

## Patterns and Challenges of Social Identity: An Analysis of Third Space Perspective on Afro-Sri Lankans in Sirambiadiya

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**Abstract:** This study explores a community that is less known in Sri Lanka – Afro-Sri Lankan community or Kaffirs, that is considered as the smallest ethnic minority in the country. Earlier their members were scattered in few places in Negambo, Jaffna, Kalpitiya and Puttalam, but one of the remaining and known community now lives in Sirambiadiya. It has been studied as having a distinctive culture especially focusing on their unique music and dance known as ‘Maanja’. This research investigated Sirambiadiya as a marginalized space with reference to Edward Soja’s notion of Third Space. Soja’s third space insists us to look at places such as Sirambiadiya focusing on their lived experiences, rather than setting them as objective/perceived (first spaces) or subjective/conceived (second spaces) spaces. Here, in order to understand formulation of social identity and challenges of this ethnic minority, a field research with in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were done. Results revealed that the ethnic identity of Afro-Sri Lankans is neglected in the category of “other” in the official discourses and therefore their ethnic identity is at stake. Because of the lack of recognition, they are marginalized as a separate space amidst other villages. Their physical appearance reminding the African descent helps to formulate their identity. Yet, they now try to formulate their social identity while trying to exhibit their creole culture. The study concludes that in the case of people in Sirambiadiya, looking at it as a third

space, their identity has become a problem in the rendering of their everyday life.

**Keywords:** Afro-Sri Lankans, Third Space, Sirambiadiya

### Introduction

Afro-Sri Lankan community, an ethnic minority is a group lacking clear identity and consideration of governance. They live in Sirambiadiya, Puttalam in the northwestern province of Sri Lanka. They have been known to have a distinctive culture based on their unique music and dancing practices. While most studies highlight this fact, many studies have a less or unsubstantial attempt in exploring their position in terms of identity. This orientalist view elides factions and communities from an identity that is true to themselves. This research look at Sirambiadiya as a marginalized space. The conceptual foundation of this research is Edward Soja’s notion of third space. Edward Soja’s Third Space invites us to look at places such as Sirambiadiya by focusing on their living/lived experiences. This excludes orientalist notions that play to the western appetite and focus solely on the elides as a subject on its own worth devoid of west-led logocentric practices.

The third space is a perspective which can fairly employ to study the world or society based on everyday life practices. It is a lived, experiential world. From the third space (lived space) perspective, identifying the places undistinguishable by the first (perceived space) and second (conceived

space) spaces. 'Third Space' (lived space) is explained as multisided, contradictory, and critical to the imagination of space (Soja,1996:74).

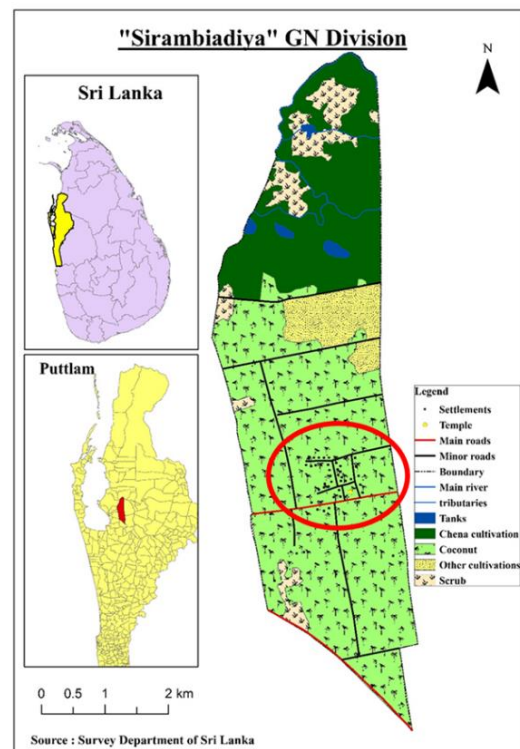
By definition identity is that unique introduction to who am I or who we are? Identity is people and concepts of who they are of what sort of people they are and how they related to others. With the time being, social identity of Afro-Sri Lankan has become a challengeable issue. Their identity is being formulated and created by several key features of the identities with historical facts. This Afro-Sri Lankan community is fighting for their identity while also being marginalized due to lack of unique identity in the wider spectrum. The objective of this paper is to examine the patterns and challenges of the social identity of Afro-Sri Lankan community based on Edward Soja's notion of the third space perspective.

### Methodology

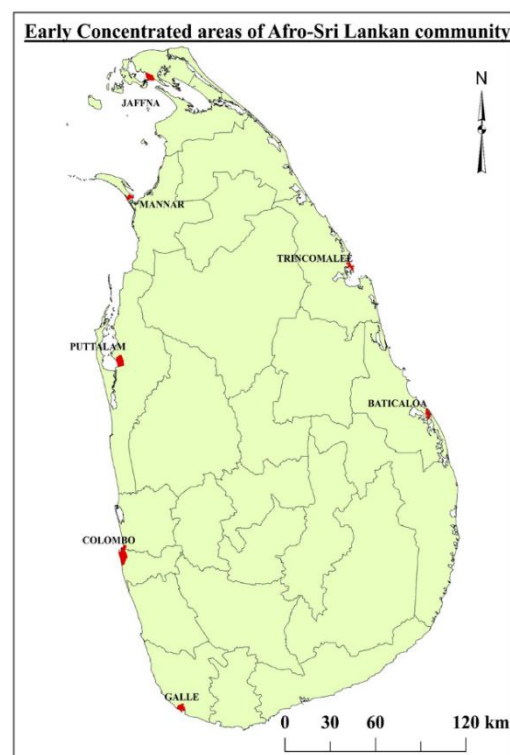
Post-positivist researches acknowledge a world that is ambiguous and variable, research that can be intuitive and holistic, researchers that can be subjective and collaborative, methods that can be inductive and exploratory and findings that can be ideographic and qualitative (Leary, 2004:8). Therefore this research is a 'Post-positivist' research in humanistic geography, because this research conducted as part of a subjective world reality. In order to study such a place, starting the research framework with a hypothesis is impossible. Therefore, approach of this research is inductive and certainly grounded.

Study area of this research is 'Sirambiadiya' village located in the Puttalam district of the Northwestern province in Sri Lanka (See map 01). Earlier this community was concentrated in several places such as Sirambiadiya, and some locations in Puttalam, Negambo, Trincomalee, Colombo

and, Galle. However, now Sirambiadiya is the only place where this community lives at present (See map 02).



Map 1: place where the Afro-Sri Lankan community lives in Sirambiadya village



Map 2: Early concentrated areas of Afro-Sri Lankans

Typically the unit of analysis in social research are the individuals, families, groups of a community, or social artifacts. Accordingly unit of analysis of this study is the entire Afro-Sri Lankan community in the Sirambiadiya village as a whole. Total number of population in the area is 60 representing 37 males and 23 females. All they are included in to 19 families.

A field research was conducted to gather data on everyday life practices of the Afro-Sri Lankan community. Further, field research urges the need of non-availability of data particularly related to the study context. The field research was strengthened by using a set of data collection techniques including direct observations, open-ended interviews, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. During the field study, researchers were able to visit the Sirambiadiya school for observing the way and nature of the children being educated and passing through their particular formative years. Fifteen open-ended interviews were conducted by selecting at least one member from one family in the Sirambiadiya village. In addition to focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, gathering data referring diary writings of the school children, and photographs collection also were used for the analysis. The Afro-Sri Lankan community has maintained a logbook about their day today activities and researchers were able to collect some information using that log notes. A set of qualitative methods were used for data collection and analysed using qualitative techniques.

Under that, transcribed the recorded data on the same day and analyzed the data related to words, concepts, linguistic devices and non-verbal cues using thematic analysis.

### **Results and Discussion**

The term 'identity' is not new to social sciences. Identity can be conceptualized as

a way of making sense of some aspect or part of self-concept (Turner, 2004). Identity, defined simply, is that unique introduction to who am I or who we are? The outcome never conforms on one 'right' way. It differs from person to person, place to place and object to object. People's identity is conceptualized who they are or what sort of people they are, and how they related to others (Hogg and Abrans, 1958). Group identity is formulated emphasizing the invariable heterogeneity of the notion of identity.

Identity is one of the most significant dimensions of social and spatial analysis. Simply, identity concerns the psychological sense of self, its nature and importance, and how it is related to others, and how such links shape the boundaries of human experiences (Turner, 2004). Identity simultaneously reflects personal phenomenon and social phenomena as an aggregate. Further it shapes individual behaviours and collective behaviour as identity creates a collective consciousness on what they inherited as identity. Everyday life reproduces and reproduces each and everyone's identity (Warf, 1956). Identities are naturally embodied with several social and cultural fundamentals. Social construction describes this as an embodied identity which is related to historical experiences. The body is also the most personalized form of politics. Ethics, morality, personality, and even disciplines are defined in various ways but speak of identity all the same.

The notion of exhibits that identities are always social, not merely individual, with roles such as class, gender, age, and ethnicity factors. Some argue that in a social world, identities are constituted according to historical significance. Yet, it is understood that all formulations are historically significant and mostly rooted in the everyday life of people in their class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. Therefore

identity reproduces the way of everyday life. On the other hand, everyday life reproduces each and everyone's identity (Warf, 1956). This community is commonly known as "kaffirs" due to historical significance as migrated community from Mozambique and of course, that is the so called unique identity which is being culturally constructed for them in the local context.

The explorations of identity led researchers to analyze its significance from multiple sides by its diasporas, disabilities, citizenships, and/or emotions. All of these dimensions include a specific identity. Thus, the term 'identity' is not merely a static phenomena. Changes are taken place always with identity, but what should be understood as important is its act of reproducing our everyday life practices. From ancient times, the Afro-Sri Lankan community went by several names. Some records were written by explorers and travelers also detailed about this community. Earlier they were known as '*Kaapiri*' or '*Kaffirs*'. The etymology of the term 'Kaffir' points to a non-believer, and a non-Muslim person. However, members of the community specified that they don't allow themselves to be called *Kaffir*. They always try to assert themselves as Afro-Sri Lankan. Therefore, it shows that the identity that they crave is one calling them Afro-Sri Lankans. The records in '*The Ceylon directory calendar and the compendium of useful information for 1883*', by A.M Ferguson called this community as "*Caffers*". Moreover, Brohier also in his work of "*The Discovering Ceylon*" noted them like this, "I cannot forget the singular picture in mind of the first visit to the kaffir colony; this small ethnic group of people was the descendants of the solidary who kept the British flag over the fortlet at Puttalam" (Brohier, 1973: 40). Largely this community is seen to be named by different names like *Kaffirs*, *Kaapiri*, *caffer* and

*Ceylon Africans*. According to the responses by the community it is noted that now they want their identity to be called Afro-Sri Lankans.

Afro-Sri Lankans constitute a small minority in a multicultural country which consists of Sinhalese, Tamils, Moors, Malays, and Burghers. The ethnic composition of contemporary Sri Lanka is Sinhalese 73.95%, Sri Lankan Tamils 12.70%, Sri Lankan Moors 7.05%, Indian Tamils 5.52%, Malays 0.32%, Burghers and others 0.20% (Department of Census and Statistics 2013). However, there is an exclusion in recording the ethnic identity of Afro-Sri Lankans. Their identity is hidden and introverted in the category of "other" in many official discourses (See table 1) i.e. the Afro-Sri Lankans are not properly mentioned as a ethnic group in the recent census. But there are other minor ethnic groups such as Malays, Chatty, Veddas, and other such minority groups are represented with their ethnic identity in the census. This marginalization and exclusion is really a gap to shove an identity under an umbrella term as blasé as 'other'. This may be because of the less number of members forcing the bureau to include them under the category of "other", but it doesn't deny the fact that this provides for them a lack of recognition when recognition is the very thing they need to consolidate their group identity within the larger society.

This Afro-Sri Lankans are apparently similar to the African people or the orthodox human race known as Nigro. Of course, the physical appearance is completely vary from the ordinary Sri Lankans including aborigians. They have big lips, curly hair, black skin, and a great height to boot. During the interview with a young member of their community, Sajith Gayan, said that he faced a lot of social and cultural consequences because of his physical appearance. He further



emphasized that the real problem occurs when he marks his identity in certain occasions. This problem, indeed, because of the contradiction created between his name and the physical appearance. His name goes with Sinhalese identity and the physical appearance looks like an African citizen. Therefore, their identity is at stake, subject to stigma, and at the mercy of compassion. As their identity creates problems in society, some have even resorted to changing their appearance to better amalgamate with larger context. During the interviews, it is proved that their new generation is hardly trying to change their appearance to more engage with others who are non-Afro-Sri Lankans.

Afro-Sri Lankans are marginalized spatially as a community in their creation of a separate space, which they call “watta”, amidst other villages. Adding to this is how the outsiders perceive and term their life-space; for they too call their home-space as “*Kaapiri Watta*”. While conducting interviews with some outsiders, they made connections to the Afro-Lankan space via the term “*Kaapiri Watta*”. This proves how this particular community is marginalized within a space created and propagated by those who aren’t self-same. They come to call themselves ‘*watta*’ as it is what is used to describe them. The research found that how difficult them to capitalized their

identity over the cultural hegemony that confines them to the term, ‘*watta*’.

There is an organization called “Afro-Sri Lankan Society” which concerns itself with the social needs of the members among Afro-Sri Lankan community. The particular society maintains a music band and their music identity is known as the “*Ceylon African Maanja Group*”. This music tradition sometimes encompasses and described the group identity of this community and they try to exhibit their cultural identity by fighting back with the stigma placed on them. Of course, this music tradition and the Creole culture has a certain recognition at present and some performance were taken in to the national context.

Society realizes how ontologically asphyxiating it is to be reprimanded for how someone is born. This community is denied recognition and hence, acceptance simply because they apparently do not look self-same. They are stuck in their own entity in Sri Lanka, held by the gaze that wants of them to remain exotic and the ‘other’. So who are they? What is their real identity? True that they are of Portuguese descent, hailing from Mozambique and speaking “*Maanja*”, their language, but this identity of past cannot be their reality now that a lot of mixing and cultural infusion has happened. (Jayasooriya, 2003).

Table 01: Number of the population by ethnicity 1911 to 2012  
 Source: Department of census and Statistics

Ethnicity	Year									
	1911	1921 <sup>(4)</sup>	1931 <sup>(5)</sup>	1946	1953	1963	19471	1981	2001 <sup>(3)</sup>	2012
Sri Lanka	4,106.40	4,498.60	5,306.00	6,657.30	8,097.90	10,582.00	12,689.90	14,846.80	16,929.70	20,359.40
Low-Country Sinhalese	1,716.90	1,927.10	2,216.20	2,902.50	3,469.50	4,470.30	5,425.80	10,974.4 <sup>(2)</sup>	13,876.2 <sup>(2)</sup>	15,250.1 <sup>(2)</sup>
Up-Country Sinhalese	998.6	1,089.10	1,256.80	1,718.00	2,147.20	3,042.60	3,705.50			
Sri Lanka Tamil	528	517.3	598.9	733.7	884.7	1,164.70	1,424.00	1,886.90	732.1	2,269.10
Indian Tamil	531	602.7	818.5	780.6	974.1	1,123.00	1,174.90	818.7	855	839.5
Sri Lanka Muslim	233.9	251.9	289.6	373.6	464	626.8	828.3	1,046.90	1,339.30	1,892.60
Indian Muslim	32.7	33	36.3	35.6	47.5	55.4	27.4	(1)	(1)	(1)
European Burgher & Eurasian	7.6	8.1	9.2	5.4	6.5	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)
Malay	26.7	29.4	32.3	41.9	46	45.9	45.4	39.4	35.3	38.2
Sri Lanka Chetty	13	13.4	16	22.5	25.4	33.4	43.5	47	54.8	44.1
Bharatha	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	10.8	5.6
Veddhas	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2.2	1.7
Other	5.3	4.5	5.2	2.4	0.8	0.4	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)
	12.7	22	27.4	41.1	32.2	19.5	15.5	28.4	23.9	18.2

### Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine the challenges of the social identity of the Afro Sri Lankan community living in Sirambiadiya. To undertake this, pioneering works of Edward Soja's notion of third space and concept of marginalization was used as the theoretical foundation of the study. Edward Soja's notion of third space was instrumental in unpacking their lives and experiential world brought about by their everyday life practices. Afro-Sri Lankan community is an ethnic minority that lacks and faces challenges in official recognition. Therefore their ethnic identity is misled or hidden in the category of 'other' in many formal confirmations in the state. Afro Sri Lankans' intensity of exclusion is considerably higher than the other ethnic minorities. They are the only people who live in Sri Lanka of its kind and spatially trapped in a small geographical entity.

According to the third space perspective, they are both spacially and culturally marginalized and identity is reformulated as a hybrid community. Instead of being ill-defined by names used to call them in the days of yore, they now argue for a new identity as 'Sri Lankan Africans'. This identity based on their social identification is constantly changing and remaking, in making their identity politics a contestable issue in their everyday lives.

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