Negotiating Ethnic Segregation through Political and Cultural Boundaries: A Case Study of the Mawanella Divisional Secretariat Division

Wijmini Senevirathne[1*], Thamali Kithsiri[2]
Department of Geography, Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka [1,2]
[*]wijminisenevirathne@gmail.com

Introduction

Massey and Denton (1993) describe ethnic segregation as physical separation. But, it takes various form like social, residential and even psychological also. Hence it creates boundaries in the area. Here, this study focused on political and cultural boundaries. Bashkow (2004) explains that cultural boundaries are invisible lines that divide different cultural groups. While Drew (2004) said that political boundaries are formal legally recognized divisions of space. Cultural boundaries do not always follow political boundaries but political boundaries are influenced by cultural boundaries.

Studies on ethnic segregation in Sri Lanka so far have mainly focused on segregation across the country and in urban centres. However, there is a gap in the amount of research that has been conducted on how this ethnic segregation affects suburban and rural areas. Furthermore, most of these studies focused on the historical roots of these ethnic tensions (Tambiah, 1996), the impact of language policies (De Silva, 1986), and the consequences of long-term conflict on intercommunal relations (Höglund and Orjuela, 2011) related to this topic but, there has been less comprehensive study of the contribution of ethnic segregation to shaping the political and cultural boundaries of everyday life. This research aims to investigate ethnic segregation at the micro level, examining how ethnic segregation actively shapes and how people experience these political and cultural boundaries in Mawanella.

Objectives of the study

The main objective of this study is to examine how ethnic segregation has created different boundaries producing conflicts in Mawanella while focusing on two sub objectives.

- To map the spatial patterns of ethnic segregation in Mawanella Divisional Secretariat Division.
- To explore the mechanisms through which cultural identities and power dynamics construct symbolic boundaries in public institutions and spaces, while assessing instances of negotiated coexistence that blur ethnic divisions in daily interactions.

Methodology

This research will employ a mixed-method approach, as defined by Creswell and Clark (2017), integrating qualitative and quantitative data to comprehensively address research questions. Combining quantitative (e.g., ethnographic data for ethnic division) and qualitative (e.g., interviews, observations, photo documentation for political alignment and cultural characteristics) techniques offers a broad framework for understanding complex ethnic dynamics.

For this study, both primary and secondary data were used. Under primary data semi structured interviews with 20 participants selected through purposive sampling and was used photographs as visual ethnography to capture how space is symbolically and materially occupied. For the data analysis, this study used segregation indices to map spatial patterns. Dissimilarity index by Duncan and Duncan (1955) was used to identify how evenly two groups are distributed across area and the Entropy index by Theil (1972), which measures the diversity within each unit. These were calculated using excel and ArcGIS Pro software to visualize the results.

This study focuses on the Mawanella Divisional Secretariat division in the Kegalle District, Sabaragamuwa Province, Sri Lanka, located along the A1 Colombo-Kandy road. It has 71 GN divisions. The area is known for its ethnic and religious diversity, mainly comprising Sinhalese, Muslims, and a smaller number of Tamils.

Findings

The Spatial Manifestation of Ethnic Segregation in Mawanella

The power dynamics and identities associated with ethnic diversity play a significant role in the spatial segregation of populations, resulting in the establishment of culturally distinct enclaves. The Mawanella Divisional Secretariat Division (DSD) provides an insightful case study exemplifying this phenomenon. An analysis employing a dissimilarity index indicates that a majority of Grama Niladhari (GN) divisions within Mawanella exhibit considerable ethnic segregation, wherein populations are inclined to form homogenous communities as opposed to integrated ones *(Map I)*.

This segregation manifests in a clear territorial claim. The Sinhala majority population is predominantly concentrated in the outer GN divisions, which are primarily rural, mountainous, and agricultural. In contrast, the Muslim population is clustered in the central corridor and southern parts of the division, particularly around urban centers like Mawanella and Hemmathagama. This spatial arrangement reflects an asymmetrical territorial power, as described by Paasi (1996), where the Sinhala community controls a larger share of the land. While the Muslim community holds symbolic control over the urban spaces. Paasi's framework emphasizes that this

territorial control is essential for the formation of ethno-territorial identity, as it fosters a shared sense of belonging and cultural security. In contrast, the Tamil community is numerically very small compared to the Sinhalese and Muslim population living in Mawanella. Due to this, they have become an invisible community in the area and are often confined to rural areas with minimal amenities in Attanagoda estate (Attanagoda and Ambulugala GN divisions), Karandupanawatta estate (Attanagoda GN division), Asiri Estate (Dodanthale GN Division).

The asymmetry in territorial power has contributed to ethnic segregation and the formation of significant cultural and political boundaries. As Newman and Paasi (1998) argue that such boundaries, especially between distinct ethnic groups, can become sources of tension and conflict. This is particularly evident in the areas surrounding urban centers in Mawanella, which demonstrate strong symbolic and spatial boundaries, highlighting how everyday space becomes deeply contested through ethnic divisions.

Symbolic and Political Boundaries in Public Space

The cultural and political boundaries within Mawanella are not merely abstract concepts; they are tangibly experienced in the everyday lives of residents through the symbolic exclusion embedded within public spaces and institutions. For example, public schools display name boards with ethno-religious labels (e.g., those names reflect a particular ethnic group. Through this naming process it produces 'us' and 'them'), which, despite their public status, symbolically claim the space for a single ethnic group, potentially discouraging others from accessing or feeling a sense of belonging there. This process exemplifies Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic power and Lamont and Molnár's (2002) notion of symbolic boundaries, where cultural markers shape access and reinforce social divisions.

In that context, symbolic exclusion extends to state institutions where the prominent display of certain ethnic/religious symbols and sign boards are in one or two languages. Sibley (1995) describes this as symbolic exclusion, where the dominant group's cultural artifacts marginalize minority groups within shared spaces. Gramsci (1971) refers to this as cultural hegemony, where the language and cultural authority of one group are prioritized, silencing others. This manifestation of state hegemony over minority identities, as explained by Mitchell (2000), demonstrates how landscapes are socially produced to reflect existing power relations.

Furthermore, the study reveals territorial inequality (Sack, 1986), particularly affecting the Tamil community, which is numerically and politically a minority in Mawanella. Photographic evidence from estate settlements like Karandupanawatta

documents infrastructural neglect, highlight disparities in access to basic services and utilities *(Image 1, 2)*. This lack of development serves as a physical manifestation of their marginalized political status.

Image 1, 2: These photographs were taken from the Attanagoda GN division. Source: Wijmini Senevirathne, 11.06.2025.
This is the Karandupanawatta estate settlements The images depict an estate line-room settlement in the Attanagoda GN Division, known as Karandupanawatta. The housing structures reflect limited access to basic infrastructure and public services. Water scarcity and minimal utilities highlight spatial inequality and marginalization, particularly affecting minority communities residing in estate areas.

The spatial organization of religious sites *(Map II)* further underscores these divisions. Mosques are often centrally located within GN divisions, acting as anchors of identity and spatial cohesion for the Muslim community (Torreken, 2007). In contrast, Buddhist temples are frequently found near the boundaries of GN divisions, serving as symbolic traces that territorialize space (Anderson, 1996). This spatial arrangement reflects how religious institutions are not just places of worship but are also markers of group identity and spatial control.

However, the boundaries in Mawanella are not always static and impenetrable. The study highlights instances where these divisions are negotiated and even blurred. A death notice for a Tamil woman, written in Sinhala and featuring a Buddhist benediction ("May you attain Nirvana"), demonstrates a practical linguistic adaptation for communication with the dominant community. This act reflects a form of mutual

connection and the navigation of linguistic boundaries in daily life, suggesting that ethnic and religious boundaries are not fixed but are constantly being made and unmade (Lamont & Molnár, 2002).

Conclusion

In conclusion, Mawanella is a highly segregated area where ethnic divisions influence landscapes, institutions, and daily life. The boundaries are visible in symbols, public services, and settlement patterns, demonstrating how space is strategically organized to enhance control over territoriality. While the segregation is clear, Mawanella is best described as a contested space rather than a conflict zone, where boundaries are continually negotiated and reshaped, revealing the complex and layered nature of coexistence in multiethnic localities.

Through this study, we argue that the Mawanella Divisional Secretariat Division emerges as a critical case study, illustrating that ethnic segregation is not merely a demographic pattern, but rather a dynamic process that actively shapes spatial configurations, power relations, and identities. The research reveals a significant territorial asymmetry: the Sinhala majority occupies a substantial expanse of rural and agricultural land while the Muslim community is concentrated in urban centres of significant symbolic importance. More importantly, the study highlights territorial inequality, exemplified by the infrastructural neglect faced by the politically marginalized Tamil community residing in estate settlements, further evidencing how ethnic boundaries translate into unequal access to resources and services. This spatial division, as theorized by Paasi (1996), is essential for cultivating a sense of ethno-territorial identity; however, it also generates considerable cultural and political boundaries. These boundaries transcend mere abstract lines on a map; they manifest tangibly through symbolic exclusions experienced in daily life. Thus, public institutions, including schools and government offices, subtly reinforce the dominance of a singular ethnic identity through the use of language and cultural symbols.

In sum, Mawanella stands as a significant example of how ethnic segregation shapes spatial arrangements, institutional practices, and daily life in multiethnic Sri Lanka. Rather than simply reflecting demographic distributions, these boundaries are actively produced and maintained through symbolic markers, public services, and settlement patterns that reinforce territorial control and group identities. The study reveals not only a pronounced division between Sinhala rural dominance and Muslim urban concentration, but also the persistent marginalization of the Tamil estate community, whose limited access to resources and infrastructure underscores the realities of territorial inequality. Importantly, Mawanella is not merely a site of static separation or overt conflict; rather, it is a contested and negotiated landscape, where boundaries are continually redrawn in response to shifting socio-political dynamics.

References

Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism.* Verso.

Bashkow, I. (2004) 'A neo-Boasian conception of cultural boundaries', *American Anthropologist, 106(*3), pp. 443–458.

Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power.* Cambridge, Polity Press.

Brekke, T., Kühle, L., Larsson, G. and Martikainen, T. (2019) 'Mosques, Muslims, Methods: The Role of Mosques in Research about Muslims in Europe', *Journal of Muslims in Europe, 8*(2), pp. 216–233

Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2017). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.).Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

De Silva, K.M. (1986). *A History of Sri Lanka.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Drew, G. (2004) *Population, Land, and Ethnicity in Sri Lanka.* Colombo: Social Scientists' Association.

Duncan, O. D., & Duncan, B. (1955). A methodological analysis of segregation indices. *American Sociological Review, 20*(2), 210–217.

Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited by Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith. New York: International Publishers.

Höglund, K. and Orjuela, C. (2011). 'Winning the peace: conflict prevention after a victor's peace in Sri Lanka', *Contemporary South Asia, 19*(3), pp. 275–290.

Lamont, M., & Molnár, V. (2002). The study of boundaries in the social sciences. *Annual Review of Sociology, 28,* 167–195.

Massey, D. S., & Denton, N. A. (1993). *American apartheid: Segregation and the making of the underclass*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Mitchell, T. (2000) *Questions of Modernity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Newman, D., & Paasi, A. (1998). Fences and neighbours in the postmodern world: Boundary narratives in political geography. *Progress in Human Geography, 22*(2), 186–207.

Paasi, A. (1996). *Territories, boundaries and consciousness: The changing geographies of the Finnish–Russian border*. John Wiley & Sons.

Sack, R. D. (1986). *Human territoriality: Its theory and history*. Cambridge University Press.

Sibley, D. (1995). *Geographies of exclusion: Society and difference in the West.* Routledge.

Sibley, D. (1995). Bounding space: Purification and control. In *Geographies of exclusion* (pp. 72–89). Routledge.

Silva, K. T., Saif Deen, N. T. M., & Gunasekera, A. M. A. S. (2001). *The May 2001 riots in Mawanella: A sociological accoun*t. University of Peradeniya.

Tambiah, S.J. (1996). *Leveling Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Theil, H. (1972). *Statistical Decomposition Analysis.* Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company.