefly proposed that as Buddhism historically favoured the king rather than the Brahmin, the disjunction between status and power did not occur, as a consequence of which the king remained primary and the Brahmins few. Caste in Sri Lanka therefore ‘has all the characteristics of caste except its vigour’, and is ‘quasi-caste rather than caste proper’ (Dumont, 1980, p. 216).

It is either a testament to Dumont’s extensive influence, or to the fact that his theory reflected existing preconceptions about caste, that Sri Lankan caste research—particularly research that focuses on Sinhalese—has a strongly Dumontian sensibility despite rarely referring to his work outside of the abovementioned handful of scholars in the first stage of caste research who engaged with debates beyond Sri Lanka. In short, caste is presumed to derive fundamentally from Hinduism, religious and political domains are ontologically separate, and Buddhism is ideologically opposed to caste, with a slippage from Buddhist caste to that of Sri Lanka as a whole. In his famous history of Sri Lanka, for example, K.M. de Silva claims that ‘caste has no religious sanction from Buddhism’ and that Buddhism ‘may well have retarded if not arrested the growth of caste, for some time at least’ (2005, pp. 57–58), while Seneviratne proposes that Buddhism ‘is possibly the best explanation for the relatively greater social liberalism in Sri Lanka when compared with Muslim and Hindu India’, and for the ‘mild form’ of the Sri Lankan (read Sinhalese Buddhist) caste system in comparison to that of the Sri Lankan Hindu Tamils (1999, p. 18). Of course, the view that Buddhism is antithetical to caste is not confined to Sri Lanka, and can be found in Dr B. R. Ambedkar’s anti-caste neo-Buddhism (Silva 2017), as well as in the beliefs of Indian Tamil Buddhists recently discussed by Ayyathurai (2020).

Two explanations, both only weakly substantiated by historical evidence, have been given for Buddhism’s weakening of caste in Sri Lanka. The first is that the absence of ‘religious sanction’ means that caste among Buddhists can only be ‘secular’. According to Ryan (1953, 37–38), ‘the most critical factor in the secularization of Sinhalese caste was the separation of priestliness and caste’, which occurred because the *sangha* was founded as a casteless order open to all. On the other hand, in his study of the Kandyan Kingdom, Pieris proposed that while caste was secularised by being ‘uprooted from its sacrificial base’, it was ‘consolidated and legitimated through the medium of the entire apparatus of a strong central government’ (1956, p. 180; see also Malalgoda, 1976, p. 46). Similar concepts can be seen in the work of scholars who describe Sinhalese caste as ‘feudal’ (Jiggins, 1979; Leach, 1959; although cf. Roberts, 1984), as well as in descriptions of migrant communities from India being incorporated into the Sinhalese caste system for specific labour purposes (Roberts, 1982, pp. 48–49).

Second, Sinhalese Buddhist caste is held to lack three specific religious dimensions of the ‘Indian Hindu caste system’. First, the notion of *varna* is described as either absent—‘contrary to the Indian experience, what is almost wholly lacking as an accepted referent is the idea of a single encompassing, universal, and primordial hierarchy, conceptualised in *varna*’ (Jiggins, 1979, p. 19)—or incomplete, specifically

missing Brahmans and Kshatriyas (Gombrich, 1971, p. 296; Pieris, 1956, p. 171). Second, the absence of an equivalent caste to the Brahmans among Sinhalese means that ‘there are no Brahmins to integrate them’ (Peebles, 1995, p. 45). Although unexplored empirically, the relatively small number of Hindu Brahmans among Tamils, and their lack of authority, is thought to have a similar weakening effect (Rogers, 2004, p. 52). Third, the notion of ‘ritual pollution’ is either diminished or non-existent among the Sinhalese, as a result of which untouchability either does not exist, or – usually in reference to the stigmatised Kinnara and Rodi castes – exists solely as a secular rather than a religious condition (Gombrich, 1971, p. 296; Mahroof, 2000, p. 43; Ryan, 1953, pp. 16–17).

It is important to note here that these arguments exist in parallel to the recognition that caste *has* played a role in the institutional structure of Buddhism—for example, in recruitment for the main *nikāyas*, or monastic lineages (Kemper, 1980)—as well as in theological interpretation, as seen in the legitimization of caste inequality on the basis of *karma* (Silva, 2017, pp. 9–10). While many scholars have viewed religion as a force that acts unidirectionally on caste, a smaller number have made the more nuanced argument that the existence of caste among Sinhalese Buddhists, even in weakened form, is due to Buddhism itself changing to accommodate caste. For example, Buddhism ‘adapted to the secular structure’ (Jiggins, 1979, pp. 19–20) or ‘transformed itself to legitimise the caste system’ (Dewasiri, 2008, p. 218). Nevertheless, these perspectives tend to support the view that ‘authentic’ Buddhism is anti-caste, as can be seen in the following comment by Gombrich (1971, p. 310): ‘In no other respect has Buddhism in Ceylon come so far from its original state as in the invasion of the Order by caste, yet another testimony to the remarkable strength of that insidious institution.’

Caste is a Characteristic of Tamil Ethnicity Due to the Tamil Relationship with Hinduism

While the presumed relationship between Hinduism and caste is a familiar one, it is complexified in the Sri Lankan context by the enclosure of religion, and therefore caste, within ethnicity. According to Rogers (1994, pp. 14–15), within Sri Lanka’s ‘modern sociology of knowledge’ ethnicity is considered to be the primary and outermost layer, while religion and caste are considered to be subcategories of ethnicity. However, Rogers’ point that religion is considered optional and caste inherent sidesteps the fact that Hindu and Buddhist identities are in fact highly constrained within emic assumptions about ethnicity, as demonstrated, for example, by the apparent incongruity of a ‘Tamil Buddhist’ (McKinley, 2022). Similarly, despite the existence of large numbers of Tamil and Sinhalese Christians, even conversion to Christianity—particularly more recent denominations—may be considered a threat to ethnic identity. A notable way in which such an association between religion and ethnicity appears in academic scholarship can be seen in occasional claims that all Jaffna Tamils are Hindus (e.g., David, 1973, 1977; Perinbanayagam, 1965 and 1982; Skjøsberg, 1982, p. 15), to the surprise of those who have observed the many Christian churches in the region.

In other words, religion is considered to be a significant characteristic of ethnic identity per se, and continues to have an ongoing influence on ethnicity after conversion

to Christianity. Caste, therefore, is ultimately enclosed not within religion but within ethnicity. Caste is not enacted by Hindus or Buddhists, but by Tamils and Sinhalese as a result of their relationship with Hinduism and Buddhism, respectively. Tamils and Sinhalese are thus considered as a whole to reproduce a certain kind of caste system as an essentialised ethnic characteristic, and as caste is viewed negatively in the public sphere, this differentiated ethnic characteristic also has a strongly ethical connotation. In other words, Tamils are more hierarchical and discriminatory than Sinhalese. For example, Ryan (1953, p. 17) wrote that 'The absence of the Hindu concept [of untouchability] has rendered the Sinhalese caste system mild and humanitarian when judged by Indian standards'. This conceptualisation of caste in ethical terms existed long before recent research on caste as a form of stigmatisation and subordination. As a normative attitude connected to ethnic categories, such an understanding of caste has a broader political valence, as we will see later. Finally, due to the Tamil relationship with Hinduism caste is only an authentic property of Tamil ethnicity, and its presence among Sinhalese must necessarily be anomalous and attenuated.

Ethnoreligious Caste Systems are Essentially Different and are Impermeable to Outside Influences

In the literature on caste, the term 'caste system' is used in three main ways: 1) as a synonym for caste itself; 2) as a way of conceptualising caste as a phenomenon with systemic properties; and 3) to identify localised instances of type 2, usually highlighting a particular systemic property as the limiting factor (e.g. a regional caste system, a religious caste system). It is in the third sense that caste system is used in Sri Lanka, always in the plural, with the limiting factor being ethnicity. However, the precise nature of the differences between the caste systems is largely overlooked, or rather assumed. In fact, in structural terms, similarities have been highlighted more often than differences, as many castes are considered to be analogous to each other, such as the landowning Tamil Vellalars and Sinhalese Govigamas who are numerically and socio-economically dominant in many parts of Sri Lanka (De Silva, 1965, p. 187; Gaasbeek, 2010, p. 86; Ryan, 1953, p. 4; Yalman, 1989, p. 144). Moreover, the visual metaphor of an 'inverted pyramid' has been used to represent both Sinhalese (Pieris, 1952, p. 410; Ryan, 1953, p. 95) and Tamil (Jayawardena, 2000, p. 165) caste systems. What differences are emphasised relate primarily to the presence or absence of the Hindu properties of caste mentioned above, as well as to the *strength* of caste, a rather nebulous concept that refers to varying levels of commitment to hierarchical intercaste boundaries.

This mix of similarities and differences does not include 'non-religious' factors such as the role of the colonial or postcolonial state: there is no 'national context' within which caste can be situated without the discourse being immediately channeled into the parallel systems framework. Nor is there any consideration of how these caste systems might interact with or influence each other. In fact, caste systems are treated as if they are impermeable to outside influence, the only relevant factor being that of religion today or in the past. Statements about caste being weaker at the level of

the nation than India rely on presumptions about caste *within* the systems and the demographic majority of Sinhalese Buddhists; significantly, the ‘milder’ form of Sinhalese Buddhist caste is not described as having an effect on the Tamil system. A good example of this tendency is Winslow’s important 2023 attempt to theorise Sinhalese caste, which has much to say about influences from India but nothing on how Tamils and Sinhalese may have influenced each other within Sri Lanka.

There is one caveat to make here. Although two caste systems are usually identified in Sri Lanka, the ‘national’ Tamil caste system fragments at higher levels of detail. For example, Silva, Sivapragasam and Thanges (2009, p. 1) write that ‘Three parallel and more or less independent caste systems prevail in Sri Lanka: Sinhala, Sri Lanka Tamil and Indian Tamil’, while Mahroof (2000, p. 40) identifies four: the Northern Tamil (Jaffna) system, the Eastern Province system, the Plantation (Estate) system, and a ‘fugitive’ system of a ‘narrow segment of urban scavenging workers’. However, in common with the projected model of ‘Hindu India’, only one caste system is identified among the Sinhalese, although some scholars propose that there were once two, one among Sinhalese of the low country and another among the Sinhalese of the Kandyan region (Mahroof, 2000, p. 40). While the multiplicity of contemporary Tamil caste systems is due ostensibly to regional and intra-ethnic difference, I suggest that it is primarily a result of the more cumulative nature of Tamil caste research and the greater attention that it has paid to intercaste relationships and historical contexts.

Historicising the Ethnoreligious Theory

Rather than emerging from evidence-based analysis, the ethnoreligious theory of caste is the contemporary expression of a discourse that became prominent under particular historical conditions in the 1830s, as has been most clearly demonstrated by Rogers (1994, 2004a, 2004b) in his attempt to draw Sri Lanka into broader postcolonial debates about the colonial influence on caste. As is now well known, the historical turn in Indian caste scholarship from the 1960s onwards foregrounded the late nineteenth century as the crucial period for the formation of caste in its modern form through the manifold effects of British colonial knowledge production and governance, such as classification and enumeration (Appadurai, 1993; Cohn, 1987; Pinney, 1990). More recent research has offered a strong riposte to the more extreme claims of epistemic rupture made in this scholarship by being more attentive to Indian actors and precolonial history (e.g. Peabody, 2001, Piliavsky, 2015), but the debate nevertheless continues to reflect a marked ‘methodological nationalism’ (Wimmer and Schiller, 2002) in its disinterest in relevant comparative examples from Nepal (see Guneratne, 2023) and Sri Lanka. As I emphasise later, however, Sri Lankan caste scholarship has also largely ignored its Indian counterpart. Of the three groups, only scholars of Nepal demonstrate a strong cross-border scholarly awareness due to their engagement with Indian work.

Colonial state intervention in caste in Sri Lanka differed from India in being, on the one hand, more formalised and sustained over a longer period than in India, and

on the other, in turning in a starkly different direction in the 1830s. I will address these in turn. From the Portuguese onwards, the colonial states in Sri Lanka drew upon precolonial practices that utilised caste as a key source of labour and taxation. Caste-based labour, which was known by the British as ‘compulsory service’, sometimes but not always drew upon ‘traditional’ caste occupations, although the labour assigned to individual castes could change depending on the needs of the state in the district in question. In a similar manner to that described in the Indian scholarship, the colonial states also privileged specific castes for powerful headmen positions, and, especially under the Dutch, passed laws that bound certain castes to their assigned labour. Additionally, the *Thesawalamai*, a Dutch collection of ordinances applying to Jaffna that was passed in 1707, established the legal ownership of members of four castes as slaves. While we do not yet have a good sense of the intellectual history of colonial ideas about caste in Sri Lanka, especially for the Dutch and the Portuguese periods, the long duration of specialised caste-based labour and its organisation, as seen for example in Governor van Rhee’s detailed list of caste duties in Jaffna in 1697, suggest that it would be a mistake to presume that caste identities only ‘solidified’ in the nineteenth century, more so as the British decided to withdraw from intervening in caste in the 1830s.

When the British took over the Dutch territories in 1796 they were divided in their view of compulsory service, with some in government strongly opposed to it and the way in which it reinforced caste identities. Between 1796 and 1832, the British made a number of changes to its operation (Mendis, 1956, vol. 1, p. 234, and vol. 2, p. 289; Samaraweera, 1969, p. 220), and in 1832 the Commission of Eastern Inquiry, conducted by W.M.G. Colebrooke and C.H. Cameron, emphasised local hostility towards it and recommended its abolition (Casinader et al., 2018; Mendis, 1956; Samaraweera, 1969)—although this decision did not apply to royal villages, villages granted to an individual, and temple villages in the Hill Country (Kendrick, 1992, pp. 194–195). Criticisms of compulsory service, from both native Sri Lankans and colonial officials, drew on economic and ethical arguments, as well as a set of views about social identification that prefigured the ethnoreligious theory. As Colebrooke wrote:

The civil institutions of the Cingalese, who profess the religion of Bhood [Buddha] are obviously derived from Hindu origin. The possession of their lands on tenures of service, and the division of people into classes, according to their various trades or occupations, subsist also among the Malabars [Tamils], and probably prevailed throughout the continent of India before the Mahomedan conquests; but the abolition of the religious distinctions of caste has constituted a marked peculiarity of the Bhoodists, which drew on them the hostility of the Brahmins, and produced the religious wars which depopulated the country and led to the settlement of the Malabars in the northern district of the island. The civil distinctions of caste have doubtless originated in an attempt to introduce a division of labour, and these distinctions have been

rendered hereditary from the privileges acquired by particular castes, and by the practice of assigning lands for the conditional performance of labour or service. (Mendis, 1956, p. 25)

Changing views of caste in Sri Lanka also reflected a growing conceptual ‘partitioning’ of Sri Lanka from India (Sivasundaram, 2023). Rogers (1994) has argued that caste was not seen as subsidiary to ethnicity prior to this time, that British perceptions of caste in India and Sri Lanka were similar until the 1830s (2004a, pp. 76–77), and that the abolition of compulsory service was accompanied by a perception that caste ‘was not a legitimate form of social identification’ (Rogers, 2004a, p. 53), leading to little official discussion of, or collection of data about, caste. This situation continued after Independence, an important consequence of which has been the absence of official caste categories like those of India. (These points should not be taken to mean that the colonial and postcolonial states ceased to have any relationship with caste, although it is not possible to address this here.) Also worth noting is that this different course was partly motivated by ideas from India itself, as the notion of caste as a Hindu phenomenon was circulating widely by the mid nineteenth century (e.g. Meigs, Poor and Howland, 1853; Tennent, 1860, vol 1, pp. 425, 530).

However, even by the early twentieth century the concept of entirely different and incommensurate caste systems had not yet become habitualised, as shown by two key pieces of evidence. The first is the fact that the British continued to view certain castes as analogues of each other across the ethnic divide. In a short booklet submitted to Governor Robert Wilmot-Horton in 1832, at the time of the commission, a headman named A. de Saram wrote that ‘The distinction of Castes among the Malabars in the Island is similar to that of the L. [lowland?] Singhalese almost in every respect’ (1832, p. 7).⁴ Moreover, Tamil caste names were used to refer to their perceived Sinhalese counterparts into the twentieth century. Various scholars have noted the use of forms of the word ‘Vellalar’ to refer to Govigamas, as seen in Colebrooke’s report on the administration of Ceylon: ‘The highest and most esteemed caste is that of Vellales or Goyas’ (Mendis, 1956, p. 26; see also Peebles, 1995, p. 45; Rogers, 2004, pp. 75–76; Tennent, vol. I, p. 426). Less noted is the fact that ‘Chandos’—a Dutch derivation of the Tamil Sandar, a caste associated with toddy tapping—was used for the Sinhalese Durawas, who were similarly associated with that occupation, or that the Tamil Karaiyars and Sinhalese Karavas were also viewed as equivalent (Rogers, 2004, pp. 75–76). With regard to the use of ‘Vellalar’ in particular, Meyer has noted that although this practice has not been investigated, it has important implications for the development of caste and ethnicity: ‘A systematic study of the occurrence of the term could shed light on the consolidation of the caste, and on the affirmation of Sinhala consciousness versus the Tamil’ (2014, pp. 25–26). Meyer suggests that it may have been due to the British following the earlier Dutch practice ‘which

⁴Although the title of this document states it was submitted in 1832, a reference (p. 8) to the abolition of compulsory service in 1833 suggests that it was later than this, or edited subsequently.

underlined similarities between Tamil and Sinhala caste structure' (Meyer, 2014; see also Dewasiri, 2008, p. 189), or that 'the Kandyans were already using the term at the time of the Nayakkar dynasty' (Meyer, 2014, pp. 25–26). However, there is some evidence that the Portuguese also did the same (Queyroz, 1992, vol. 3, p. 1089, cited in Peebles, 1995, p. 45).

The second piece of evidence is the fact that the most significant caste work to emerge from Sri Lanka during this period paid little attention to the ethnoreligious theory at all. Hocart (1950) placed the king at the centre of a sacrificial system in which all other castes, rather than only the Brahman, are treated as priests with the responsibility to conduct rituals to remove pollution. While Hocart, like Dumont, traced the origins of caste to the Vedas (Hocart, 1950, pp. 22–23), he also drew upon Hindu and Buddhist texts without discrimination and noted that the 'The Tamils of the North of Ceylon have much the same castes [as the Sinhalese]: the kings are extinct, the brahmans and merchants imported, so that the farmers again are the highest indigenous caste; then come the low castes' (p. 4). Although Hocart was responding directly to the prominent racial and occupational theories of caste during the late colonial period, his work has had its greatest impact in critiques of Dumont's subsequent theory of caste as an ideological Hindu phenomenon. Ironically, those who have made the most use of Hocart's work (e.g. Dirks, 1987; Quigley, 1993) have overlooked the Sri Lankan context from which his evidence was drawn, while few scholars in Sri Lanka itself have engaged with it.

A Critique of the Ethnoreligious Theory

In this section I argue that the ethnoreligious theory is flawed in a number of ways, the result of which has been to direct attention away from, first, the available Sri Lankan evidence (and recognition of its lacunae), and second, from other highly relevant bodies of research, particularly caste research from outside Sri Lanka in which many of the issues raised by the Sri Lankan context have already been debated. The ethnoreligious theory and the research that has been conducted in Sri Lanka exist in a recursive relationship that has produced a closed system with no apparent questions remaining to answer. As I deconstruct the principles of the theory, however, it will become apparent that they point outwards, away from caste and towards other strongly held assumptions about religion, ethnicity and the nation. To move beyond the ethnoreligious theory of caste it is also therefore necessary to rethink these categories, and I have tried to suggest ways in which we can do this.

Religion

An informed reader may perhaps by this point be bemused that I have yet to mention the voluminous work on caste and religion from elsewhere. On the one hand, this literature has produced many nuanced discussions of the relationship between caste and Hinduism (e.g. Fuller, 1988), including non- or anti-caste movements (Lorenzen, 1987) and critical investigations into the historical processes by which caste became

seen as Hindu (Viswanath, 2015). On the other hand, it has explored the apparent tension between caste and other religions such as Christianity (e.g. Mosse, 2012), Islam (Ahmad, 1978; Levesque, 2023), Sikhism (Jodhka, 2024), and Jainism (Cort, 2004), all of which are popularly understood to be, like Buddhism, opposed to caste due to an ideology of egalitarianism. Winslow (2003–2004) has argued that anthropologists have often misrecognised the particularities of Sri Lankan villages due to the influence of Indian village studies. When it comes to caste, however, views of India are largely divorced from empirical evidence—the ‘book view’ without the book. Thus, we find replicated a frustratingly outdated and static concept of the ‘Indian Hindu model’ of caste which has little bearing on what has been written on this topic over the past several decades.

Two examples of this will be sufficient. First, in contrast to its depiction in the ethnoreligious theory, the ‘classical’ four-fold *varna* scheme is not held identically and universally by Hindus throughout India, but is rather a set of ideas and practices that, where found at all, are held in varying ways and are often the subject of much disagreement. Meanwhile, concepts of *varna* have in fact played a role in Sri Lanka, as seen in the association between Govigamas and the Vaishyas (Gombrich, 1971, p. 297), between Vellalars and Sudras (Pfaffenberger, 1982), and between Karavas and Kshatriyas (Roberts, 1982). Second, the assumption that Brahmins are always the ‘highest’ caste is not the case (Quigley, 1993, pp. 54–86), and, as in Sri Lanka, there are Indian regions in which Brahmins are a relatively small population. The historical presence of Brahmins in different parts of Sri Lanka among both Tamils and Sinhalese (McGilvray, 2008, p. 84; Obeyesekere, 2015) also demonstrates that their contemporary absence is historically contingent and should not be treated merely as an essential characteristic of Sinhalese or Tamils. Rather than approaching these topics as examples of the ‘incomplete’ (and thus anomalous) nature of caste in Sri Lanka, there are more relevant (and interesting) questions to ask about how these ideas and practices have been transmitted, who has adopted them, and how they have been locally interpreted.

Besides demonstrating a lack of familiarity with the ethnographic evidence from Sri Lanka and elsewhere, the ethnoreligious theory also employs a restrictive concept of religions as static, transcultural and transhistorical essences—to borrow the terminology of Asad’s famous critique (1993, p. 28)—with transparent theologies that have a unidirectional effect on human behaviour. What is striking about this is that there is a strong thread of scholarship on religious pluralism within Sri Lanka itself, most prominently concerning the interface between Buddhism and Hinduism (de Alwis, 2018; Goonasekera, 2007; Pfaffenberger, 1979; Obeyesekere, 1984; Whitaker, Rajasingham-Senanayake and Pathmanesan, 2022). Furthermore, the focus on theological correctness, which posits any caste practices of Buddhists as inauthentic, imposes an emic normative judgement as an analytical category while overlooking a wider literature on the complex relationship between caste and Buddhism (e.g. Samuels, 2007a; Silva, 2017). The notion of anti-caste Buddhism also needs to be related to the modern development of the notion that Buddhism is an inherently pacifistic religion

that has, in the words of the Buddhist reformer Angarika Dharmapala, ‘made Asia mild’ (Frydenlund, 2017).

What is more relevant from an anthropological perspective is not simply whether and how Buddhists practice caste—and there is sufficient evidence of this not to doubt it—but how Buddhists understand caste in relation to Buddhism. For example, Weeratunga (2002, pp. 24–26) argues that discrimination against Rodis cannot solely be understood as secular, because it is justified on the basis that they not only take animal life by hunting but allegedly conducted human sacrifices to their deity in the past, practices that were anathematised on the basis of Buddhist morality. Elsewhere, Silva (2017, pp. 9–10) has noted that the concept of karma is used to explain and even legitimise caste and other inequalities. A comparative example of the need to move beyond assumptions of the consequences of egalitarianism is particularly evident in the work on caste and Islam. Initially preoccupied with the ‘paradox’ of the practice of caste despite an apparent lack of ideological justification (which was considered to be solely Hindu), early researchers argued that among Muslims caste was instead connected to secular matters of wealth, prestige, and honour (Ahmad, 1978). Breaking out of this framework, more recent work has highlighted ways in which South Asian Muslims understand caste and caste identities through concepts other than egalitarianism but which are also understood as Islamic (e.g. Bellamy, 2021; Rathore, 2023). In Pakistan, an association between stigmatising sanitation work and ‘low-caste’ Christians (see Butt, 2023) is justified on the grounds that Christianity, unlike Islam, does not require its adherents to be ‘pure’ for ritual contexts (Aqeel and Gill, 2021, pp. 21–22). Mosse’s work on caste and Christianity, which comprises one of the most astute critiques of these issues, applies across the so-called egalitarian and anti-caste religions:

Rather than framing the issue in terms of the nature of caste among Indian Christians, it is often more fruitful to ask about the Christian influence on the experience of caste; or instead of asking whether or how Christianity in India has accommodated caste (a missiological question), to ask how caste has accommodated Christianity as part of its particular cultural politics (an ethnographic question). (Mosse, 2012, p. 59)

Ethnicity

Another step towards moving beyond the ethnoreligious theory would be to undertake an actively comparative analysis of the putative caste systems while simultaneously identifying empirical gaps. As noted above, several scholars have identified similarities between Tamil Hindu and Sinhalese Buddhist caste systems in the existence of analogous castes and a roughly tripartite structure of numerically and socioeconomically dominant landholding Govigamas and Vellalars, mid-status fishing and artisan castes, and low-status service castes (as well as Rodis). Although remaining within the ethnoreligious framework, there are benefits to this approach, which raises

a range of comparative issues such as intercaste service relationships, historically known as *kuḍimakkal* in Tamil and *tōvil* in Sinhala. Such an approach would also shine light on the large gaps in the ethnographic record; for example, almost nothing has been written on *tōvil* beyond a short 1965 article by U.A. Gunasekera.

However, this approach remains restricted by its conceptualisation of ethnicity. Here it is necessary to note that ethnicity and religion have not been treated analogously in Sri Lankan scholarship, because the element of plural interaction present in religious research is largely absent from that on ethnicity. Given the large amount of attention paid to ethnicity since the start of the civil war—and historical critiques of primordialist nationalist arguments about the antiquity of contemporary ethnic identities (e.g. Nissan and Stirrat, 1990; Rogers, 1994, 2004a, 2004b)—this might appear to be a counterintuitive claim, but a closer look at the ethnographic record will demonstrate, as Spencer noted almost two decades ago, the lack of research on the ‘everyday work of ethnicity... the working through of issues of similarity and difference in work and the economy, kinship, or religious practice’ (2007, pp. 163–164). The post-Barthian debate around ethnicity as a relational production that has led to nuanced studies such as Baumann (1996) has had, with few exceptions (most notably Davis’s 2020 of language ideologies in Kandyan schools; also see Gaasbeek 2010; Sykes 2018), relatively little influence on the persistent division of Sri Lankan research along ethnic lines, of which caste is perhaps only the most prominent (and rationalised) example. When ethnic interaction *is* the focus, it is most often conceptualised as a property produced in areas where ethnic ‘culture zones’ (Sykes, 2018, pp. 119–162) meet, leading to what Yalman (1962) termed ‘shatter zones’, rather than in the everyday forms of contact that occur throughout Sri Lanka.

If a straightforward comparison of assumed caste systems would reproduce this conceptualisation of ethnicity, other evidence (although slim) makes the systems approach problematic by demonstrating that the putative caste systems are *not* impermeable to each other, as the ethnoreligious theory presupposes. Although Ryan (1953, p. 139) suggested that in Colombo Sinhalese would ‘choose to remain ignorant of [a Tamil’s caste], probably assuming it to be Vellāla unless the contrary were known’, other evidence shows that Sinhalese and Tamils do sometimes interact with each other on the basis of caste, either by employing service castes across the ethnic divide (McGilvray, 1974; Piyaarathne, 2018, pp. 157–160; Ryan, 1953, p. 141), or by propagating a shared view of caste hierarchy, as demonstrated by the double minoritisation briefly noted by Silva, Thanges and Sivapragasam (2009, p. 105) in their chapter on a community of largely Tamil Paraiyar and Chakkiliyar sanitation workers in majority-Sinhalese Kandy. Here it would appear that Tamils and Sinhalese share a notion of pollution. Even more significantly, there is also evidence that some ‘analogous’ castes have viewed each other as part of the same caste group, complicating the notion of a hard ethnic boundary between them. Until at least the 1980s, for example, there existed an organisation called the All-Ceylon Kshatriya Maha Sabai whose members included both Tamil Karaiyars and Sinhalese Karavas (Esler, 2021, p. 238). Similarly, an organisation called the Ceylon Vishvakarma Union, which was

still active during McGilvray's fieldwork (2008, p. 212), encompassed not only Tamil artisan castes (Kollar blacksmiths, Tattar goldsmiths, and Tatchar carpenters), but also the Sinhalese Navandanna, all of whom were considered to be descendants of the god Vishvakarma (Ratnawira, 1909).

Although it is evident that all of these issues need to be researched in greater detail, they immediately show that the notion of impermeable ethnoreligious caste systems is unfeasible. What difference *does* ethnicity make, then? Placing caste within a relational concept of ethnicity helps to think about this, and draws attention to the ethnicisation of caste from the 1830s onwards. On a national level, there is a shared public denial and rejection of caste as an undesirable phenomenon. While this public discourse can be found across South Asia, the Sri Lankan state pays relatively little official attention to caste. Sri Lanka's 1978 constitution proscribes discrimination on the basis of caste, but the only legislation addressing this is the 1957 Prevention of Social Disabilities Act, which has rarely been implemented. Neither is caste very visible in public politics (Uyangoda, 2000, p. 18), although it is occasionally mobilised as an electoral asset (Jayanntha, 1992, Jiggins, 1979, Peiris, 2021) and appears to have played a role in the formation of both the JVP and the LTTE (Hellmann-Rajanayagam, 1993; Obeyesekere, 1974; Moore, 2021). This shared public antipathy towards caste has been incorporated into the production of ethnic identity and difference, and both Sinhalese and Tamils have denied or suppressed caste (Silva, 1999).

Among Tamils, the extension of Tamilness to 'lower' castes was a process that was still incomplete in the 1970s (Pfaffenberger, 1990, pp. 82–83; Hellmann-Rajanayagam, 1993, p. 256), and was ultimately catalysed by a 'politics of defensive unity' (Pfaffenberger 1990) that suppressed anti-caste activism. This process appears to parallel the extension of Hinduism to Indian Dalits in the first half of the twentieth century (Lee, 2021), and in fact during my own research in Mannar I have heard Tamil Hindus occasionally refer to themselves as 'Tamil people' (*tamilākkaḷ*) in contrast to Christians and others, a practice previously noted by Suseendrarajah in Jaffna (1980, p. 347). Public discussion of caste was later discouraged by fear of the LTTE and on the grounds that it would undermine Tamil solidarity and the cause of independence. Among the Sinhalese, a discourse of modernity that privileges social, democratic egalitarianism—linked to Buddhism—has downplayed and deferred caste (Abeyasekera, 2021, pp. 11, 30; Douglas, 2017; Silva, 1999; Uyangoda, 2000a, 2000b). On the one hand, elements of a 'national' ethnic culture have been divorced from their earlier categorisation as low-status caste traditions (Douglas, 2017, 2019; Reed, 2010). On the other hand, caste is treated as a property of 'low' castes, resulting in an 'upper-caste' 'casteless subjectivity' in much the same way as has been described in India (Douglas, 2017; Deshpande, 2013; Subramanian, 2015). This is reflected in W.M.A. De Silva's 2018 article on the phenomenon of Sinhalese replacing 'low-caste' names with those that have either 'a-caste' or 'upper-caste' connotations. Although De Silva notes that this decision is made to avoid caste stigma, he does not directly identify the source of that stigma as coming from members of other castes. Caste is also externalised as a property of Tamils, in a manner that resonates with Harrison's

argument that cultural ‘differences’ may be denied resemblances, specifically the configuration which he calls ‘difference-as-inferiority’, in which ‘the cultural Other is made to represent censored and disclaimed attributes of the Self’ (2001, p. 357). In this regard, caste was used by Sinhalese politicians in the 1950s and 1960s as a reason to refuse Tamils regional autonomy (Bastin, 1997, p. 426; Pfaffenberger, 1990, pp. 86–87), and it continues to emerge as criticism of Tamils in newspapers, as seen in H.L.P. Mahindapala’s series of articles on Jaffna in the *Sunday Observer* from 2020 to 2022, such as ‘Bad news: Vellalars are back in Jaffna’ (2020).

Beyond the Enclosure

While the two preceding sections argued against the presumption of enclosed caste systems by highlighting flaws in the theory’s conceptualisations of religion and ethnicity, I now turn briefly to the absences in the theory to suggest two further factors that continue to weaken the notion of ethnoreligious enclosure, both of which demand a stronger connection to historical evidence and arguments. First, the similarities noted between the putative systems suggest the need for greater consideration of the way in which caste concepts and practices have travelled from India to Sri Lanka and from Sri Lanka to India—as demonstrated by the financial support sent in the first half of the twentieth century by Jaffna Tamils to the Indian scholar Maraimalai Adigal, who proposed that Tamil civilisation was based on Vellalar rather than Brahmin custom and identity (Vaithees, 2015)—and throughout Sri Lanka itself. Second, there is an even stronger need to examine the material dimensions of caste, broadly defined. Although one of these dimensions—the fact that caste status is often associated with landownership—is clearly visible in the caste scholarship, the economic dimensions of caste in agrarian relations have been little interrogated (see Gunesinghe 2007), even less the relationship between caste and the market economy (cf. Mosse, 2020b). In contrast, much historical work on the role of the state (at least from the Dutch period onwards) exists, and topics such as compulsory service and caste-based slavery shine light on the thinness of the notion of caste as an essentialised property of ethnicity (see Pfaffenberger, 1990). These issues will also help to reconnect Sri Lankan caste studies to its Indian counterpart, where the role of the state has been of preeminent importance. In comparison with India, the contemporary Sri Lankan context is defined by the apparent absence of state intervention, an absence that is shared across the ethnoreligious caste systems.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that an integrated approach to caste in Sri Lanka—a field of caste research that does not collapse ceaselessly into the framework of parallel ethnoreligious caste systems that I have identified above—is only possible if Sri Lankanist scholars recognise and reflect upon the assumptions that underlie this theory. Similar assumptions about the nature of caste have played a key role in the larger Indian scholarship, although they have been critiqued more sharply and extensively in ways that have been highly productive. I hope to have demonstrated that

this can also be the case in Sri Lanka, as the interrogation of ideas about caste lead to further interrogation of other concepts that are central to how Sri Lankan research has conceptualised its subjects.

The work of an integrated approach to caste might beneficially begin not with differences but with similarities and connections, such as the existence of analogous castes, a notion of caste status invested in land ownership, the withdrawal of the state following the abolition of compulsory service, a public sphere within which caste is largely suppressed, and so on. More broadly, this approach to caste in Sri Lanka would be attentive to local and national contexts, contemporary and historical. It would treat religion and ethnicity not as enclosures but as complexes of concepts, discourses and practices that are continuously produced, transformed, shared and rejected, not only between self-identified ethnic groups in Sri Lanka but also between people throughout South Asia and beyond. Indeed, the Sri Lankan evidence suggests that one way of rejuvenating the comparative study of caste across the subcontinent might be to extend Mosse's work (2020a, 2020b) to consider how caste is perceived and produced in relation to a network of discursive enclosures that must be understood in relation to each other and to the secondary categories enclosed within each.

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