

Temples, Kovils, Mosques, and Churches: Making and Unmaking Borders through Religious Diversity in Sri Lanka

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Introduction

The relationship between geography and religion significantly influences the cultural landscapes of Sri Lanka. Reflecting the island's ethnic diversity, multi-religious communities are present across various regions, creating distinctive social and political dynamics and challenges. However, it is widely accepted that cities serve as shared landscapes where a variety of ethnic groups, social classes, genders, and religious communities coexist. This inherent diversity has been on the rise, particularly in the age of globalization, which fosters enhanced interactions and exchanges among different populations. In the context of Sri Lanka, while its cities may not experience the same cosmopolitan nature as those found in other global regions with different nationalities, they nonetheless reflect a rich and vibrant tapestry of ethnic and religious diversity.

Religious diversity refers to the coexistence of two or more distinct religions within a particular region or society (Lin et al., 2022). In this context, Sri Lanka is recognized as a multi-religious/multi-ethnic nation, primarily comprising Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Roman Catholics. The presence of these religions in Sri Lanka is often highlighted through distinct territorial symbols, such as places of worship, cultural symbols, and language. These symbols serve not only as markers of religious identity but also contribute to the rich tapestry of cultural life in the country. The varied religious landscapes are often evident in the urban areas of Sri Lanka.

It is important to understand that, despite this diversity, the urban population in Sri Lanka is below 20%. This statistic highlights that a substantial portion of the population still resides in rural areas. The patterns of urbanization in Sri Lanka are primarily propelled by economic development rather than solely by demographic diversity. The religious landscape within urban spaces is becoming increasingly varied (Martínez-Ariño, 2019). Numerous scholars argue that cities are crucial arenas where religious diversity is more prominently displayed (Becci, Burchardt, and Casanova, 2013; Knott, Krech, and Meyer, 2016). Typically, urban studies in Sri Lanka have focused on aspects such as infrastructure development and political or administrative

decisions (Jones and Selvaratnam, 1970; Wanasinghe and Karunanayake, 2003). The defining features of urban landscapes in Sri Lanka often revolve around skyscrapers, advanced infrastructure, and the availability of public services.

In that context, our study aims to explore the role of religious diversity in defining the urban landscape of Sri Lanka. This focus is particularly significant as there has been little prior research on how religious diversity influences urban areas in the country. We seek to fill this gap by examining how the complex interplay of different religious communities contributes to the overall urban identity and spatial organization, thereby enriching the discourse around urbanization in Sri Lanka.

Objectives

The main objective of this research is to explore the religious diversity in Sri Lanka. In this study, we are not merely focused on quantifying the demographic proportions of various religious groups (Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Catholics, Christians, and Other) within the population; rather, our aim is to delve deeper into the concept of religious diversity and its implications for understanding the cultural complexities in Sri Lanka.

Within this broader objective, this study is focused on two sub objectives.

- To explore the spatial variation of religious diversity in Sri Lanka.
- To investigate how religious diversity can be recognized as an urban characteristic in Sri Lanka.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-method approach to examine how religious diversity vary across the urban-rural continuum, using Divisional Secretariat Division (DSD) - level data as the unit of analysis. Religious composition data for each DSD were obtained from the Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka, based on the 2012 population census, the latest available national-level census data for the country. The census includes six religious categories: Buddhist, Hindu, Islam, Roman Catholic, Other Christian, and other. The Shannon Entropy (H') was used to quantify the religious diversity for each DSD.

The Shannon Entropy (H') is calculated as:

$$H' = - \sum_{i=1}^S p_i \ln(p_i)$$

Where:

p_i = Proportion of the population belongs to the i th religious group

S = Total number of religious groups considered

Since this study considered six major religious groups, the index has a theoretical maximum value of 1.79, which occurs when all six groups are equally represented. The minimum value of 0 corresponds to complete homogeneity, where only one religious group is present. To facilitate interpretation, values were classified into five ordinal categories of diversity: very low diversity (0 - 0.29), low diversity (0.3 - 0.59), moderate diversity (0.6 - 0.89), high diversity (0.9 - 1.4), and very high diversity (1.4 - 1.79).

It is important to note the sensitive nature of visually representing religious and ethnic data in a country with a history of ethnic war. To prevent potential misinterpretation or misuse of the findings, the authors have made a deliberate decision not to display explicit maps or raw data in the findings section. The results will instead be presented and discussed through descriptive narratives, focusing on the underlying patterns and correlations without providing a direct visual link to specific locations. This approach ensures that the analysis remains academically rigorous while exercising caution and responsibility in presenting findings that could be socially sensitive.

A key limitation of this study is the reliance on 2012 census data, which may not fully capture recent demographic shifts, migration patterns, or changes in ethnic/religious affiliation that have occurred over the past decade. Once the updated data (Sri Lanka Population and Housing Census 2024) is available, the study's findings can be revisited and refined to reflect more current trends, enabling a clearer understanding of how religious diversity is evolving across Sri Lanka's urban and rural areas. Since this study uses aggregated data at the DSD level, the observed patterns may differ from the actual situation on the ground. A more accurate and detailed pattern could be obtained by using data at the GN (Grama Niladhari) division level.

Findings

According to Shannon Entropy, Sri Lanka has a religious diversity score of 0.84, indicating relatively high diversity on a global scale. However, the analysis reveals that high religious diversity is concentrated in a few specific regions: 1) the western coastal belt from Panadura to Kythes, 2) the eastern coastal belt from Batticaloa to Vadamaradchchi East, and 3) the central highlands, including the Kandy and Nuwara Eliya districts. Notably, many of these Divisional Secretariats Divisions (DSDs) with significant religious diversity are urban areas or possess urban characteristics. They are also directly linked to the country's ethnic and demographic histories. For instance, several Urban Municipal Councils exhibit higher levels of religious diversity. This concentration of diversity in urban areas produces multicultural landscapes that encompass three or more religions. Traditional secularization theory argues that increased religious diversity leads to decreased participation in religious practices, and that individuals who encounter various religions tend to diminish their commitment

to a specific faith (Lin et al., 2022). Nevertheless, examining the distribution of religious places, particularly in the Colombo district, makes it challenging to assert that religious participation has declined, given that Colombo hosts the largest number of religious places. Helble (2007), along with Dolansky and Alon (2008), points out that states with greater religious diversity often exhibit more flexibility, openness, and a greater readiness to embrace risks. Conversely, in Sri Lanka, these regions with high religious diversity often become contested spaces, making them susceptible to ethnic and religious conflicts.

Beyond the regions with high diversity, a clear pattern of low religious diversity is evident in many parts of the country, including, the Southern, Central, North Central, Uva, and Sabaragamuwa provinces. Even in urban hubs like Galle and Matara in the Southern Province, religious diversity remains relatively low compared to other major cities. This pattern is common in the peripheral/rural and agricultural areas, where traditional village life and a deep connection to the land reinforce a largely homogenous religious identity. The predominance of a single faith in these regions creates a distinct contrast to the diverse coastal and urban centres, shaping the overall religious landscape of Sri Lanka.

Moreover, while there is a general trend of urban areas having higher religious diversity, the numerous exceptions and the powerful influence of historical and ethnic factors make it an unreliable and inconsistent metric for determining urbanization in Sri Lanka. This spatial pattern predominantly reflects the historical settlement dynamics of ethnic and religious groups rather than a singular trajectory of modernization. While the findings show a clear correlation between high religious diversity and urban areas, this relationship is not a simple cause-and-effect. The diversity in DSDs like Colombo and the eastern coastal belt is not solely a product of modern urbanization. It is deeply rooted in the country's ethnic and demographic histories, shaped by centuries of migration, trade, and colonial settlement. Therefore, a high diversity score might indicate a historic multicultural enclave rather than a newly urbanized area.

Conclusion

Based on the findings presented, Sri Lanka's religious landscape reveals a fundamental paradox: it exhibits considerable overall diversity while simultaneously manifesting a pronounced spatial segregation of its religious communities. This phenomenon results in the establishment of "invisible religious borders" that traverse the island, which do not align with simplistic administrative divisions but rather stem from deep-rooted ethnic, historical, and demographic factors. Consequently, Sri Lanka emerges not as a homogenous melting pot but as a complex tapestry of distinct religious spatial units.

The term “invisible borders” refers to the social and cultural boundaries that delineate the various religious as well as ethnic groups, which are often not easily identifiable on a map but are deeply felt in the lived experiences of the people. These borders reflect the historical narratives, migration patterns, and interactions among different ethnic and religious communities. They represent a complex interplay of identities that have evolved through significant events such as colonialism, civil war, and post-colonial nation-building.

Conversely, the vast majority of the country’s land, particularly the Southern, North Central, Uva, and Sabaragamuwa provinces, is marked by a pervasive religious homogeneity. These largely rural, agricultural areas, defined by traditional village life, reinforce a singular religious and ethnic identity. This distinct spatial contrast, between the diverse, often conflict-prone urban hubs and the homogenous, rural periphery, is a defining feature of Sri Lanka’s ethno-religious landscape. This marked spatial divide between heterogeneous urban centres and religiously homogenous rural regions highlights the complexity of Sri Lanka’s ethno-religious landscape. Recognizing these patterns is essential, as they have significant implications for policy formulation, particularly with respect to language rights. This necessitates data-driven approaches that account for varying degrees of diversity and promote equity and social cohesion across different geographic contexts.

The application of the Shannon Entropy Index thus offers a promising framework for guiding language policy in Sri Lanka. By quantifying religious diversity at the DSD level, this index can help identify divisions where multiple communities coexist. If a DSD registers a diversity score above 0.6, indicating moderate to very high diversity, these areas could be considered for official recognition of all three national languages. Such a data-driven approach would ensure that language policy is responsive to the actual demographic makeup of each division, promoting greater inclusivity and equitable access to public services in Sinhala, Tamil, and English. At the same time, it is crucial to recognize the value of linguistic rights even in divisions with lower diversity scores. Affirming the presence and dignity of minority language speakers, regardless of numerical thresholds, fosters social cohesion, protects minority rights, and strengthens the spirit of national unity across all regions of Sri Lanka.

In summary, Sri Lanka’s religious landscape is marked by both diversity and spatial segregation, resulting in invisible borders between communities. Addressing these patterns through data-driven, inclusive language policies is essential for fostering minority rights, social cohesion, and a more unified national identity across the island.

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