Negotiating the Sri Lankan Muslim Identity through Choice of Clothing: Emerging Trends and Tensions

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Abstract

Despite the relative peace that prevailed in Sri Lanka after the end of the 30 year old civil war in 2009, Muslims in the country have experienced tensions with other ethnic groups. Challenges, threats, and tensions, have pushed them towards an attempt to differentiate themselves from other ethnic groups in Sri Lanka. In doing so, they seem to have shed an 'older' Sri Lankan Muslim identity and embraced the identity of the global Muslim community (Ummah). Thus, Sri Lankan Muslims are faced with the dilemma of having to differentiate their identities from Sinhala and Tamil identities within Sri Lanka, while at the same time, defending themselves against being portrayed in the same manner as some foreign extremist and fundamentalist Muslim groups. Nowhere has this evolution and associated dilemmas been more apparent than in their choice of clothing, and in the responses of others to these choices. As in many societies, a special emphasis has been placed on the attire of women. As Muslims have felt threatened, Muslim women, and men (to a lesser degree), have started wearing clothes conservatively to represent a 'reformed' identity, which has enabled the community to identify more strongly with the Ummah. They have, however, also drawn the suspicion of and alienation from other ethnic communities within Sri Lanka. In trying to reassert their identity, the Muslim community has made it easier for non-Muslims to label them as aliens and outsiders.

Key words: Muslim, identity, Moor, Islam

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Introduction

Conceptual introduction

Identity can be simply defined as the manner in which an individual understands him or herself in relation to others (Hogg and Abrams, 1998. p. 02). It is central to how an individual respond to his or her social environment, and how others respond to them. Identity, which can be personal, political, cultural, religious, and ethnic, develops through relationship with others. As Berremann explains;

> Identity is contextual in both derivation and expression that is manipulable and changeable is now well-known and is surely expectable, for it shares these features with all that is cultural (as cited by Regmi, 2003, p.01).

Thus identity is a reflection of one's culture and is responsive to cultural and contextual change.

Identity starts to develop at a micro level within family and among friends, and moves to macro level elements such as social prejudgements, stereotypes, and ethnic appearances. Erickson in his book Identity, Youth and Crisis (1968) suggests that identity develops in the following manner: starting with family members, peers and members of community, and then larger society. While a person may be introduced to a plethora of groups from which an individual could derive his/her identity, during different stages of development an individual may pick and choose which identities to adopt and which to discard. Sometimes they are forced to follow. While identity enables the person to understand and place him or herself within their social context, identity also provides a basis for a sense of belonging and solidarity with others who share the same identity (Adler, 2002). Thus group identities are created.

Among the many agents that provide impetus for identity development such as ethnicity, political affiliation, etc., religion holds an important place. Group identities that are thus created are often intertwined with the history of a particular people. Therefore, group identities and changes that they go through can only be understood based on past and current political, social and ideological paradigm shifts of a particular group. This paper attempts to conduct a similar analysis of the development and shifts in identity, specifically religious identity, with particular focus on attire. This research is carried out

mainly through a qualitative method, using in reading materials, books, journals and magazines, and various websites.

Manifestations of identity

Given the cultural-contextual nature of identity, different markers are used as outward manifestations of the identities that an individual embodies. For example, Twigg (2009) explains how Bourdieu suggests that external markers are a significant way in which identities are expressed. Among the many markers of identity that he places importance on is choice of clothing. Similarly, many researchers, including Veblen (1889) and Simmel (1904) identify clothing as a significant part of class identity. While it provides a means of differentiating oneself from others, clothing also provides a means of social mobility and movement. While clothing has been largely discussed in terms of social class and class identity; this paper attempts to examine religious identity through the lens of clothing. This analysis uses the case of Sri Lankan Muslims in order to do this analysis of how religious identity and its development and shifts could be studied through an exploration of clothing trends of the community.

Muslims of Sri Lanka

Generally, Muslims can be categorised based on their social condition. They fall broadly into three different categories: (1) those living in countries which have a Muslim majority and the religion of Islam is the governing ideology (Pakistan, Afghanistan, Indonesia and most Middle Eastern countries); (2) those living in countries with a Muslim majority and is ruled by a secular government (Albania, Azerbaijan, Kosovo, Tajikistan, Turkey, Uzbekistan); and (3) those living in countries where Muslims are a religious minority and are ruled by other ethnic group/s and are excluded from dominant roles (Sri Lanka, India, Canada, USA, West Europe). Each of these situations brings about different challenges and complexities. But this paper focuses on the third category, where Muslims are a minority, where this status and their interactions with the other communities shape their identity, and this identity is then manifested in their clothing. Additionally, the paper also examines what impact outward markers of identity; in this case clothing has on interactions with other communities and their responses to Muslims.

Scholars such as Mirdal (2000) and Waardenburg (2000) emphasize the role of religion in ethnic identity, especially in the case

of minorities:

> Religious and ethnic identity especially play an important role for persons belonging to minority groups, often to the point that they predominate above all other aspects of identity (Mirdal, 2000, pp. 39-40).

This can be applied to Muslims in Sri Lanka as well. Therefore, their religious self-identification and its reception by other communities in a society are of the strongest significance.

The affirmation of identity is often through performance external manifestation. This can be done in two ways: either through attempting to keep the tradition alive, or through behaviour, which can be seen as a reaction to negative portrayals by 'others' (Chavez & DiBrito, 1999, p.41). This paper argues that in the case of Sri Lankan Muslims as a religious minority, the clothing they have chosen can be seen mostly as a reaction to negative portrayals by other communities and the influence of Arabic culture and Islamic movements.

Issues Related to Veiling as a Manifestation of Islamic Cultural-Religious Identity

The veil as a clothing choice and identity-marker has generated much discussion, controversy, and misunderstanding in many parts of the world, including Sri Lanka. The veil is a major marker of religious identity among Muslim women and it plays a significant role in reconstructing and preserving the cultural-religious identity of Muslims, generally. Mohammad (1999) explains that such a choice

> Intensifies collective interest in the regulation of women's bodies and sexualities through measures, which focus on both the body and the psyche; visually, spatially and temporally. It is also expressed in Islamic concepts of family life, which are constructed as pivotal in the maintenance of social order and in the resolution of wider socio-economic problems. (Mohammad, 1999, p. 225).

The attire of Muslim women plays a crucial role in materialising ideological thought. Muslim women in Sri Lanka had been dressing in different ethicised styles since colonial times. They have historically adopted West Asian, Malay –Javanese, and Northern and Southern Indian forms of clothing. In this manner, the saree and shalwar kameez were popular. They used a cover for the head, using a shawl paired with

the shalwar kameez and the 'headpiece' of the saree, which is called Mukkadu. However, these have changed in the recent past, and more Middle Eastern, specifically Arab clothing has been adopted. By these clothing choices the community has affirmed a new kind of identity that primes a single global identity, which makes the community conspicuous. This trend can not only be witnessed in Sri Lanka but also in the western world where it is often answered by a call for banning the veil as a religious symbol. Though the veil is becoming socially acceptable for Muslims, it is also viewed as posing a threat by others. It is often discussed within the dichotomy between western and eastern, old and new, and medieval and modern.

History of Muslim identity in Sri Lanka

Discourse on Moor/Sonakar/Muslims and the unification of Muslim identity

Muslims are the second largest minority in Sri Lanka, making up around 9.11% of the population (based on the census report of 2011). The largest percentage of Muslims, around two thirds, live outside the North and the East of the country. One third lives in the North and East, and they are the largest group in some districts in the Eastern province. Some of the Muslims historically were merchants descending from Arabs who settled in India and Ceylon. Their descendants are called by different names in India such as Moplas, Memons, and Pattanis (Mohamed, 2011, p. 429). The Sinhala majority called the descendants of Arabs 'Marakkala' (ship people), whereas the Tamil minority call them Sonahars and Tamil Sonahars. The colonial Europeans called them Moors.

Muslims of Sri Lanka have different ethno-social backgrounds. Based on this, they are called Sri Lanka Moors, Malays, Indian Moors (Moplas – Malabar Muslims, Pathans - North Indian Muslims), the Memons, Hambayas, Bohras, etc. Their diversity can be seen in their languages and practices. Malays speak Malay, the Bohras speak Gujarati, the Memons speak Kutchi or Urdu, while a majority of other Muslims speak Tamil. Further, each has their own Mosque and community organizations and associations in Sri Lanka to maintain their differences, history, and unique identity. For example, the Malay mosques can be seen in Slave Island and Kandy, the Hambaya mosque on 2nd cross street, Colombo, the Borah mosque on 4th cross street, Colombo, the Memon mosque on 3rd cross street, Colombo, the

Moplah mosque on Wolfendhal, Colombo, the Ahmediya mosque in Negombo, the Hanafi mosques in Kandy and Gampola, and numerous Moor mosques around Sri Lanka, which reflect the diversity of what is known as the Sri Lankan Muslim community. Initially, Muslims who were called Moors spread throughout Sri Lanka and were to a great degree not connected with the global Muslim Ummah (community). This situation unconsciously forced them to mix with other ethnic groups of Sri Lanka and adapt their language as a mother tongue (Tamil and Sinhala) and to incorporate some cultural elements into their own cultural practices.

The use of the term 'Moor' can be traced back to the colonial and particularly Portuguese period. The Portuguese used the term 'mauro' meaning 'of Arab or Moroccan origin' to describe their Moor neighbours in Spain and Morocco (Gugler, 2013). They also referred to Muslims in Sri Lanka with the same term to indicate their Arab roots and their assumed identity based on their religion. Further, the Portuguese applied this term to Muslims in their African and Asian empires. European terms such as 'Mohammedan' or 'Mussalman' were also later applied to refer to Muslims of Sri Lanka (McGilvray & Raheen, 2011, p. 414).

This Western label of 'Moor' was substituted for Marakkala or Sonahar during the last five hundred years. This was later altered to mean Muslim followers of Islam, generally. Around the 19th century the term 'Ceylon moor' emerged and was translated as 'Sonakar' by educated Muslims, mostly in urban areas such as Colombo and Kandy, in order to act as a political representation based on the racial and communal claim in the colonial era. This created some contention among Tamil Hindus, who argued that apart from their religion, Muslims and Tamils share a similar cultural and linguistic identity. They argued that therefore Ceylon moors were not a different ethnic group or identity group but that they should share the same Tamil identity. This was done with the intention of preventing a separate and unique identity for Muslims or moor political representation. This is still evident in the political language of the Tamil community: for example, the TNA talks of representing the 'Tamil speaking people' which includes Tamils and Muslims.

The TNA arguments show the importance of language in defining identity and ethnicity. Language overshadows religious, ideological,

physical, and institutional differences. Ramananthan (1916) argued that language is of utmost significance in forming identity.

> Community of language is a presumptive evidence of the community of blood and it is proof of something which for practical purposes is the same as community of blood' (Ramanathan, 2011/1916, p.423).

In the case of Muslims of Sri Lanka, many had acquired not only the language but also many aspects of local Tamil culture. Thus they share much culture with Tamils, including customs such as the use of dowry and especially the type of clothing they adopted.

In opposition to the argument that moors are members of the Tamil 'race' by Ponnambalam Ramanatham (1916), Azeez (1957) argued that originally the moors of this country were Arabs and that they were a different race from Tamil Hindus, who moved to Sri Lanka from South India, though there were some cultural similarities only due to the acculturation process. For example, he said that the moor for the purpose of communication had learnt and spoke Tamil. Further, he argued that though there were some physical resemblances between the two groups, it did not mean they were originally Tamils (as cited by Nuhman, 2004, pp.17-19).

This sort of contestation of identity symbolises the beginning of the 'Arabization' of identity of the moor in Sri Lanka. It was clearly a reaction against the negative and suppressive treatment from others. This situation can also be understood using the lens of cultural diffusion. This realisation of their own identity influenced developments in Muslim personal law, the importance of including Arabic language in Muslim schools, and the introduction of Muslim religious education (madrasas). These were the new markers of their unique Muslim identity. These events should be considered as the start of attempts at the homogenising of the Muslim identity based on religion. To prove their argument moors, particularly educated moors, acquired a new mode of clothing, such as the Turkish fez cap. At present this is used ceremonially, including at some moor weddings, as part of the traditional attire of the bridegroom.

It should be mentioned that the policies of the colonial rulers in Sri Lanka also influenced the shaping of the Muslim identity. For political and administrative purposes, the British divided the local communities or ethnic groups as upcountry and low country Sinhalese,

Ceylon and Indian Tamils, Indian and Ceylon Moors and Malays. In this manner, the Moor of Ceylon was considered as a separate ethnic group for the colonial administration. Though it was divided for political and administrative purposes, this system helped local communities to consciously build their identity to ensure that their political representation was also protected. Thus each group tried to differentiate themselves from other communities in this process (Zackariya & Shanmugaratnam, 1997).

The major riot in 1915 was perceived as a wakeup call for Muslims to mobilise their political identity and unify. The riots and political differences with the Tamil political elite possibly encouraged the Muslim elites of Sri Lanka to differentiate themselves from the Sinhala majority and Tamil minority. They advocated that the general Muslim public rethink their political role as a minority by strengthening political representation, by espousing a common identity that included Moors, Indian Muslims, and Malays. This did not completely erase some of the tensions between these communities. For example, there were disagreements and divisions between Moors and Malays on the portrayal of the 'Muslim'. Moors were involved in merchant activities whereas Malays were mostly government officers. Further, Moors considered themselves to be the descendent of Arabs whereas Malays were of Javanese origin and as such were more comfortable with (South) East Asian culture. Nevertheless, leaders from both the Moor and Malay communities emphasised the importance of coming together under one identity as 'Muslims'. For example, T. B. Jaya (a Malay) and the Ceylon Muslim League (1942) (majority Moors) emphasised the importance of increasing Muslim political representation, protecting cultural, social identities, business interests and bringing all Muslims together. In the end the project to build a single Muslim identity had triumphed.

This history of Sri Lankan Muslims has indicate that the adoption of a Muslim identity was the result of the interplay between interdependence of self and others. Yinger (1976) explains:

> Religious identities among minorities are influenced by attitudes shown towards them. Therefore, religious identity is being shaped throughout tensions and strains in the oscillation between benevolence towards and distrust of the 'other' (Yinger, 315, p.206).

Therefore, when examining the social and religious identities of Sri Lankan Muslims, it would mean that the following three principals have to be explored: (1) the concept of Muslim individual self, (2) the definition of territory, and (3) the definition of community. This paper contends that in performing their identity through their choice of clothing, the Sri Lankan Muslim community assert their identity and sense of community.

Muslim/Islamic political parties and movements and their influence on identity

The emergence of Muslim political parties should not be linked with religious ideology or the emergence of Islam. One of the expressed aspects of these political parties was to give a voice to Muslims' problems that would allow them to assert their separation from the hegemony of other ethnic groups. This led to the creation of the unique political identity of Muslims. In this view, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) is the result of political marginalization by the Sinhala Buddhists' and Tamil nationalists' view of minorities and Tamil political dominance in the North and East. Though there were Muslim politicians representing major political parties, they were traditionally representing mainly the interest of the Muslim business classes or political elite's aspirations. Their concerns, however, did not include the lower strata of the Muslim community, such as those engaged in farming and fishing (Zackariya & Shanmugaratnam, 1997).

As a result of the ethnic conflict, relationships between Tamil and Muslims were also affected. Two major incidents against Muslims by the LTTE, namely the expulsion of Muslims from the North in 1990, and mosque massacres in the East, gave Muslims more reason to differentiate their political and cultural identity from the Tamils. In this manner, the ethnic conflict gave an opportunity for the SLMC to propagate itself on the basis of a separate Muslim political identity. Though the manifesto of the SLMC is based on Islamic principles, it is not related to the theological foundation or Islamism . Basically, the leadership of the party pledged corruption-free politics, fighting for Muslim identity and rights, resistance to domination by major political parties or Tamil parties, and ending the thinking of Muslims as "free riders." It should not be denied that the emergence of the SLMC was a significant event in separating Muslim political and cultural identity from the other ethnic groups of Sri Lanka. Though Tamil and Sinhala

nationalists were disturbed by the SLMC, the Motto of 'Muslim political identity by Muslim political party' can be understood as a response to Tamil and Sinhala ethno-nationalism (Zackariya & Shanmugaratnam, 1997). This political identity has further increased the mistrust between communities.

It should be accepted that there have been traditional and cultural differences among Muslims in how they practice and live Islam. This is due to the varied and diverse interpretations of Islamic teachings. Muslims are influenced by the Islamic ideas of Middle Eastern countries, Pakistan and India. Their ideas have influenced the identity of Muslims of Sri Lanka. There are different Islamic movements in Sri Lanka, such as Sufism, Tabliq Jamathe, Jamaeth i Islamiyyah, Salafi groups (Tawhid), etc.

Except for Sufism and Tabliq, the others have a political take on Islam and are involved in the electoral process, too. For example, Salafis calls themselves the followers of pure, original or fundamental Islam without the religious and cultural influences of others. Accordingly, dowry, saint worship, superstitions like Kanduri (feast celebrations) are seen as not pure Islamic traditions and therefore should be done away with. In this manner this group tries to purify Islam based on literal interpretations of Islamic holy texts combined with some Arabian cultural influences. Clothing choices are very much influenced by these sorts of interpretations and the turning to the global Muslim Ummah for affirmation of identity.

The followers of Tabliq, Jamathe i Islamie and Salafis, mostly, use the traditional clothing of Arabs like Jubbah with beard for men, and niqab, abayas for women as identity markers to differentiate themselves from others. They preach and publish their Islamic interpretation through their mosques and publications.

Contemporary reading on identity of attire

Today, the shift towards Islamic clothing as an affirmation of their identity is viewed as modern resulting from the Islamism practised by modern Islamic political movements. In other words, it is the result of the politicization of Islam. The intention of the Islamic movements is to bring the global Muslim Ummah together based on Islamic ideal by adhering to this modern Muslim identity. Even clothing choices became political statements, for example, where veiling was also taken as a deviation from Western culture (Keddie, 1990, p.98). In a way, it

is a statement against the dominant culture and clothing that represents the dominant culture. This is also the case among Sri Lankan Muslims. At the same time, while differentiating oneself from the more dominant cultures in one's locality. One is also able to declare an affinity to a global identity that is the Muslim Ummah. The following three elements in the formation of group identity can also be applied to the case of Muslims of Sri Lanka;

1. **Categorization** (of people): Labelling and defining people. Individual self-image is related to what category he / she belongs to e.g., Muslims.

2. **Identification:** Association with certain groups e.g., Muslims consider themselves a part of local or global Muslims Ummah and this is reflected through their attire.

3. **Comparison:** Comparison with other groups (Tajfel and Turner, 1979, p.43). In the case of Sri Lankan Muslim, through attire they distinguish themselves from other ethnic groups while creating favourable affiliation with the global Muslim Ummah, to which they think they belong.

There are the following identity types: first is the identity of legitimacy: it is put forward by dominant social groups to show their dominance over others. Second is the identity of resistance, which is created by less powerful groups who feel that their positions are degraded or devalued by the majority or dominant group. Third is projective identity; based on the availability of cultural material and social agencies to build a new identity and this redefines their position in the society or country that leads to the transformation of general social structure (Kulenovic, 2006, p. 716).

Based on these types of identity-formation, the Muslim identity appears to be a hybrid identity of resistant and projective identity. Muslims' feeling of being threatened was directly correlated with their choice to dress conservatively to affirm who they were. In this manner, through veiling or adopting the jubba (by men), Muslims adopt a different identity based on their faith and ideology. Further, this phenomenon shows their freedom of belief and the protection of their religious values from those of other ethnic groups. Generally, in forming identity, nation, language, religion, sex, and socio-economic status play a major role, but when it comes to Muslims of Sri Lanka,

religion overtakes the rest of the major markers of identity due to the fact that religion has been an object of attack for Muslims. Therefore, in the case of the Arabization of dress, the religious and private identity of Muslims become a public identity whether they are living in a secular, non-secular, Islamic or non-Islamic state. Further, based on the level of religiosity, affiliation, and ethno-religious background, Muslims are categorised into four types: firstly, ethnic Muslims, who build an identity based on ethnicity and social grouping over religious groups; secondly, cultural Muslims, who base their identity on the customs of a person's ethnic and cultural origins; thirdly, religious Muslims, whose identity is based on religious belief rather than ethnicity; and fourthly, political Muslims, whose identity is based on socio- political reality (Duderija, 2008, p.375).

Based on the above categorization, the clothing choices of Muslims in Sri Lanka are related to a religious identity that outranks other markers of identity. When religious identity becomes public identity it can be seen as threatening and thereby creates intolerance. It widens the conflicts between Muslims and others. In the general perception, many think that religious symbols and identity should be part of private life and not mixed with public life. When clothing becomes part of public life, it can become a target of intolerance. As witnessed by the banning of 'religious attire' in public places e.g., recent controversies against wearing Burkinis and the face veil. It shows that what is perceived as an identity marker by Muslims may also be perceived as a threat by other communities. In the Muslim perspective, this attire shows acknowledgement of the rights of Muslims and equality in a pluralistic society. These efforts of control have been mostly focused on the attire of women. Through veiling, Muslim women achieve two different goals; first, it gives them freedom from isolation and allows them to visually observe solidarity. Second, it is an expression and symbol of modesty and morality that allows them to affirm their superiority over others (Kulenovic, 2006, p.716).

Wearing the Burkini should also be understood against this background. Veiling started as a part of a religious identity but has now increasingly taken on a political meaning. In this view, the hijab shows a new place in the social order for women in Islam. Muslim women show their identity and essence while engaging in the activities of the modern world. Not only ordinary women but also well-educated women accept veiling (Aksay & Gambetta, 2016, p.15). This clothing

of Muslim women has changed a sign of oppression and backwardness into a unique marker of a religious and ethnic identity. Further, it has also become a symbol of identity which needs recognition as equal to the identity of other elements of identity in contemporary pluralistic societies.

It is clear that veiling is understood in different perspectives. Werbner says:

> Islamic dress has come to be a symbolically laden vehicle which may stand alternatively for modesty, a defiant, oppositional 'Islam' or a rejection of 'tradition' (Werbner, 2007, p.163).

Although the veil is often misinterpreted as a religious symbol, this is contentious because there is no clear prescription of it in the Holy Quran. Neither the Holy Quran nor the Prophet Muhammed 'directly' recommend the wearing of the veil. There is no expressed requirement for the adorning of the veil, commonly known as the hijab or the niqab, or abaya or Jubbah. Rather it should be considered as the traditional attire of Arabs.

With the adoption of this identity of the Muslim Ummah and its outward markers of clothing, what has also taken place is that the Sri Lankan Muslim is held responsible, not only for its actions, but also those of Muslim communities elsewhere. Enforced wearing of the abaya and the veil is seen as a sign of increased radicalization that leads to the type of terrorism that is seen in other parts of the world. The threat of terrorism that is posed by the Sri Lankan Muslim community because of their affiliation to the global Muslim Ummah has been a continuous rallying cry by the Sinhala nationalist movements. In affirming this new identity through their clothing, the Sri Lankan Muslim now look like the terrorist that is portrayed in the Western media. Therefore, it is believed that the threat they pose is similar.

Findings and conclusion

In summary, this research analyses the religious identity of Muslims, its formation and transformations, with special focus on clothing. Veiling in the form of headscarf (or hijab, abaya, niqab) by women and the use of beards by men are used to express a distinct Muslim identity. This is supposedly based on their religious beliefs and scriptural interpretations. It is clear that the hermeneutics of the veil is multifaceted and can be perceived by non-Muslims as ambiguous or

threatening.

This use of clothing to project identity has incited controversial reactions by others due to the following types of reasoning: that this type of attire is linked with Islamic extremism, and the public misuse of religious symbols that are supposed to be private. In the Islamic perspective, there is no difference between private and public life, unlike the situation in western and secular societies. It allows also for the discussion of the status of women in Islam. In others' perspective, veiling is a sort of discrimination and a symbol of backwardness, whereas others view it is as a symbol of Islamic feminism and modesty (Cumper & Lewis, 2008, p. 03). The veil also projects an identity that shows a return to an 'original' and strengthened Islamic culture and religion. This attire-based identity should be approached in the broader context not only of differentiation from others and conflicting relationship with other groups, but also on modernity, globalisation, and social change. In this view, Muslims perceive clothing from a cultural perspective as something that enables them to express religious, social, moral, security, and political meanings and their social relationship with others. It cannot be analysed without relating it to religious thought, belief and understanding.

It should be noted that during the colonial era anti-Muslim activities led all Muslims of Sri Lanka to come together based on their religious identity, regardless of their origin, language, ethnic, and cultural differences. The modern day Sinhala and Tamil nationalists' attitude and actions against Muslims have moved them towards the identity of the global Muslim Ummah. Today, it is apparent that just like their counterparts globally, Muslims have a separate identity based on their politics, religious beliefs, and culture. The religious awareness of Sri Lankan Muslims and expression of religious and cultural symbols developed rapidly after the mid-1980s. This is due to access to information and the sense of belonging to the global Ummah. Conflicts between communities and conflicts in Muslims countries are also a reason for increasing in religious awareness. In this manner, they have been using religious and cultural identity to strengthen their affiliation and association with the global Muslim Ummah whereas other ethnic groups use language and history to strengthen their identity.

Finally, events in Muslim countries and the world such as the Palestinian- -Israel conflict, the conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq,

and emergence of Daesh (Islamic State terrorists) and terrorist attacks in many major cities in the West are also affecting the manner in which Sri Lankan Muslims are being understood. Some groups have alleged a growing tendency of Islamic fundamentalism among some Muslims of Sri Lanka that they say is signalled by their attire. However, as suggested above, that understanding should be more nuanced and complex.

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