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Waving the National Flag”: Sri Lankan Flag- Aggressive & Violent?

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The meaning of the name parents give their child at birth often expresses their feelings, hopes and wishes for the infant. So it is with nations and their flags, particularly at independence. However, some flags have evolved through history, such as Britain’s ‘Union Jack’ (1801), representing England, Scotland and Ireland. The phrase “waving the flag” is variously defined, among others as: “arouse intense nationalist feelings by a deliberate appeal to the emotions; “expression of feelings for a country in a loud or exaggerated way” and “the strong expression of support for a country, sometimes with military intention”.

I have a recently-published book showing the world’s national flags: ‘national’ as formally recognised by the UN. Admittedly, the exact number of flags can be disputed. For example, does one include that of ‘the Holy See’? This particular book lists 196 flags of which almost one-fourth are made up simply of different colours: the flags of Austria, Belgium, Columbia, Ecuador, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Nigeria, Poland, Russia, Thailand and others. The Indian flag consists of three colours – saffron, white and green – but has the *Ashoka Chakra* (the eternal wheel of law) with twenty-four spokes, in its centre. There are other, similar flags which, while being simply made up of colours, have in addition a design or object. Canada’s flag consists of two red bands with a white square at its centre in the ratio of 1:2:1. In the middle of this white band is a stylized, red, 11-pointed maple leaf. The Japanese flag is white with a red ball in its centre: the Land of the Rising Sun. The Israeli flag is white with two blue horizontal lines that recall the *Tallit*, the Jewish prayer shawl, separated by a hexagram, the Star of David. The flag of Argentina is a tricolour - blue, white and blue – but with the sun (of freedom?) in the middle.

Some Christian-majority countries have a cross on their flag as, for example, Denmark (white horizontal cross on a red background); Finland (as with Denmark but here a blue flag on a white background), Greece, Iceland and Switzerland. Of course, the cross resembles a sword

and can be read as signifying the readiness to fight for Christianity.

Muslim-majority countries often have green on their flag, the colour most linked to Islam, together with the crescent moon. Green is associated with Paradise, and was also the favourite colour of the Prophet who often wore clothes of that colour. Indonesia with the largest Muslim population is an exception, its flag being made up of two broad, horizontal bands of red and white. Egypt's flag too lacks green. It's a tricolor consisting of the three equal horizontal bands: red, white and black. It also bears the Egyptian Eagle of Salah ud Din (1138 – 1193), [1] better known as Saladdin. The flag of Iraq too doesn't have green, being made up of three horizontal bands of red, white and black. The white band in the middle carries the '*Takbir*' in Kufic script: "Allah is the greatest". (If I am not mistaken, the "greatest" in "*Allahu Akbar*" should not to be seen as a superlative because Allah is beyond any comparative scheme.) But the flags of other Moslem-majority countries such as Algeria and Pakistan have green. The flag of Saudi Arabia, 'Custodian of the Two Holy Place of Islam', is green, with the '*Shahada*', and below it a sword. (The '*Shahada*' or 'Confession of Faith', one of the Five Pillars of Islam, declares belief in Allah, and the acceptance of Muhammad as Allah's Prophet.) The sword is not vertical but lies horizontal beneath the *Shahada*.

However, there are other flags which resist grouping: of course, every flag is unique. The flag of Mozambique includes an AK-47 with fixed bayonet, crossed by a farming mattock, reminiscent of the Marxist 'Hammer and sickle'. Bhutan has a dragon on its flag, a white dragon to signify purity. (Dragons have long been drained of ferocity and fear because no one now believes they exist - except in the wonderful world of the imagination - raging about, breathing fire.) The Mexican flag depicts an eagle carrying away (removing) a snake.

The Albanian flag has a double-headed eagle because of the myth that the ancestor of the Albanians was an eagle. One recalls the myth that Romulus and Remus, founders of Rome, were suckled by a wolf. Similarly, a cherished myth of **Sri Lanka's** Sinhalese Buddhist majority is that they are the descendants of bestiality; specifically, the sexual union of a lion and a princess ("There are few things stranger or more repulsive than bestiality".) Compounding bestiality is patricide: the lion is later killed by his own son. (The first arrow shot by the son doesn't harm the lion because the animal has only love for his son. The second arrow angers the beast, and then he becomes fatally vulnerable. I 'read' this episode as a moral and philosophic parable about the self-harm of anger.)

The Sri Lankan flag is not simple. It has been described as consisting of a gold lion holding a [2]sword in its right fore-paw in a maroon background with four gold "bo" leaves in each corner. ("*Bodhi*" means enlightenment.) This is bordered by gold, and to its left are two vertical stripes of equal size in green and orange. The lion and the maroon background are meant to represent the Sinhalese, while the saffron border and four "bo" leaves represent Buddhism and its Four Noble Truths. The orange band represents the Tamils; the green represents Sri Lankan Muslims.

It's most important that we make a clear distinction between 'religious doctrine' and 'religion' as practised and expressed in real life with its rituals, paraphernalia, hierarchy, myths and superstitions. Religious doctrine has a divine or semi-divine origin or is from an exalted, exceptional, individual. Simplifying, one could say: While religious doctrine is 'divine'; *religion is a human construct*. Indeed, religion can be

quite the opposite of its religious doctrine.

Sri Lankan Buddhists declare the country to be the '*Dhamma Deepa*', the Island where the doctrine of the Buddha is preserved in its purity. But how does Buddhism manifest itself as a religion? Is it by force and domination? Is it by the building of Buddhist structures; by chanting, praying and processions? If so, isn't the Buddhist religion violating Buddhist doctrine?

To the world in general, Buddhism is associated with noble and exalted qualities such as loving kindness, compassion, peace, moderation, philosophic detachment, self-discipline and abnegation. Though not a Buddhist, I think Buddhism with its agnosticism (see the Buddha's famous analogy of a man shot with a poisoned arrow) and with its Existential attitude of individual responsibility, is the wisest and gentlest of religious doctrines.

Since Sri Lanka boasts of being the primary stronghold of Buddhism, people will also look at what symbolises the country: the flag. But there's little of Buddhist doctrine in the flag which is dominated by a lion, its jaw agape and, to add to its menace, a raised sword in its paw. One would have expected to see a flag that was peaceful, even serene but the present flag has all to do with power and pomposity (gold); power and hegemony; aggression and violence. In short, *with all that the Buddha abjured*. It is yet another example of religion being potently and perniciously political. (It's not the flag but beliefs and behaviour.) In a certain context Karl Marx said: If this is Marxism, I'm not a Marxist. Similarly, one can imagine Christ saying that of Christianity or the Buddha, 'the Soul of Utmost Compassion', sadly saying, if *this* is Buddhism, then I'm not a Buddhist. Of course, one can be profound (disingenuously or not) and subject the flag to a historical and philosophical interpretation, such that the eight hairs on the lion's tail represent the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path, albeit one would have thought it an insult to place the Buddha's Eightfold Path on the tail of an animal. Be that as it may, what do those who are not Sinhalese, or those not militantly Sinhalese-Buddhist, see?

By way of an answer, I turn to 'The Front Row' in Pradeep Jeganathan's collection of short stories, '*At The Water's Edge*', quoting from my '*Sri Lanka: Literary Essays & Sketches*' (page 151): To the child, "innerly" lonely and vulnerable, the national flag at the front of the classroom threatens violence and cruelty: a "fierce" lion on a "blood red cloth", with "a naked sword" in its paw. In a remarkable use of understatement and indirection, we are told that, seeing the flag Krishna tried to calm himself: his psychosomatic attacks of asthma were getting more frequent

There's much corruption (particularly at the highest levels) and violence in 'the Paradise Isle': racial and political violence; violence in public and in private life. See, for example, 'Sri Lanka: A Long History of Violence', '*The New York Times*', 21 April 2019. See also, 'How torture is institutionalized in Sri Lanka ('*The Diplomat*', 20 September 2019) from which I cite an extract: "A new 68-page report from the International Truth and Justice Project demonstrates how torture has been institutionalized in Sri Lanka. It is shown to be the direct consequence of Sri Lanka continuing to use the Prevention of Terrorism Act implemented in 1978. The PTA was described as an "an ugly blot on the statute book of any civilized country" by the International Commission of Jurists in 1984... the PTA deems "confessions" obtained under torture

admissible.”

Sadly, the Sri Lankan flag, after all, *is* appropriate. The *Dhamma Deepa* can be proud that of all the 196 national flags of the world, its flag appears to be the most aggressive and violent.

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[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eagle_of_Saladin

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