



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# ‘The Jews of Ceylon’: Antisemitism, prejudice, and the Moors of Ceylon

Shamara Wettimuny 

The Queen’s College, University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom

Email: [shamara.wettimuny@queens.ox.ac.uk](mailto:shamara.wettimuny@queens.ox.ac.uk)

(Received 26 October 2022; revised 5 September 2023; accepted 5 September 2023)

## Abstract

In the early twentieth century, economic and religious antagonism between Sinhalese and Moors in Ceylon escalated into widespread, deadly violence. In the immediate aftermath of the 1915 pogrom, which involved the targeting of Moors and their property, the Sinhalese nationalist Anagarika Dharmapala observed that ‘Muhammadans’ had accumulated wealth through ‘Shylockian methods’. Even prior to Dharmapala’s claim, Moors were repeatedly depicted as the ‘Jews of Ceylon’ by both influential Sinhalese actors and colonial state actors. As Ceylon did not have a local Jewish population, this article investigates the use of a rhetorical device that was familiar within the broader networks of empire to ‘other’ a non-Jewish mercantile minority. The article accordingly enquires into how and why antisemitic epithets came to be used in prejudicial speech against Moors. It also explores propaganda portraying Moors in terms of ‘hostile’ Jewish stereotypes and the way in which such stereotypes were deployed in Sinhalese interactions with Moors. By tracing the connections between anti-semitism and anti-capitalism, this article aims to contribute to a broader discourse on the positions of Semitic groups in British imperial ideology.

**Keywords:** Moors; Ceylon; antisemitism; colonialism; Sri Lanka

## Introduction

The Muhammedans, an alien people, who in the early part of the 19th century were common traders, by Shylockian methods became prosperous like the Jews. The Sinhalese, sons of the soil, whose ancestors for 2358 years had shed rivers of blood to keep the country free from alien invaders...are in the eyes of the British only vagabonds...The alien South Indian Muhammedan comes to Ceylon, sees the neglected illiterate villager, without any experience in trade...and the result is that the Muhammedan thrives and the son of the soil goes to the wall.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Anagarika Dharmapala, ‘1915 riots and the British officials’, in *Return to righteousness: A collection of speeches, essays and letters of the Anagarika Dharmapala*, (ed.) Ananda Guruge (Colombo: Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs, Ceylon, 1965), p. 540.

On 15 June 1915, Anagarika Dharmapala, a Sinhalese Buddhist ‘nationalist father figure’ and ‘polemicist’ shared these sentiments with the Secretary of State for the Colonies in Whitehall in London from his base at the Maha Bodhi Society in Calcutta.<sup>2</sup> These sentiments were included in a letter on the ‘1915 Riots and the British Officials’ written ‘in the interests of the sons of the soil, the Sinhalese Buddhists’ following the British colonial state’s suppression of violence targeting Moors between 29 May and around 6 June 1915.<sup>3</sup> The ‘Muhammedan’ Moors were adherents of Islam, but the term ‘Moor’ was an ethnic label applied to the largest group of Muslims in Ceylon (which accounted for around 6 per cent of the population). The majority of Moors were ‘Ceylon Moors’ who had been a presence in Ceylon for over a millennium, while Coast Moors were typically South Indian traders who had arrived in increasing numbers in the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Dharmapala appeared to pick out the ‘South Indian Muhammedan’ as particularly ‘alien’. Significantly, he claimed that due to the wrongful intervention of the British in a ‘great riot between the Sinhalese people and the Muhammedan population’, ‘hundreds [of Sinhalese] have been shot, thousands have been injured seriously, thousands are in jail’.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, Dharmapala appears to justify the ill-feeling held by Sinhalese towards Moors based on their changed economic position over the previous century—from being mere ‘common traders’ to ‘prosperous like the Jews’. Explicit in his statement above is the aggressiveness and cunning of Moor traders, and the increasing prosperity of the ‘alien’, who, ‘like the Jews’, amasses wealth at the cost of the original or rightful inhabitant of the land.<sup>6</sup> Where did the hostile stereotyping of the Moor as ‘Jew’ come from?<sup>7</sup> And why did Dharmapala specifically use terms like ‘Shylockian’ in his correspondence with colonial officials?<sup>8</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Harshana Rambukwella, *The politics and poetics of authenticity: A cultural genealogy of Sinhala nationalism* (London: UCL Press, 2018), p. 21. Sinhalese was the ethnicity of the majority of people in Ceylon, and over 60 per cent of Ceylon’s population were Buddhist by faith. See E. B. Denham, *Ceylon at the Census of 1911* (Colombo: H. C. Cottle, Government Printer, Ceylon, 1912), p. 245.

<sup>3</sup>Rambukwella, *The politics and poetics of authenticity*, p. 537.

<sup>4</sup>The terms ‘Coast Moor’, ‘Indian Moor’, and ‘South Indian Muhammedan’ refer to the same group and were used interchangeably during the period under review. I use the term ‘Coast Moor’ (which was the more commonly deployed term in English) unless the sources specifically use other terms. The term ‘Indian Moor’ was formally introduced to denote such people as a separate category in the 1911 Census by the British to separate them from Ceylon Moors.

<sup>5</sup>Rambukwella, *The politics and poetics of authenticity*, p. 538.

<sup>6</sup>The Jews, too, have been portrayed as ‘aliens’ in antisemitic discourse. In mid-nineteenth century Romania, for example, decades of Jewish immigration resulted in an antisemitic backlash. As in Ceylon, it appears that nationalist Romanian political actors labelled Jews as ‘foreign’ and therefore ‘aliens’ responsible for the misery of the ‘sons of the soil’. For instance, a senior Romanian state actor denounced Jews as ‘a threat to the national body, a “disease,” against which the state must take immediate action by...curbing the immigration of this “foreign proletariat”’. See Lisa Moses Leff, ‘Liberalism and antisemitism: A reassessment from the peripheries’, in *Jews, liberalism, antisemitism: A global history*, (eds) Abigail Green and Simon Levis Sullam (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 44.

<sup>7</sup>For more on ‘hostile’ Jewish stereotypes, see Colin Holmes, *Anti-Semitism in British society, 1876–1939* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 114.

<sup>8</sup>Curiously, two of Dharmapala’s recent biographers—Steven Kemper and Sarath Amunugama—do not refer to his use of an antisemitic trope in correspondence with British officials. Steven Kemper, *Rescued from the nation: Anagarika Dharmapala and the Buddhist world* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015);

At the turn of the twentieth century, Sinhalese and Moors found themselves in competition with each other in both the religious and economic realms.<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, in the sphere of religious competition, Coast Moors leveraged the British antipathy to the use of sound in worship to insist on the silencing of musical instruments in Buddhist processions that went past mosques. Coast Moors insisted on silence in the vicinity of their mosques on the basis that the use of tom-toms (a type of drum) could disturb worshippers. The colonial state often supported such positions, claiming 'there are no stated hours of worship in a Mohammedan Mosque, service being held practically all through the day and often far into the night'.<sup>10</sup> In such instances, the state ruled 'that the only adequate method of ensuring that processional music does not disturb public worship at the mosque is to stop all such music within 100 yards of the mosque on either side'.<sup>11</sup> Such interference with Buddhist processions had resulted in numerous episodes of violence, including in Galle in 1890, Gampola in 1907, and Kurunegala and Kandy in 1915. Meanwhile, religious groups occasionally displayed intolerance towards the religious beliefs and places of worship of others, trading insults and assaults on mosques, Bo trees, and the Buddhist saffron robe from at least 1867.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, by the end of the nineteenth century, Sinhalese newspapers reflected various economic grievances against Moors traders, including their perceived increasing 'ubiquitousness' and their 'exploitative' trade practices.<sup>13</sup> These economic grievances manifested in acts of vilification and discrimination, such as 'Buy Sinhalese' campaigns with concomitant 'Boycott Moor' campaigns. By vilification, I mean that some Sinhalese portrayed Moor traders in a negative light to convince others of Moors' perceived 'ills' or bad behaviour. The discrimination occurred with regard to matters of trade, as Sinhalese traders made appeals in newspaper articles, public speeches, and even advertisements, to favour their own ethno-religious community, as opposed to patronizing the trade of Moors. In this article, I explore the former manifestation of grievance: the vilification of Moors, and accordingly assess propaganda portraying Moors in terms of 'hostile stereotypes'.<sup>14</sup>

The stereotyping of Moors was not unique to the period under consideration. Alexander McKinley has analysed the longer-term deployment of (largely negative)

---

Sarath Amunugama, *The lion's roar: Anagarika Dharmapala and the making of modern Buddhism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>9</sup>K. N. O. Dharmadasa, *Language, religion, and ethnic assertiveness: The growth of Sinhalese nationalism in Sri Lanka* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), p. 142.

<sup>10</sup>Sri Lanka National Archives (SLNA), Colombo, Sri Lanka, File 21489, Kandy Buddhist Temporalities: Wallahagoda Dewale, Colonial Secretary's Office to President, Buddhist Temporalities Ordinance Committee, Desp. No. 18450, 1 November 1912.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>For example, in 1867 a pig carcass was left inside a mosque, and in 1897, pictures of pigs were drawn on mosque walls. In 1896, a Moor spat tobacco juice on a monk's robe and chased the monk while 'pulling his robe and slapping him on the face'. See John Rogers, *Crime, justice, and society in colonial Sri Lanka* (London: Curzon Press, 1987), pp. 170–171; *Ceylon Observer*, 11 November 1867; 16 June 1896.

<sup>13</sup>These newspapers targeted, alternatively, Ceylon Moors, Coast Moors, and Moors in general. A discussion of the different labels deployed in the Sinhala language press follows below. When a particular group is referred to, I used the relevant English equivalent and in other instances I use the broader term 'Moor', which reflects the ambiguities of the sources.

<sup>14</sup>Holmes, *Anti-Semitism in British society*, p. 114.

stereotypes about Muslims in Sinhala literature. The earliest stereotypes date back to the pre-colonial period in around the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and refer to the transient nature of Moor traders.<sup>15</sup> These stereotypes of ‘envy, contempt, paternalism, or admiration’ were deployed in descriptions of both ‘Muslim’ men and women in coastal areas like Beruwala. As the Moors became more settled, and entered the Kandyan regions as a result of their displacement by the Portuguese and the Dutch from the coastal provinces, they began to be stereotyped as ‘religious others’, in a precursor to the context studied at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>16</sup> McKinley reveals that Muslims (typically Moors) were stereotyped in Sinhala village dramas as early as the seventeenth century, for example, as ‘wicked’ for killing bullocks to sell.<sup>17</sup> In the nineteenth century, a new stereotype of Moors as ‘Jews’ emerged.

Crucially, then, the use of stereotypes to ‘other’ Moors was not a modern phenomenon, although the stereotype of ‘Moors as Jews’ was new. Instead, stereotyping appears to have been a device that was weaponized across centuries by various Sinhalese poets, writers, and traders in their descriptions of Moors, particularly at times when Sinhalese-Moor relations became strained. In this article, I develop the idea that two discourses of stereotyping were evident in the Sinhala and English languages respectively. In Sinhala, the long-standing antipathy towards Moors (discussed by McKinley) was reframed in the late nineteenth century to reflect what I call a ‘host-parasite dynamic’. In English, some Anglicized Sinhalese deployed ‘European’ antisemitic tropes to describe Moors in their debates with the British. Curiously, although Sinhala discourse did not employ antisemitic language, it strongly resonated with hostile, European antisemitism.

The Moors, and Muslims in general, were repeatedly depicted as the ‘Jews of Ceylon’ by both influential Sinhalese actors and state actors between the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The comparison of Moors to Jews not only pertained to trade and commerce, but also to their implied transnational status. Ameer Ali has recognized and discussed the comparison of Moors with Jews.<sup>18</sup> Yet he does not offer any analysis of the use of antisemitic epithets to compare Moors and Jews and, in fact, employs them when he writes, ‘without any commitment towards the native population, the Shylockian methods of Indian Moor business competition not only created resentment...etc.’. It is the roots of these antisemitic sentiments that enable (or make potent) such comparisons which I seek to explore in depth. In this context, this article analyses how two discourses of antisemitism and philosemitism could have different currency in different contexts within Ceylon.

This article attempts to contribute to wider historiographical debates on the connections between anti-colonialism, antisemitism, and anti-capitalism, and the relationship between Jews and British imperialism.<sup>19</sup> For instance, I take a comparative

<sup>15</sup>Alexander McKinley, ‘Merchants, maidens, and Mohammedans: A history of Muslim stereotypes in Sinhala literature of Sri Lanka’, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 81, no. 3, 2022, p. 524.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 523. McKinley explicitly criticizes Lorna Dewaraja’s portrayal of pre-1915 Sinhalese-‘Muslim’ relations as undisturbed ‘ethnic harmony’. I discuss Dewaraja’s position further below.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

<sup>18</sup>Ameer Ali, ‘Muslims in harmony and conflict in plural Sri Lanka: A historical summary from a religious and political perspective’, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2014, p. 234.

<sup>19</sup>Abigail Green, ‘The British empire and the Jews: An imperialism of human rights’, *Past and Present*, vol. 199, 2008, p. 175.

approach to understand what lay behind this equation of 'Moors as Jews'. Was it because Moors in Ceylon occupied a similar socio-economic niche to Jews abroad that triggered a persecutory response under certain conditions? Yuri Slezkine in his introduction to *The Jewish Century* refers to 'the oldest Jewish specialities—commerce, law, medicine, textual interpretation, and cultural mediation'. I refer in this article to the first 'specialty' or niche: commerce.<sup>20</sup> I also take a connected history approach to examine where the antisemitic discourse of 'Moors as Jews' came from. I employ Lisa Moses Leff's conceptualization of antisemitism, which refers to 'the late-nineteenth-century political mass movement aimed at limiting Jews' newly won political rights, social integration, and economic activities'—a conceptualization that reflects the changed socio-political and economic position of Moors in Ceylon by the late nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup> Such changes to the position of Moors included the appointment of a Moor Muhandiram (a high position within the native headmen system maintained by the colonizers) in 1818, and the removal of economic disabilities (originally imposed by the Dutch but upheld by early British administrators) in 1832.<sup>22</sup> For instance, by order of government regulation, Moors were given the ability to purchase land in key commercial areas of Colombo such as Pettah and the Fort in 1832.<sup>23</sup> Lastly, I attempt to reflect on whether the wider changes taking place in Ceylon, such as the development of politicized religious identities, may have encouraged an equation of 'Moors as Jews'. In 1889, a separate seat for a 'Mohammedan Member' in the Ceylon Legislative Council was established. For the first time in Moor history in Ceylon, Moors had a stake in governance (no matter how tokenistic), on equal footing with other minority groups like Tamils. Separate representation for Muslims in Ceylon echoed symbolic advances towards emancipation and equal rights for Anglo-Jews, following Lionel de Rothschild's entry into parliament in Britain in July 1858.<sup>24</sup> In Ceylon, control over this Council seat gave Moors control over the representation of all Muslims on the island. Moors comprised over 94 per cent of Muslims according to the 1911 Census, and ethnically dominated the Muslim 'social formation'.<sup>25</sup>

This article is organized into three sections. First, I briefly discuss Dharmapala's language, which gives cause for further investigation into antisemitism in Ceylon. Second, I analyse the origins of antisemitism in Ceylon during British colonial rule. Finally,

<sup>20</sup>Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 1.

<sup>21</sup>Leff, 'Liberalism and antisemitism', p. 23. Despite the existence of a broader application of the term to mean 'anti-Jewish prejudice', I specifically use this narrower conception of 'antisemitism'.

<sup>22</sup>The appointment of a Moor Muhandiram removed Moors from the 'executive and judicial jurisdiction of Kandyan chiefs' who were typically Sinhalese. See Lorna Dewaraja, *The Muslims of Sri Lanka: One thousand years of ethnic harmony 900–1915* (Colombo: Lanka Islamic Foundation, 1994), pp. 150–151, for other factors that were 'favourable to the Muslims from the beginning of British rule'.

<sup>23</sup>Government regulation published in The National Archives (TNA), London, UK. *Colombo Journal*, 21 January 1832.

<sup>24</sup>Michael Clark, *Albion and Jerusalem: The Anglo-Jewish community in the post-emancipation era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>25</sup>Qadri Ismail, 'Unmooring identity: The antinomies of elite Muslim self-representation in modern Sri Lanka', in *Unmaking the nation: The politics of identity and history in modern Sri Lanka*, (eds) P. Jeganathan and Q. Ismail (Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 1995), p. 58. The 1911 Census was the first census to disaggregate ethnic data for Muslims into Ceylon Moors, Indian Moors, and Malays (previously there was only a combined category for 'Moors'). Denham, *Census of 1911*.

I explore the various actors and means through which British and Ceylonese discourses portrayed Moors as ‘Jews’ and assess the impact of such comparisons.

### Dharmapala’s language

The characterization of the recently settled or itinerant Coast Moors as ‘shrewd’ in business echoed attitudes towards Jews in Western Europe and in the Ottoman empire.<sup>26</sup> Dharmapala’s use of a hostile antisemitic stereotype may have stemmed from his contact with the Theosophical Society, which had its foundations in North America and Europe, as well as through his own extensive travels in the West during a time of rising antisemitism.<sup>27</sup> Theosophists, despite their belief in universal brotherhood, widely espoused racial mythology and antagonism towards Semitism. For example, Helena Blavatsky, a founder of the Theosophical Society in Ceylon, was a mother-like figure to Dharmapala. Blavatsky has been accused of antisemitism, and his exposure to her views may have resulted in some transference.<sup>28</sup> Harshana Rambukwella observes that Dharmapala’s use of antisemitic rhetoric ‘could potentially be a strategy of gaining sympathy by invoking a longstanding European stereotype of the “scheming Jewish merchant”’.<sup>29</sup> But sympathy from whom? The letter was intended for the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Andrew Bonar-Law, in Whitehall but there is no evidence that Bonar-Law himself was antisemitic.<sup>30</sup> However, it is reasonable to suggest that Dharmapala envisaged that a British official would be likely to ‘appreciate’ the connotations of the term ‘Shylockian’.

It is also likely that Dharmapala intended for copies of his letter to reach a Sinhalese audience—as it did. Did the negative comparison of Moors with Jews draw on wider antisemitic sentiments prevailing among Sinhalese in Ceylon? Elsewhere, Dharmapala used antisemitic language in his scathing attacks on Christianity: he called Jesus a ‘half-insane Jew’, and Christianity ‘Semitic Monotheism’.<sup>31</sup> Crucially, in his landscape view of world religions, the ancestry of the three Abrahamic religions is emphasized

<sup>26</sup>Holmes, *Anti-Semitism in British society*, pp. 191–192; Green, ‘The British empire and the Jews’, p. 187; Mitch Numark, ‘Perspectives from the periphery: The East India Company’s Jewish sepoy, Anglo-Jewry, and the image of “the Jew”’, in *On the word of a Jew: Religion, reliability, and the dynamics of trust*, (eds) Nina Caputo and Bryan Mitchell Hart (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2019), p. 256.

<sup>27</sup>M. Jerryson and I. Frydenlund, ‘Buddhists, Muslims and the construction of difference’, in *Buddhist-Muslim relations in a Theravada world*, (ed.) Iselin Frydenlund (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 280.

<sup>28</sup>Isaac Lubelsky, ‘Mythological and real race issues in Theosophy’, in *Handbook of Theosophical current*, (eds) Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein (Leiden: Brill, 2013), p. 335. For Dharmapala’s relationship with Blavatsky, see Ruth Harris, ‘A Tormented Being’, unpublished paper shared with me by the author, June 2022.

<sup>29</sup>Rambukwella, *The politics and poetics of authenticity*, p. 66.

<sup>30</sup>Jehuda Reinharz, ‘The Balfour Declaration and its maker: A reassessment’, *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 64, no. 3, 1992, p. 470.

<sup>31</sup>Michael Roberts, ‘For humanity. For the Sinhalese. Dharmapala as crusading Bosat’, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 56, no. 4, 1997, p. 1008. Like Dharmapala, others paired Judaism with Christianity in antisemitic tracts. Writing in the mid-Victorian era, Matthew Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy* (1867–1869) critiqued Semitic culture by comparing it with Christianity, which he termed ‘a triumph of Hebraism’. In his essay, Arnold juxtaposed ‘Hebraism’ with ‘Hellenism’, favouring the latter. See Mathew Arnold and Stefan Collini, *Culture and anarchy and other writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 134.

(for example, 'Judaism and Jehovah are inter-dependent').<sup>32</sup> There is a genealogy, then, by which Moors *can* be the Jews of Ceylon. Furthermore, Dharmapala's use of such language elsewhere, besides his strategic appeal to the British, is significant—it appears that antisemitism had infected him on a more personal level.

A statement from John Seneviratne, the subeditor of the *Ceylon Morning Leader*, to the Inspector General of Police on 29 June 1915 claimed, 'The feeling against the Mohammedan was, I presume, long and among the lower classes partly of the nature of the popular feeling that obtains...in Europe against the Jews'.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, a 'Sinhalese Memorial' sent to the governor of Ceylon and the Secretary of State for the Colonies in Whitehall in September 1915 contained a similar comparison. The Memorial contained the claim that 'the Coast Moors have never been popular among the other inhabitants of the Island, and have been regarded very much in the same way as the Jews used to be regarded in Western countries'.<sup>34</sup> While the Sinhalese Memorial may have been influenced by Dharmapala's letter, Seneviratne's statement was sent just two weeks after Dharmapala wrote his letter, and it was unlikely to have reached the broader population at this point given the state's censorship of the press and private correspondence. At least among some English-speaking Sinhalese, it appears that Moors' 'personal traits' were portrayed as reflecting those of Jews—particularly their perceived 'ubiquity' and 'pugnacity'.<sup>35</sup> Why did anti-Jewish caricatures resonate in Ceylon, and how was such discourse, which was very familiar in Europe, used in such a far-removed context?

### Jews and antisemitism in Ceylon

There was no significant Jewish population on record in Ceylon during this period, in contrast to nearby regions, such as the Bene Israel community in West India, the Bombay Baghdadi Jews, and the Jewish community in Cochin.<sup>36</sup> The Census of Ceylon for 1911 recorded only eight Jews.<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile, in India, several high-profile Jewish imperial administrators were involved in the governance of the Raj. Edwin Montagu, for example, Secretary of State for India (1917–1922), was known for his recommendations in the Montagu–Chelmsford Report that fed into the Government of India Act 1919. Furthermore, Rufus Isaacs was a viceroy of India.<sup>38</sup> In Ceylon, by contrast, Jewish

<sup>32</sup>Anagarika Dharmapala, 'Arya Dharma of Sakya Muni, Gautama Buddha', in *Return to righteousness*, (ed.) Guruge, p. 157.

<sup>33</sup>A. C. Dep, *Ceylon police and Sinhala-Muslim riots of 1915* (Ratmalana: Sarvodaya Vishva Lekha, 2001), p. 100.

<sup>34</sup>SLNA, PF2745–2479/15, 'Sinhalese Memorial', p. 2.

<sup>35</sup>Ameer Ali, 'Muslims and capitalism in British Ceylon (Sri Lanka): The colonial image and community's behaviour', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1987, p. 319. The epithet Prusin uses is 'omnipresent'. Alexander Prusin, *Nationalizing a borderland: War, ethnicity, and anti-Jewish violence in East Galicia, 1914–1920* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), pp. 28, 30, 110.

<sup>36</sup>Mitch Numark, 'Constructing a Jewish nation in colonial India: History, narratives of dissent, and the vocabulary of modernity', *Jewish Social Studies*, New Series, vol. 7, no. 2, 2001, p. 89; *Ceylon Observer*, 4 March 1885.

<sup>37</sup>Denham, *Census of 1911*, p. 240.

<sup>38</sup>Stephanie Chasin, 'Citizens of empire: Jews in the service of the British empire, 1906–1940', PhD thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 2008, p. 4.



administrators did not play as significant a role. The most renowned was arguably the British assistant government agent, Leonard Woolf, who worked in the Ceylon Civil Service between 1904 and 1911. However, Woolf's 'Jewishness' does not appear to have been particularly visible, and during his time in Ceylon at least, he was 'avowedly atheist [and] dogmatically anti-religious'.<sup>39</sup>

In addition to the few Jewish administrators on the island, Jewish business interests in Ceylon were limited. The most substantial Jewish investment made in Ceylon's economy was by the Rothschild family, which established a tea estate in Pussellawa in 1841.<sup>40</sup> Gabriel and Moritz Worms, nephews of Nathan Mayer Rothschild, managed the interests of the Rothschilds in Ceylon. Gabriel Worms was a widely respected philanthropist in Ceylon, often praised for his generosity to Christian missionary education 'despite' being Jewish.<sup>41</sup> The editor of the *Ceylon Observer* wrote in Gabriel's memoriam that he was 'a noble-hearted Jew: in practice, if not in profession, a true Christian'.<sup>42</sup> The Rothschilds did not remain invested in Ceylon beyond a few decades, and eventually sold their estate to the Ceylon Company Limited in 1873.<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, other Jewish investments in Ceylon were marginal, and included Jewish gem speculators who came to Ceylon for the auction of oysters at the pearl fisheries.<sup>44</sup> These speculators were on the island for only short periods of time, and their contact with the broader population beyond the gem economy appears to have been negligible. In this context, antisemitism would have been an imported construct, rather than a response to actual interactions between Sinhalese and Jews in Ceylon.

Though antisemitism may not have been locally generated, racialized ideologies were circulating widely in Ceylon. British Orientalism and scholarly 'discovery' held that Sanskrit was the precursor of various languages in the Indian subcontinent and shared linguistic links with certain European languages.<sup>45</sup> In Ceylon, Sinhala—the language spoken by Sinhalese, and which is heavily influenced by Sanskrit—was considered an 'Aryan' language. This link, however, caused certain Sinhalese to presuppose 'a common racial origin' located in ancient North India, connecting language with race, culture, and the idea of the 'nation'.<sup>46</sup> From the late nineteenth century onwards, some Sinhalese and nationalist newspapers increasingly used the language of Aryanism

<sup>39</sup>Luke Reader, 'A Jew of a rather peculiar sort: Leonard Woolf, Jewishness, and a public 20th century life', *Jewish Culture and History*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2018, p. 237.

<sup>40</sup>*Ceylon Observer*, 27 March 1873.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 9 November 1881.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 27 March 1873.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 4 October 1902; 21 March 1904.

<sup>45</sup>Sheldon I. Pollock, *Literary cultures in history: Reconstructions from South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Sheldon I. Pollock, *The language of the gods in the world of men: Sanskrit, culture, and power in premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

<sup>46</sup>Dharmadasa, *Language, religion, and ethnic assertiveness*, pp. 145–147; Kumari Jayawardena, *Labour, feminism and ethnicity in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Sailfish, 2017), p. 279. By contrast, Europeans who shared such beliefs in the common roots of Indo-European languages were more inclined to believe that 'the ties of language were reinforced and modified by the imprint of culture. In this way the Indian element of Aryanism could be cast away.' See David Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews: Social relations and political culture 1840–1914* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 91.



to assert their 'racial' superiority vis-à-vis non-Sinhalese groups, as well as their perceived relative decline (as a consequence of colonialism).<sup>47</sup> Sinhalese glorified their ancient origins, associating 'the Sinhalese people with the chosen "Aryan race," and the chosen Buddhist faith'.<sup>48</sup> They even chastised themselves for straying from the ways of their Aryan ancestors. One contributor to a Sinhala-language newspaper stressed in 1911 that 'the ancient Sinhalese had great nationalism in their hearts...Sinhalese, shouldn't you share your Aryan great grandparents' nationalism and strength...When you look at what the Aryan Sinhalese did for their religion, country and nation, it is a shame to see what recent Sinhalese are doing'.<sup>49</sup> D. M. Kannangara, another contributor who published a poem in *Hitavadi* entitled 'Sinhalese, Wake Up!', wrote of the decline of the Aryan Sinhalese who had previously 'lived as they wished for 2500 consecutive years'.<sup>50</sup> This conception of an 'Arya-Sinhala' identity—which was inextricably linked with Buddhism—was, for Dharmapala too, a preoccupation.<sup>51</sup> In the same letter that Dharmapala referred to Coast Moors as Jews, he also claimed 'the Sinhalese traces his origin to India and to Aryan sources'.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, despite the widespread use of 'Aryan' to describe Sinhalese and 'Jew' to describe Moors, there is no evidence to suggest that the two (that is, Sinhalese and Jews) were juxtaposed with one another, at least in the period under consideration. British writers, by contrast, were already making claims regarding race, pitting 'Indo-Europeans' against Semites.<sup>53</sup> Matthew Arnold, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, referred to 'we English, a nation of Indo-European stock'.<sup>54</sup> He claimed that 'Science has now made visible to everybody the great and pregnant elements of difference which lie in race, and in how signal a manner they make the genius and history of an Indo-European people vary from those of a Semitic people'.<sup>55</sup> Could such views have crossed continents into Ceylon?<sup>56</sup>

The key importer of antisemitic sentiment was undoubtedly the British through the influences of colonial education, the spread of missionaries, and the new print media. There is evidence, for example, that contact with Europeans and European colonial powers in the Middle East led to a rise in antisemitism. Bernard Lewis notes that the 'blood libel' accusation emerged for the first time in the Ottoman empire in the nineteenth century with the 'Damascus Affair' in 1840 but became 'commonplace' thereafter.<sup>57</sup> He also observes that 'from the 1860s onward there was an

<sup>47</sup>Jayawardena, *Labour, feminism*, p. 279; *Sihala Samaya*, 23 October 1911; *Hitavadi*, 19 May 1914. These 'nationalist' newspapers were not explicitly anti-colonial; they were more 'culturally' rather than 'politically' nationalist.

<sup>48</sup>Jayawardena, *Labour, feminism*, p. 280.

<sup>49</sup>*Sihala Samaya*, 23 October 1911.

<sup>50</sup>*Hitavadi*, 19 May 1914.

<sup>51</sup>Dharmadasa, *Language, religion, and ethnic assertiveness*, pp. 145–148.

<sup>52</sup>Dharmapala, '1915 riots and the British officials', p. 541.

<sup>53</sup>Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews*, pp. 87–88.

<sup>54</sup>Arnold and Collini, *Culture and anarchy*, p. 135.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup>Nirenberg sheds some light on how such discourses might have 'travelled' and been instrumentalized. David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2013).

<sup>57</sup>Jews in Damascus were accused of slaying Father Thomas, a Christian monk, and using his blood in the ritual preparation of *matzo* during Passover. Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 158.

ominous growth of European-style antisemitism among the Christian communities of the empire'.<sup>58</sup> In Ceylon, I believe, the Anglicized Ceylonese would have had to look no further than the first privately run English newspaper—the *Ceylon Observer*—which was taken over and edited by the Baptist A. M. Ferguson, and his nephew John Ferguson between 1859 and the early 1900s.<sup>59</sup> A. M. Ferguson was named the 'Father of Ceylon Journalism' in Arnold Wright's *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon*, a reflection of his legacy on the island's printing press.<sup>60</sup> The readership of the *Ceylon Observer* comprised a largely colonial, English-speaking audience, along with some Anglicized Ceylonese. The official circulation figure for this daily paper was 1,350 readers in 1888, but it was probably read by many more English-language speakers.<sup>61</sup> This was the highest circulation for any English-language daily newspaper at the time. In the following section, I discuss the exposure of Ceylonese elites to British literature and theatre, which are renowned for carrying antisemitic tropes. I also highlight the influence of the *Ceylon Observer* in the dissemination of such tropes in Ceylon.

### Antisemitism in literature, theatre, and the press in Ceylon

The hostile stereotyping of Jews was widespread in European discourse and Victorian literature.<sup>62</sup> 'Crafty' Fagin in *Oliver Twist* is one such example.<sup>63</sup> In an introduction to Dickensian characters, Fagin is described as 'a crafty old Jew, a receiver of stolen goods...[who] employs several boys (styled "apprentices") to carry on a systematic trade of pilfering'. Charles Dickens is said to have clarified to a Jewish correspondent that he was not insulting Judaism in his description of Fagin. He wrote, 'Fagin...is called "the Jew" not because of his religion but because of his race...I make mention of Fagin as the Jew because he is one of the Jewish people'.<sup>64</sup> Dharmapala's reference to Shylock, a Shakespearean construct from the Elizabethan period, was also a commonly used stereotype to describe Jews in Britain as 'the personification of capitalism and materialism'.<sup>65</sup> Shylock, then, was a complex figure who was deeply linked to various antisemitic tropes.<sup>66</sup> Dharmapala appears to have deployed the epithet 'Shylock' in the same way it has been used to describe an 'eternal parasite...a usurer' in English literature.<sup>67</sup> There is every reason to imagine that such well-known items of English literature circulated among the English-speaking Sinhalese in Ceylon

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 170.

<sup>59</sup>Arnold Wright, *Twentieth century impressions of Ceylon* (Colombo: Lloyd's Greater Britain Publishing Company, 1907), p. 302.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

<sup>61</sup>*Ceylon Blue Book, 1888* (Colombo: H. R. Cottle Government Printer, 1889), p. 438.

<sup>62</sup>Brian Cheyette, *Constructions of "the Jew" in English literature and society: Racial representations, 1875-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 269.

<sup>63</sup>Gilbert A. Pierce, *The Dickens dictionary* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1878), p. 100.

<sup>64</sup>Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews*, p. 77.

<sup>65</sup>Holmes, *Anti-Semitism in British society*, p. 113.

<sup>66</sup>Gil Anidjar, *The Jew, the Arab: A history of the enemy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 108. Anidjar suggests that in Shakespeare's construction of Shylock, he is 'the absolute enemy [of the Gentile], who hates and is hated on the explicit basis of his religion'.

<sup>67</sup>Cheyette, *Constructions of "the Jew"*, p. 253.

in the early twentieth century. Elite Christian schools such as Trinity College in Kandy were 'anchored in English public school custom' and boasted, for example, a Literary Association, which would have engaged with Shakespeare and Dickens. At the school's first prizegiving in 1872, graced by Governor W. H. Gregory, three scenes from 'The Merchant of Venice' were performed.<sup>68</sup> At the time the College was headed by Reverend Richard Collins, a Cambridge graduate.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, 'The Merchant of Venice' appears to have been staged repeatedly in Colombo by both the British and the Anglicized Sinhalese communities. In January 1907, Mr and Mrs A. E. Murrell of Colpetty put on the play in their home to an audience of around 100 guests. The male host was lauded in the *Ceylon Observer* for his 'clever piece of character acting' as Shylock and praised for running 'through the whole gamut of passion, malignant hatred and baffled cunning showing a scholarly appreciation of one of Shakespeare's most powerful creations'.<sup>70</sup> In 1912, a more professional adaptation of 'The Merchant of Venice' was staged at the Public Hall in Colombo by the Allan Wilkie Company. Once again, the description of Wilkie's lead performance reflects a deeply held antisemitism by the *Ceylon Observer's* editor: 'Mr Wilkie is an excellent Shylock, and realistically portrays the grasping nature of the money-lending Jew of those days'.<sup>71</sup> A few years later, a musical arts society staged the play at the Tower Hall Theatre in Maradana under the patronage of Mr Walter Dias Bandaranaike, the Gate Mudaliyar. Such a shift away from purely colonial circles is significant. Mr A. S. Dias was reported to have played Shylock 'extremely well'. Thus, among both the British and the Sinhalese elite, the epithet of the 'Shylockian Jew', as wielded by Dharmapala, was a familiar figure.

It is against the backdrop of this familiarity with antisemitic tropes that many British used the epithet of 'the Jew' to describe Moors in Ceylon. This British usage may have stemmed from a habitual tendency to conflate Moors and Jews as Semites, or from an instinctive comparison between the two 'racial categories'. The editor of the *Ceylon Observer* claimed of Moors that 'their Semitic origin is clearly traceable in their features'.<sup>72</sup> The British in India, meanwhile, stereotyped non-Jewish native populations as Jews. For example, the British frequently referred to Bohras, Jains, Marwaris, and Parsis as 'the Jews of India' for their involvement in occupations typically associated with Jews, including the sale of clothes and moneylending.<sup>73</sup> Significantly, then, the British seem to have used the term 'Jew' comparatively, to designate a certain socio-economic type. Similarly, the editors of the *Ceylon Observer* (the Baptist Ferguson family) appear to have repeatedly attempted to hammer home a comparison between Moors and Jews due to their 'professions' and (as far as the evidence suggests) coined the phrase 'the Jews of Ceylon' to refer to Moors.

<sup>68</sup>J. Mangan, 'Imperial origins: Christian manliness, moral imperatives and pre-Sri Lankan playing fields', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, vol. 27, nos. 1–2, 2010, p. 433.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 432.

<sup>70</sup>*Ceylon Observer*, 7 January 1907.

<sup>71</sup>*Ibid.*, 2 August 1912.

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*, 9 May 1888.

<sup>73</sup>Numark, 'Perspectives from the periphery', pp. 263–264.

The metaphor describing Moors as ‘the Jews of Ceylon’,<sup>74</sup> and its variations, such as ‘Jews of the East’,<sup>75</sup> ‘Ceylon Jew’,<sup>76</sup> ‘Jews of the island’,<sup>77</sup> and ‘Jewish Moors’,<sup>78</sup> featured at least 16 times in the *Ceylon Observer* between 1866 and 1910. For example, an article from November 1866 noted ‘the Moorman population of Colombo, whose addiction to the pursuits of jeweller, shopkeeper, and pedlar, has attached to them the designation of “the Jews of Ceylon”’.<sup>79</sup> In March 1908, an article carried an antisemitic trope (in addition to that of the pedlar) when it claimed, ‘Jewish Moors, going about ostensibly to sell cloths, but who are in reality money-lenders. Neither the rice-selling nor the cloth-selling was the ulterior motive. The object in view was usury.’<sup>80</sup> The editors of the *Ceylon Observer* crudely drew parallels between Jews and Moors, not only in terms of their socio-economic niche but ‘racial characteristics’, for example:

as the Jews are in Europe, so are the Moormen in Ceylon, keen, cunning, and eager in accumulating money, which, when once obtained, is as perseveringly retained, whatever their wealth may be, pretending poverty, just as hard and intent upon making an extra penny upon what has already yielded them many hundred per cent of profit, as if the whole profit of the day’s transaction was only to consist of that penny.<sup>81</sup>

When the *Ceylon Observer* was not comparing Moors to Jews, it occasionally compared other minority ethnic groups in Ceylon to Jews, based on the latter’s perceived ‘ubiquity’, ‘usurious’ nature, and ‘monopolization’ of certain trades. For instance, its correspondent in Madras wrote, ‘Jaffna Tamils are something like Jews: one finds them everywhere.’<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, Nattukottai Chetties in Kandy were referred to as ‘chetty Shylock [who] pressed for his 60 per cent’,<sup>83</sup> while the *Ceylon Observer* called on the state to ‘interfere and restrict the [Chetty] jews [sic] in Jaffna from demanding an exorbitant rate’ for rice.<sup>84</sup>

In various other articles, the editors or contributors to the *Ceylon Observer* introduced antisemitic tropes to illustrate a broader point, typically regarding moneylending. For instance, one article claimed that ‘under our present law of mortgage there are some modern “Shylocks” among us who quite take “the shine” out of the old “Jew of Venice”. The benighted man would have been contented with the penalty of his bond but here, by a bit of sharp practice “shent per shent” can be made.’<sup>85</sup> The term ‘Jew’ was used as an insult to any trader who was strict on collecting payments due or

<sup>74</sup>*Ceylon Observer*, 30 November 1866; 4 July 1877; 23 August 1880; 31 August 1881; 25 May 1882; 2 December 1882; 28 December 1882; 6 January 1883; 9 May 1888; 11 February 1889.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*, 19 February 1870; 9 September 1910.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, 15 August 1889; 17 March 1897.

<sup>77</sup>*Ibid.*, 11 December 1899.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, 27 March 1908.

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*, 30 November 1866.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*, 27 March 1908.

<sup>81</sup>*Ibid.*, 4 July 1877.

<sup>82</sup>*Ibid.*, 11 September 1882.

<sup>83</sup>*Ibid.*, 14 July 1896.

<sup>84</sup>*Ibid.*, 15 February 1898.

<sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*, 21 July 1870.

who charged 'exorbitant' rates.<sup>86</sup> Usage of this language was particularly evident in the 1870s and 1880s. Such language was also employed into the 1890s and 1900s, albeit with less frequency, which is possibly a reflection of the changing of the guard at the editorial office. A. M. Ferguson, the editor, 'never attended the *Observer* office after 1879' and left it running to his nephew John Ferguson, who oversaw it until the turn of the century.<sup>87</sup> In 1903, John Ferguson wrote a handbook for visitors to the island, entitled 'Ceylon in 1903', in which he explained that 'the Mohammedans of Ceylon are bigoted, but not aggressive. They are the Jews of Ceylon and are found everywhere, as pedlars, lapidaries, jewellers, masons, and shopkeepers.'<sup>88</sup> His comments appear to introduce a 'foreign' community to (presumably) European visitors by comparing them with a community that would be more familiar to Europeans. By 1907, John's son Ronald Ferguson had taken over as the editor. Noticeably, with successive transitions between editors from the same family, there appears to have been a gradual reduction in the overt antisemitism reflected in the paper.

The reason for such a reduction in the frequency (but, importantly, not a change in the tone) of antisemitic content is unclear. It may simply have been a matter of individual editors differing in terms of the prejudices held. However, it is arguable that the Fergusons were adjusting their content to suit the interests of their readers, primarily the English-speaking (and British colonial) community in Ceylon. Beginning in 1898, the press in Britain had become preoccupied with the Dreyfus Affair in France, in which a French Jewish military officer was unjustly convicted, twice, of treason in one of the most widely publicized episodes of antisemitism in modern France.<sup>89</sup> The French ambassador in London at the time of the Dreyfus Affair informed his government that 'British public opinion was "almost unanimous" in its belief that Dreyfus was innocent'.<sup>90</sup> While British public opinion was undoubtedly shaped more by anti-French than pro-Dreyfus sentiment (or any deep concern about antisemitism in France), it is possible that press discourses began to reflect a greater consciousness regarding antisemitism. Crucially, in Ceylon, there was keen interest in the Dreyfus Affair, which was closely reported by the English-language press, including the *Ceylon Observer*. When the French court martial upheld the guilty verdict against Dreyfus (whose innocence was overwhelmingly clear by this point) in the 'Rennes Verdict' of September 1899, the *Ceylon Observer* featured the news under 'Current Topics' of 'public interest'. The editor, most probably John Ferguson, referred to the Affair as 'a matter of International importance...a contemporaneous event of world-wide importance'.<sup>91</sup> On 13 September 1899, Ferguson described the episode as 'the Dreyfus farce, or tragedy—the proceedings against the unfortunate Jew partake of the character of both', thus bringing Dreyfus's Jewish identity into the commentary.<sup>92</sup> Meanwhile, the European community in Ceylon, including several merchants and planters, wrote to

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 22 August 1873; 17 November 1874.

<sup>87</sup> Wright, *Twentieth century impressions*, p. 303.

<sup>88</sup> John Ferguson, *Ceylon in 1903* (Colombo: A. M. and J. Ferguson, 1903), p. clxvi.

<sup>89</sup> Ruth Harris, *The man on Devil's Island: Alfred Dreyfus and the affair that divided France* (London: Penguin, 2011).

<sup>90</sup> Ronald K. Huch, 'British reaction to the Dreyfus Affair', *Social Science*, vol. 50, no. 1, 1975, p. 22.

<sup>91</sup> *Ceylon Observer*, 15 September 1899.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 13 September 1899.

the papers in response to the Affair to suggest boycotting the 1900 Paris Exposition to signal protest from Ceylon, at the expense of exhibiting 'Ceylon Tea'. The planter Mr Labouchere Hillyer, for example, decried the 'vile and despicable farce which has for ever disgraced the French people...I appeal to those responsible for the representation of Ceylon at the coming Paris Exhibition to entirely refuse to have anything to do with that Exhibition...so long as France continues to debase herself by refusing justice to an innocent man'.<sup>93</sup> Ferguson, whose newspaper received and published such protests added, 'in the expression of indignation at the Dreyfus' sentence the *Observer* and the other daily papers have joined and given voice to the opinion of the English-speaking community of Ceylon'.<sup>94</sup> Thus, there is strong evidence that the Fergusons were conscious of public sentiment regarding an antisemitic and unjust conviction of a French officer, and even acted to condemn it. Insofar as it is possible to unpack individuals' motives, it is feasible that an editorial policy of limiting overtly antisemitic content was adopted in the colony in response to the outcry surrounding the Dreyfus Affair.

Notwithstanding the antisemitism of the *Ceylon Observer*, in other quarters, the British colonial perspective on Moors in Ceylon appears to have been positive, and the comparison of Moors to Jews was not a sharply negative comparison. In fact, the British were generally appreciative of the economic ethos of Moors. James Devane, a special commissioner appointed during the period Ceylon was governed by martial law following the anti-Moor violence of 1915, observed that 'the Moors are the Jews of Ceylon...who live by their wits rather than by their hands'.<sup>95</sup> Devane compared Moors to Jews in terms of what he understood as their unique sense of enterprise. This was not an uncommon position in Victorian British discourse, which saw a role for Jews in promoting commerce and civilization in, for example, the Ottoman empire.<sup>96</sup> Indeed, a philosemitic discourse existed alongside antisemitism in Victorian Britain. Abigail Green notes that within the British empire, Jews were viewed to some extent 'as a commercial diaspora', who were economically 'useful'.<sup>97</sup> However, a notion about Jews in the metropole and elsewhere—that they were rarely farmers or labourers—is inaccurately reflected in Devane's observation regarding the Moors' economic activity.<sup>98</sup> Devane's reliance on the metropolitan stereotype of Jewishness causes him to overlook the fact that the majority of Moors in the Eastern Province of Ceylon were actually farmers who lived 'by their hands'.<sup>99</sup> According to the 1911 Census, around 39 per cent of Ceylon Moors depended on agricultural cultivation for their living.<sup>100</sup>

Some British commentators also compared the pre-colonial trading success of Moors in Ceylon to 'the Jews in Europe in the Middle Ages' regarding the nature of

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., 15 September 1899.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid., 14 September 1899.

<sup>95</sup>SLNA, 65/227, 'Report on the Recent Riots in Yatinuvara, Harispattuwa, Tumpane and Uda Nuwara', James Devane, Special Commissioner Under Martial law, 15 July 1915.

<sup>96</sup>Green, 'The British empire and the Jews', p. 181.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., pp. 175 and 180.

<sup>98</sup>Numark, 'Perspectives from the periphery', pp. 257–258.

<sup>99</sup>Ismail, 'Unmooring identity', pp. 77–78; Dennis B. McGilvray, 'Arabs, Moors, Muslims: Sri Lankan Muslim ethnicity in regional perspective', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 32, no. 2, 1998, p. 446.

<sup>100</sup>Denham, *Census of 1911*, p. 466.

relations between Moors and other groups on the island.<sup>101</sup> E. B. Denham, the superintendent of the Census, in the Report of the 1911 Census claimed, 'The feeling towards them was very much the same as that felt towards the Jews', except that, in contrast, the Moors [Muslims] 'were in most places in the East at the same time a conquering and a proselytizing power'.<sup>102</sup> By the early twentieth century, the growing financial success of Moors was interpreted by many Sinhalese as an affront to their own economic standing, dignity, and, ultimately, identity. However, some of the British seemed to have valued the qualities that many Sinhalese detested in the Moors—their indefatigable pursuit of profit.<sup>103</sup> Elsewhere in the world, such as in the Middle East and North Africa, 'Jews emerged as key intermediaries for the British...both as local partners for British merchants and as employees of the growing consular corps'.<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, Christian Zionists believed in 'the civilizing influence of the Jews exerted in an extra-European context', wielded through 'their commercial flair'.<sup>105</sup> In Ceylon, Moors (who did not play any significant role in bureaucratic administration) were valued for their role in trade and economic growth. Perhaps, then, there was some nexus between the 'civilisation through commerce' discourse projected onto Jews and the colonial perception of Moors in Ceylon.

Ameer Ali observes that there were certain areas of business that were common to both Moors and Jews. For example, he highlights the similarities between Moors and Jews in terms of their experience in the 'peddling business' and the gem industry.<sup>106</sup> Interestingly, Moors traded in gems with Jewish businessmen during this period. In 1909, a successful Moor gem trader did business in Paris with Victor Rosenthal, and in London with Pittar Levenson and Company, both leading jewellery merchants and organizations.<sup>107</sup> Ali does not, however, comment on the fact that some Jews in Britain were associated with high finance as well as these 'petty' trades. In Britain, in an example of the nexus between anti-colonialism, antisemitism, and anti-capitalism, Jewish money and power, and families such as the Rothschilds, were targeted in J. A. Hobson's antisemitic discourse in a chapter entitled 'Economic Parasites of Imperialism'. Hobson wrote, 'United by the strongest bonds of organisation, always in closest and quickest touch with one another, situated in the very heart of the business capital of every State, controlled, so far as Europe is concerned, chiefly by men of a single and peculiar race, who have behind them many centuries of financial experience, they are in a unique position to control the policy of nations'.<sup>108</sup> In Ceylon, as will be highlighted below, Sinhalese polemicists attacking successful Moors were likely to have been capitalists themselves. It was not a matter of anti-capitalism, then, that underscored their hostility towards Moors, but envy. Of course, the comparison between

<sup>101</sup>Ibid., p. 234.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid.

<sup>103</sup>Immigrant Sephardic Jews flourished in the Victorian imperial context, for example, in part due to 'linguistic skills, cultural adaptability, commercial know-how and extensive networks'. Green, 'The British empire and the Jews', p. 179.

<sup>104</sup>Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>105</sup>Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>106</sup>Ali, 'Muslims and capitalism', pp. 318–319.

<sup>107</sup>A. H. Macan Markar, *Short biographical sketches of Macan Markar and related families* (Colombo: A. H. Macan Markar, 1977), p. 14.

<sup>108</sup>J. Hobson, *Imperialism* (New York 1902; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 64.



Moors and Jews was not always coherent, which is to be expected from mediated stereotypes that are employed as rhetoric. Furthermore, Moors in Ceylon were not barred from certain types of livelihoods in the way that Jews were in parts of Europe.<sup>109</sup> Ali also argues that although Moors were associated with moneylending (along with Chettians and Afghans)—underscored by Dharmapala’s reference to Shylock—their numbers were insignificant compared to Jewish moneylenders in Europe.<sup>110</sup> Crudely comparing Moors and Jews then was a convenient means of ‘othering’ Moors, similar to the manner in which Jews were ‘othered’ elsewhere. Indeed, the imperfection of the stereotype suggests that the real analytical comparison may be the sense of jealousy and mistrust aroused by a group that was viewed as ‘thriving’ off the capitalist order.

### Scapegoating and the host-parasite dynamic

The ‘othering’ of Moors, like the Jews, also included scapegoating them for the economic misery experienced by many Sinhalese. It is, in fact, possible to draw parallels between Jews—the quintessential scapegoats in history—and Moors.<sup>111</sup> The language used to describe Moors in Sinhala newspapers often portrayed them as parasites, as taking over or buying land from the Sinhalese, and trapping them in servitude in the way Jews were written about in the nineteenth century. The portrayal of the ‘other’ as a ‘parasite’ emerges from an innate belief that Sinhalese were the rightful owners or inhabitants of Ceylon. Significantly, Sinhala-language newspapers do not appear to have adopted language from the English press in describing Moors as Jews. Instead, the Sinhala press used three terms—‘*thambiyo*’, ‘*marakkalayo*’, and ‘*hambayo*’—to refer to Muslims, Moors, and Coast Moors respectively.<sup>112</sup> The first and last terms were particularly derogatory.<sup>113</sup>

Scholars writing about present-day Sri Lanka have analysed the sense of ‘ownership or rightful belonging’ the Sinhala-Buddhist population have with regard to the country.<sup>114</sup> Gehan Gunatilleke has called this an ‘entitlement complex’, which refers to the belief among segments of the Sinhala-Buddhist population that Sri Lanka is an inherently Sinhalese and Buddhist country.<sup>115</sup> Many Sinhala-Buddhists perceive themselves as ‘hosts’ of the country and other groups as ‘guests’. The reference to hosts in this metaphor is to that of a homeowner who invites and hosts guests. Accordingly, Sinhala-Buddhists would perceive many minorities, including Moors, as ‘guests’.<sup>116</sup>

<sup>109</sup>Ali, ‘Muslims and capitalism’, p. 318.

<sup>110</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup>Geoffrey Alderman, ‘The Jew as scapegoat? The settlement and reception of Jews in South Wales before 1914’, *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England*, vol. 26, 1974, p. 66.

<sup>112</sup>Shamara Wettimuny, ‘The colonial history of Islamophobic slurs’, *History Workshop Online*, 7 September 2020.

<sup>113</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup>In the post-colonial context, the majority community is more clearly defined along ethno-religious lines, as opposed to Sinhalese who were increasingly conscious of their Buddhist culture and beliefs in the late nineteenth century.

<sup>115</sup>Gehan Gunatilleke, ‘The constitutional practice of ethno-religious violence in Sri Lanka’, *Asian Journal of Comparative Law*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2018, p. 373.

<sup>116</sup>This majoritarian disposition was not unique to Ceylon. The Buddhist majority in Burma similarly viewed Indian immigrants as outsiders and their ‘common enemies’. Niklas Foxeus, ‘The Buddha was a

Theoretically, in a 'host-guest' relationship, as long as the guests are believed to be 'behaving themselves', they are welcomed into the host's 'home'. The host maintains agency and power within this dynamic (as Sinhala-Buddhists controlled the post-colonial state) and can evict the guest if they 'misbehave'. Such a host-guest relationship appears to have existed in the pre-British colonial period as well, particularly in areas such as the former Kandyan Kingdom, which was predominantly Sinhalese and Buddhist, when Moors who fled Portuguese- and Dutch-controlled areas around the coast were welcomed.<sup>117</sup> Lorna Dewaraja provides examples of how this relationship functioned in terms of the assimilation of Moors into the Kandyan Kingdom's socio-political structure and the Kandyan body politic. For instance, she highlights how Moors served as functionaries at the Buddhist Temple of the Tooth, and administrators of Buddhist and Hindu monasteries and shrines.<sup>118</sup> However, amid growing Sinhalese perceptions of national 'decline' and 'destruction', the relationship between the Sinhalese and Moors appears to have been transformed by the late nineteenth century. I attempt to describe this transformation by referring to a biological metaphor: the Sinhalese came to perceive the dynamic between themselves and Moors as akin to a host-parasite dynamic. In this metaphor, the host is not empowered in the same way a host is within the host-guest dynamic. The host is instead disempowered, mainly because it does not wield state power (as it is in the hands of the colonizer). Apart from lacking power, the host is weakened by the activities of the 'parasite' and is unable to purge the parasite easily. I attempt to illustrate how this metaphorical dynamic was perceived and manifested below, using evidence from the Sinhala press in the early twentieth century.

The poem below reflects the perception of Moors as harmful and extractors. It was published in November 1906 on the front page of the *Sihala Samaya* newspaper, which was established and edited by W. Steven de Silva from 1902. Entitled 'Sinhalese People's Money', the poem's image depicts a Moor—recognizable by his fez—sitting beside a large sack of money.<sup>119</sup> Next to him is a Sinhalese man, with a substantially deflated bag of money. The poem states:

Baby Coast Moors [*hamba petiyo*] buy 12 match boxes for 10 cents and sell them for 12 cents. They keep 2 cents for themselves. From this method they earn a lot of money. Our people happily give money and buy clothes from the Hambayo.

From the time the Hambaya is an infant until he is an old man, he is only thinking about earning money through various methods. Without any fear or doubt, they continue doing that even today. They can do this because the Sinhalese sit looking at the floor without making a sound and disregarding their duties.

---

devoted nationalist: Buddhist nationalism, *ressentiment*, and defending Buddhism in Myanmar', *Religion*, vol. 49, no. 4, 2019, p. 665.

<sup>117</sup>Dewaraja, *The Muslims of Sri Lanka*, p. 47; Michael Roberts, 'Ethnicity after Edward Said: Post-Orientalist failures in comprehending the Kandyan period of Lankan history', *Ethnic Studies Report*, vol. 19, 2001, p. 86.

<sup>118</sup>Dewaraja, *The Muslims of Sri Lanka*, pp. 92–120.

<sup>119</sup>It is curious that the bags of 'money' are so identified in English. Perhaps this is a reflection of the monetization of the economy that accompanied British economic policies in colonial Ceylon.

It depicts the anger directed towards Moors for making a profit (by selling goods for 20 per cent more than they originally paid for them). Perhaps then, Sinhalese anger was not so much at the practice itself but *who* was doing it—Moors, as opposed to Sinhalese. There is a sense of racial competition, and frustration on the part of some Sinhalese that their ‘own’ lacked the entrepreneurial mentality of Moors. This sentiment that profits, like the land, ‘rightfully belong’ to Sinhalese was reflected in various newspaper articles. One writer complained in the *Sarasavi Sandaresa* (a Buddhist newspaper published in Sinhala) that ‘in our country the profit from commerce goes to Marakkalayo [and] Hambayo’.<sup>120</sup> *Marakkalayo* and *hambayo* were derogatory terms used respectively to refer to Moors in general and Coast Moors in particular.<sup>121</sup> L. A. Wickremeratne notes that ‘Buddhist traders believed that the Sinhalese were lagging behind in trade because their ingrained contempt for trade as an ignoble profession still persisted’.<sup>122</sup> Statistically, this was not necessarily the case: the Census reports of 1891 and 1921 highlight the relative increase in Sinhalese engaged in commercial activity (42 per cent in 1891 and 60 per cent in 1921) compared to the ‘Muslims’ (37 per cent in 1891 and 32 per cent in 1921).<sup>123</sup> Low-Country Sinhalese traders in particular were making headway in the Kandyan interior: Denham, the superintendent of the 1911 Census, observed that ‘The Kandyan Sinhalese relies almost entirely on the Moorman or Low-Country man to supply him with anything which he cannot obtain from his own field’.<sup>124</sup> Nevertheless, it would appear that many Sinhalese traders (and the authors of poems and articles) maintained that Sinhalese contempt for trade was directly benefiting Moors. These voices appear to argue that Sinhalese should be controlling trade and keeping profits out of the hands of ‘others’.

These ‘others’ were aliens, or outsiders, who were merely guests in Ceylon. This sense that Moors did not belong in Ceylon is reflected in a letter submitted to *Sarasavi Sandaresa* in 1899. The letter (which is reminiscent of harmful characterizations of Jews) cautioned, ‘We Sinhalese must remember that the Moor (*marakkalaya*) has always been jealous of us. He does not have a country or village that he can call home anywhere on earth. But he is shrewd and often misleads our people with his put-on humble manner.’<sup>125</sup> These guests were thus perceived to have become parasites on their hosts, the Sinhalese.

<sup>120</sup>*Sarasavi Sandaresa*, 15 August 1884.

<sup>121</sup>Wettimuny, ‘The colonial history of Islamophobic slurs’.

<sup>122</sup>L. A. Wickremeratne, *Religion, nationalism, and social change in Ceylon, 1865–1885* (Colombo: Colombo Studies in Society and Culture, 1993), p. 15. Jayawardena also notes ‘the distaste of the landowning feudal families for trade’, particularly among Kandyans in the mid-nineteenth century. See Kumari Jayawardena, *Nobodies to somebodies: The rise of the colonial bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Social Scientists’ Association, 2000), p. 49. Such contempt for trade was comparable to certain aristocratic British attitudes.

<sup>123</sup>In fact, using Census data, Jayasekera asserts that the Moors (though he uses the term ‘Muslims’) were losing their trade dominance to the Low-Country Sinhalese. P. V. J. Jayasekera, ‘Social and political change in Ceylon, 1900–1919, with special reference to the disturbances of 1915’, PhD thesis, University of London, 1970, pp. 306–307.

<sup>124</sup>Denham, *Census of 1911*, p. 471.

<sup>125</sup>*Sarasavi Sandaresa*, 20 January 1899. This sentiment can be contrasted with present-day anti-Muslim sentiment in Sri Lanka, where Muslims are sometimes told that if they are not happy to adjust to Sri Lankan cultural practices, they should go back to where they came from, believed to be the Middle East. For more on rising anti-Muslim sentiment in present-day Sri Lanka, see Amnesty International, ‘From burning houses to burning bodies: Anti-Muslim violence, discrimination and harassment in Sri Lanka’, 18 October 2021, p. 47.

Such perceptions of a host-parasite dynamic are evident elsewhere in the case of Jews. Newspapers in late nineteenth-century Romania, for example, accused the Jews of threatening the very existence of the majority population. One popular Romanian newspaper asked in 1870: 'Who can force us to take to our bosom a half-million charlatans to suck our blood, become owners of our property and then treat us as slaves in our own country? That will never happen.'<sup>126</sup> Following the 1871 Odessa pogrom, the governor-general reported to his superiors that,

the recent events showed that the [religious] antipathy of Christians, primarily from the lower classes, is reinforced by bitterness arising from the exploitation of their labor by the Jews, and the latter's ability to get rich and dominate all commercial and mercantile operations. From the crowds of Christians were often heard the words, 'The Jews mock Christ, they get rich and they suck our blood'.<sup>127</sup>

These references to the sucking of blood can be compared with the idea that the Jews were parasites on their 'host' populations (a classic antisemitic trope) and echoes the claims made in various Sinhalese newspapers, which framed the Moors as parasitic of the Sinhalese.

The most damning allegation against the Jews in the nineteenth century was arguably the 'blood libel' claim that Jews drank the blood of Gentile children during Passover.<sup>128</sup> These accusations framed Jews as 'barbaric'. Accusations of the ritual murder of humans did not feature in anti-Moor discourse in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Ceylon.<sup>129</sup> Yet there appears to be a parallel in the framing of Moors engaging in 'barbaric' (and un-Buddhist) practices, such as cattle slaughter. Dharmapala, in 1923, blamed 'The followers of Islam [who] have introduced the slaughter of cattle into the peaceful isle'.<sup>130</sup> Elsewhere, he had described his own school experience with 'my wine-drinking, meat-eating and pleasure-loving missionary teachers', an experience he looked back on with open disgust.<sup>131</sup> Blaming Europeans, on the one hand, and Muslims, on the other, suggests that the target of Dharmapala's criticisms could vary depending on the context in which he was writing.<sup>132</sup> However, while such Buddhist reprehension of meat (and alcohol) is used as a tool to demonize 'others' (particularly Europeans and Christians) in this period,

<sup>126</sup>Romania Libera, 11 June 1879, cited in Leff, 'Liberalism and antisemitism', p. 46.

<sup>127</sup>John Doyle Klier, *Imperial Russia's Jewish question, 1855-1881* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 359.

<sup>128</sup>Hillel J. Kieval, 'The blood libel', in *Key concepts in the study of antisemitism*, (eds) Sol Goldberg, Scott Ury and Kalman Weiser (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), pp. 53-64.

<sup>129</sup>In twenty-first century Sri Lanka, widespread claims that Muslims try to forcibly and secretly sterilize Sinhalese mothers and fathers reached fever-pitch between 2018 and 2021, including the 'Dr Shafi case', in which a Muslim doctor was falsely accused of sterilizing over 1,000 Sinhalese mothers at the state-owned Kurunegala Teaching Hospital. No evidence has yet been produced against Dr Shafi in a court of law. Amnesty International, 'Burning houses to burning bodies', pp. 38 and 57.

<sup>130</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>131</sup>Angarika Dharmapala, 'Memories of an interpreter of Buddhism to the present-day world', in *Return to righteousness*, (ed.) Guruge, p. 684.

<sup>132</sup>Rambukwella, *The politics and poetics of authenticity*, pp. 63-66.

there is a certain religious sensibility that associates animal slaughter with pollution and disgust. Doctrinally, Buddhists were supposed to be vegetarians, and were alleged to have been so until the arrival of the Portuguese—the extent to which this was the case is questionable.<sup>133</sup> By the seventeenth century, evidence from Robert Knox, a British sailor imprisoned in the Kandyan Kingdom at that time, suggests that although the consumption of meat was considered morally problematic during the Portuguese period, some may have indulged in it.<sup>134</sup> In fact, he writes that the Buddhist monks ‘will eat any lawful flesh that is dressed for them, but they will have no hand in the death of it; as to give order or consent to the killing of it’.<sup>135</sup> By the nineteenth century, however, the ‘European’ practice of eating meat had undoubtedly been adopted by local groups in Ceylon, including some Buddhists.<sup>136</sup>

Besides Dharmapala, other influential actors also noted the role played by Moors in advancing the trade in meat. Denham observed that statistically, more than two-thirds of all butchers and meat sellers in Ceylon in 1911 were ‘Muhammadans’.<sup>137</sup> Ananda Coomaraswamy, the half Tamil, half English advocate of the *swadeshi* movement, wrote, ‘Up to recent times the Sinhalese have been to all intents and purposes vegetarians...most persons invariably avoiding it (and beef entirely); others would not object to eating venison, etc., killed by Muhammedans. There was certainly no regular trade in meat, no butchers and no butchers’ shops such as are now to be seen’.<sup>138</sup> Even if, in practice, many Sinhalese had been eating meat for centuries, it is the perception that Moors were responsible for the increased availability (and the act of slaughter that accompanies such availability) that is significant. All these differences in religious sensibilities (alongside politics) ultimately ‘othered’ the Moors and set them up as scapegoats.

## Pogrom

What, then, did these changes in the relations between Sinhalese and Moors mean in terms of the violence that erupted in 1915? The intentionally misleadingly named ‘1915 Riots’ have increasingly come to be relabelled a pogrom in the historiography.<sup>139</sup> The term ‘pogrom’, derived from ‘the Russian verb “gromit” (to thunder, smash, or break), was used first in 1871 to describe anti-Jewish riots in Odessa during Holy Week’ and had been absorbed into the English language in the early twentieth century.<sup>140</sup> The violence of a pogrom may be enabled by the tacit support of the state but state

<sup>133</sup>F. Otto Schrader, ‘On Ahimsa and vegetarianism, mainly in Buddhism’, *Ceylon National Review*, vol. 3, no. 9, 1910, p. 1.

<sup>134</sup>Robert Knox, *An historical relation of the island Ceylon* (London: Robert Chifwell, 1681), pp. 30 and 87.

<sup>135</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>136</sup>Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia: History, culture, political economy* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 70.

<sup>137</sup>Denham, *Census of 1911*, p. 474.

<sup>138</sup>Ananda Coomaraswamy, ‘Vegetarianism in Ceylon’, *Ceylon National Review*, 1908, p. 126. Coomaraswamy promoted a return to traditionalist and indigenous practices as part of the resistance to colonialism and modernity.

<sup>139</sup>Ismail, ‘Unmooring identity’, p. 82; Michael Roberts, *Exploring confrontation* (Reading: Hardwood, 1994), p. 185.

<sup>140</sup>Jeffrey S. Kopstein, ‘Pogroms’, in *Key concepts*, (eds) Goldberg, Ury and Weiser, p. 216.

actors, or armies or militias, are not necessary components of a pogrom.<sup>141</sup> Instead, Jeffrey Kopstein observes, neighbours target neighbours, while ‘forces out of the community’ can also initiate violence that varies from ‘plunder to assault to murder’.<sup>142</sup> The humiliation of victims and a celebratory atmosphere reflect intentions that seek to put victims—in Kopstein’s example, Jews—‘back in their (subordinate) place within the community or, more rarely, to push them out completely’.<sup>143</sup> How comparable was the violence in Ceylon 1915 to antisemitic pogroms?

Violence targeting Moors between 29 May and 6 June 1915 spread across five of the nine provinces of Ceylon, following a provocation by Coast Moors during a Buddhist procession in Kandy in the early hours of 29 May 1915. The gravity of the provocation, according to eye-witness testimonies, ranged from ‘booing’ and jeering, to throwing of bottles from the upper levels of a mosque down to the street level, where the procession was taking place.<sup>144</sup> The motivation or causation of the violence, which is not explored in detail in this article, cannot be understood without placing this particular procession within a broader chronology of ‘riots’ over the use of sound worship between the mid-nineteenth century and 1915. Importantly, the successful appeals of the Coast Moors to the state to prevent the use of sound during a Buddhist procession in Gampola in 1912 weighed heavily in the animosity of the Sinhalese crowd in Kandy.

Yet conflict between Coast Moors and Sinhalese Buddhists over sound worship in processions does not fully explain the cause of the pogrom, as its victims and perpetrators were not confined to these two groups. Ceylon Moors also came under attack during the pogrom, although they were not associated with the mosque in question. Meanwhile, violence was also perpetrated by Sinhalese Christians and Tamils. For example, in areas where (both Sinhala and Tamil-speaking) Catholics were dominant, such as along the north-western coastal belt, Catholics attacked Moors.<sup>145</sup> Aside from religious animosities, pre-existing conflicts over trade and market share appear to have galvanized a multi-ethnic, multi-religious mob against Moors. For example, around 65 Tamils (many of whom were daily wage earners) were arrested in Kandy for violence against Moors.<sup>146</sup> These may have included Tamils who bought their daily goods and wares from Moor traders, whom they perceived as charging them high prices. They may also have been the same Tamil Hindus whose own religious procession had been disrupted earlier that month, on 4 May 1915, by Coast Moors associated with the Castle Hill Street mosque.<sup>147</sup> Though this article does not dwell further on Tamil-Moor relations, it is necessary to note that some Tamils shared similar anxieties and negativity towards Moors that were to be found in certain Sinhalese attitudes. Some of these Tamils were likely to have been perpetrators of violence during the pogrom too.

<sup>141</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 217.

<sup>143</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup>SLNA, PF2745–2479/15, Appendix III (b)—Evidence of Police Inspector F. T. Coore on 29 May 1915 in case No. 7359 Police Court of Kandy, ‘Sinhalese Memorial’.

<sup>145</sup>Roberts, *Exploring confrontation*, p. 184.

<sup>146</sup>Jayasekera, ‘Social and political change in Ceylon’, p. 265.

<sup>147</sup>D. R. Wijewardene Collection, The Memorials and Papers Relating to the Riots of 1915, vol. 1, Appendix III—Riots in Kandy, Affidavit of Perumal Kangany, 9 November 1915, Sinhalese Memorial, 25 November 1915.

Broadly speaking, and similar to the pogrom in Jedwabne, Poland, in July 1941, neighbours turned on neighbours and committed 'intimate violence'.<sup>148</sup> In both Ceylon and Poland, the 'other'—the Moor and Jew respectively—was perceived as a 'fabricated foreigner [or] the invented internal enemy'.<sup>149</sup> In the attacks across Ceylon, a clear 'insider-outsider' dichotomy emerges: the Moor was an 'alien' despite a millennia-long presence on the island.<sup>150</sup> This is one reason, I would argue, that ethno-religious violence in Ceylon is comparable to pogroms in Europe.

However, one of the reasons that the 1915 violence may not originally have been thought comparable to Jewish pogroms is the relatively low official death toll. 'Pogroms' are usually associated with the massacre of a community or a high death toll. The official death toll of the 1915 violence is just 25.<sup>151</sup> Yet this figure is likely to be a gross underestimation. Contemporary observers hint at a much higher death toll. For instance, on 8 June 1915, the Moor-owned, Tamil-language newspaper *Muslim Nesan* reported 46 dead Moors, including 23 corpses left at the Maradana police station and 11 at the Maradana General Hospital. In addition to these bodies, the reportage noted that 'many could not be brought to hospital and were returned to the earth [buried]. If these are calculated as 60, together with the 46, [the loss of life] will be a large sum'.<sup>152</sup> Moreover, even the British acknowledged the possibility of a much higher death toll. The governor of Ceylon, Robert Chalmers, wrote despatches to Whitehall that admitted that British officials were not focused on the body count and instead were prioritizing quelling the violence. In that context, he conceded:

It is by no means impossible that the real number is considerably larger...the bodies of murdered Moors may have been consumed in burning buildings or hidden in the jungle. The fact that many coast [Indian] Moors returned to India at the time of the riots makes it impossible to argue that the disappearance of a Moorman necessarily means that he has been murdered, but it is probably safe to draw that inference in some cases.<sup>153</sup>

In addition to murders, crimes ranging from looting to rape are features of antisemitic pogroms. In 1915, there were four 'ascertained' rapes of women. Once again, the actual figure is likely to have been higher, as the majority of violence against women in the early twentieth century was likely to have gone unreported for reasons including fear, shame, and social stigma. Moreover, over 4,000 shops owned by Moors were looted, 350 Moors shops and houses were burnt, and 17 mosques were destroyed.<sup>154</sup> The clear intention to wipe out, even economically, the Moors in this pogrom bears

<sup>148</sup>Jason Wittenberg and Jeffrey S. Kopstein, *Intimate violence: Anti-Jewish pogroms on the eve of the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), p. 1.

<sup>149</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>150</sup>This idea that the Moor was an alien, particularly in areas like the Kandyan interior, was promoted by the very Low-Country Sinhalese traders who also moved into such regions in the late nineteenth century. For more on Low-Country Sinhalese rivalries with Moors in the Kandyan regions, and the methods used to compete with them, see Jayasekera, 'Social and political change in Ceylon', pp. 306–307.

<sup>151</sup>TNA, Command Paper 8167, Correspondence relating to disturbances in Ceylon, 1916, p. 48.

<sup>152</sup>*Muslim Nesan*, 8 June 1915.

<sup>153</sup>TNA, Command Paper 8167, Correspondence relating to disturbances in Ceylon, 1916, p. 47.

<sup>154</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 48.



a resemblance to the ‘early pogroms’ in southern Russia (such as in 1881–1882).<sup>155</sup> These pogroms were not aimed at exterminating populations; instead they ‘caused greater loss of property (shops, ware houses, and homes) than deaths’, a pattern of violence evident across Ceylon in 1915.<sup>156</sup> According to Gaunt et al., ‘The motivating factors here were socioeconomic, in particular the disruption caused by industrialization. Thus, these pogroms were not “interpersonal,” but rather targeted wealth and property as symbols of economic injustice.’<sup>157</sup> Similarly, perceived changes to the relative economic positions of Sinhalese and Moors undoubtedly lay beneath the violence of 1915, reflected in the primary choice of physical target during the pogrom—the Moors’ shops.

Taken by surprise at the island-wide assault, thousands of Moors fled their homes and sought shelter in Colombo. The grounds of the Maradana Mosque in Colombo were transformed into a refugee camp. A description in the English-language *Times of Ceylon* by European writer L. B. David illustrates the circumstances of the displaced Moors:

Rows of cadjan sheds were quickly run up, while a number of canvas tents, lent by sympathisers were also utilised for the accommodation of families. The religious uses of the mosque were temporarily suspended, and it was transformed into huge caravanserai where men, and children with characteristic oriental adaptability made themselves at home as comfortable as circumstances would permit. Numbers more found shelter in the school building on the premises. In all, 4,000 people were estimated to have availed themselves of the relief provided...tense and tearless suffering [was] noticeable on every face...The mosque presented a pathetic picture with groups of men, women and children huddled together and occupying every foot of available space.<sup>158</sup>

Thus, while the number of lives lost may or may not have been substantial relative to other antisemitic pogroms in Europe around the same time (which could number upwards of the hundreds), there was well-documented mass displacement, terror, and destruction of the economic livelihoods of Moors in 1915.

These features of the 1915 violence, together with the fact that the death toll might have been several times higher than the official figure, suggest that it was, in fact, comparable to antisemitic pogroms in Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

## Conclusion

Decades of competition and contestation that escalated at the turn of the century between the Sinhalese and Moors surrounding religious rites, (perceived) disrespect of places of worship, and harmful rhetoric that portrayed Moors as aliens, outsiders, or parasites provide the context for the violence experienced by Moors in 1915.

<sup>155</sup>David Gaunt, Jonathan Dekel-Chen, Natan M. Meir and Israel Bartal (eds), *Anti-Jewish violence: Rethinking the pogrom in East European history* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 4.

<sup>156</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup>L. B. David, ‘A Moor refugee camp in Colombo’, *Times of Ceylon*, Christmas Number (1915).

The participation of non-Buddhists in the violence, including Sinhalese Christians and Tamils, suggests that the animosity towards Moors in the early twentieth century was not simply confined to grievances surrounding the latter's intolerance of Buddhist sound worship in processions. Instead, it reveals a nexus between anti-capitalist and anti-outsider sentiment, which focused on 'foreign' Moor traders rather than the British. Such instincts were anti-colonial insofar as the economic 'rise' of the Moors (alongside the rise of the Low-Country Sinhalese) was enabled by British economic and socio-political policies, and anti-capitalist in terms of *who* was profiting. Notably, the British were not harmed in any way during the 1915 pogrom—the targets of the violence were solely Moors.<sup>159</sup> The British, ironically, contributed both to the economic advancement of Moors and their subsequent profiling as extractive and exploitative. The role played by the British in 'othering' Moors as 'Jews' and identifying them with negative personal traits associated with hostile antisemitic stereotypes for over half a century prior to the events of 1915 must be acknowledged in this respect.

Importantly, antisemitic tropes were not principally associated with popular anti-Moor emotion among Sinhala-speakers. Judaism was not a familiar image in daily Sinhalese life and there is no evidence that antisemitic stereotyping was deployed in Sinhala newspapers. However, the bilingual nationalist Dharmapala appears to have personally held antisemitic prejudices. Furthermore, the Anglicized Sinhalese who were familiar with antisemitic stereotypes may have taken from such stereotypes a language with which to illustrate their hostility towards the Moors. This borrowing is reflected in Dharmapala's letter to the secretary of state and the Sinhalese Memorial, which were penned in English. Crucially, in such exchanges with the British, antisemitic language seems to have been specifically used to resonate with what Dharmapala and others may have viewed as colonial prejudices. Meanwhile, these English-language antisemitic stereotypes are likely to have been repurposed to frame the prejudicial, although not specifically antisemitic, language Dharmapala employed when expressing grievances about the Moors in the Sinhala press. Conveniently, the 'new' British-imported tropes of Moors as Jews overlapped with pre-existing anti-Moor stereotypes (such as that of the 'grasping trader') that had a longer history in the Sinhala press and literature.

Dharmapala's letter to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, condemning Moors for prospering through 'Shylockian' means 'like the Jews' a week after the 1915 pogrom had ended, is significant then in two ways. First, it almost suggests to its audience—British colonial officials—that they should understand the context in which Sinhalese-led violence targeted Moors, based on their own experiences with or feelings towards Jews. Second, it highlights how the language vilifying a minority ethno-religious group resembles the antisemitic language wielded across Europe and elsewhere against Jews in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thus, analysing the use of antisemitic tropes to explain or legitimize violence targeting Moors in a colonial context is relevant not just for understanding violence in Ceylon in the twentieth century but for interpreting the position of Jews in British imperial ideology.

---

<sup>159</sup>Indeed, non-Moor Muslims were also largely left unharmed (although certain Afghans claimed to have been targeted by the violence). Thus, on the whole, Moors were targeted as a specific ethno-religious group.

**Acknowledgements.** I am deeply grateful to Dr Alan Strathern, Professor Abigail Green, Professor David Rechter, Professor Ruth Harris, and Dr Gehan Gunatilleke for the many conversations and invaluable insights and feedback on this article. I also appreciate the comments received on a version of this article that was presented to the American Institute for Lankan Studies' 'New Research on Sri Lankan History' seminar series in February 2022, including those by Professor Michael Laffan, Dr Neilesh Bose, and Dr Alexander McKinley. Finally, I am thankful to the double-blind peer reviewers of this journal for their extremely detailed and careful feedback. Any mistakes contained in this article are my own.

**Competing interests.** The author declares none.

---

**Cite this article:** Wettimuny, Shamara. 2023. "The Jews of Ceylon": Antisemitism, prejudice, and the Moors of Ceylon'. *Modern Asian Studies*, pp. 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X2300029X>