The Potential Role of Arts and Culture in the Reconciliation Process in Post-Conflict Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Over a decade after the end of the conflict in Sri Lanka that saw mass atrocities being committed, reconciliation remains elusive. Traditional processes alone are inadequate in transforming relationships of antagonism into relationships of mutual trust and, traditional processes alone remain ineffective in achieving reconciliation among people who have experienced severe trauma and protracted marginalisation. This paper will examine the academic evidence for the potential role that arts and culture can play towards peacebuilding and reconciliation in post-conflict Sri Lanka. Looking at illustrative examples of the value of arts and culture in other post-conflict settings this paper will argue that to achieve sustainable peace adding a cultural component to peacebuilding is vital. By highlighting how responses, attitudes and behaviours can be transformed through arts and culture, this paper will explore how the introduction of strategic arts-based programmes with local content can have a significant impact on breaking barriers and stereotypes, recognise different identities and acknowledge loss and suffering thereby strengthening the community as a whole. This paper invites practitioners and policymakers in the reconciliation and dialogue space to consider the different ways in which the arts and culture can be used to effectively promote reconciliation in post-conflict Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Arts and culture; ethnic wars; peacebuilding; post-conflict Sri Lanka; reconciliation.
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1.   Introduction

In 1948, the island nation of Sri Lanka had a relatively peaceful transfer of power from its colonial rulers to the local government and upon attaining independence the country was expected to flourish among its newly liberated South Asian counterparts (DeVotta, 2004). However, the ethnic conflict that soon engulfed Sri Lanka is one of the world's most violent and protracted secessionist movements since the end of the Second World War (DeVotta, 2006). Sri Lanka's armed conflict emerged against the backdrop of deepening discrimination and marginalisation of the country's minorities, particularly the Tamils. The 30-year war between the Government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), together with earlier insurgencies were marked by persistent and grave human rights violations and abuses by both parties, including extrajudicial killing, widespread enforced disappearances, arbitrary

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detention, torture and sexual violence affecting Sri Lankans from all communities (Deane, 2016). Although the LTTE were defeated in 2009 the underlying ethnic divides which propelled the rebel movement are far from being resolved. Currently one of the main challenges facing post-conflict Sri Lanka is to promote reconciliation and relationship building among all communities in the country.

Post-conflict successive leaderships in Sri Lanka have attempted to achieve peacebuilding through the establishment of numerous commissions of inquiries (COIs) aimed at investigating grave human rights violations committed by both the insurgents and the government. However, to date none of them have yielded any concrete results (Walton, 2013). In fact, as recently as March 2021 the international community has raised concerns that Sri Lanka's lack of accountability for past crimes could result in a resurgence of the same kind of violations and abuse that triggered past armed conflict (Schlein, 2021).

By looking at the potential role of arts and culture in reconciliation in Sri Lanka, this paper will argue that for the achievement of sustainable peace adding a cultural component to peacebuilding is just as important as other efforts at post-conflict peacebuilding and reconciliation (Piotrowska, 2015). By highlighting how responses, attitudes and behaviours in relation to the conflict can be transformed through arts and culture, this paper will explore how the introduction of strategic arts-based programmes with local content can have a significant impact on breaking barriers and stereotypes, recognise and tolerate different identities and acknowledge loss and suffering thereby strengthening the community as a whole.

This hypothesis is based on critical literature developed by various scholars (Lederach, 1997; Premaratna & Bleaker, 2010) in particular by O Richmond (2008), who elaborates on the need for a bottom-up approach. Richmond (2008, p 163-164) further writes that traditional peacebuilding leaves room for interpretation because of the coercive top-down nature of interventions and suggests that not enough attention is being paid to the underlying causes of conflict. Consequently, current efforts towards peacebuilding are not entirely inclusive and lack the understanding of local dynamics.

Richmond further criticises the current approach to peacebuilding by writing that "in many post-violence environments local perceptions of the liberal peace project and its state-building focus indicate it to be ethically bankrupt, subject to double standards, coercive and conditional, a-cultural, unconcerned with the social welfare, and unfeeling and insensitive towards its subjects" (Richmond, 2009, p 558). Other scholars have criticised the liberal approach to peacebuilding which rests on the promotion of democracy and other processes associated with modern state building but, which often overlook the needs of the communities (International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life, 2011). Cycles of violence are then perpetuated because externally imposed values and aspirations do not coincide with the everyday needs of the local population (Galtung, 1976). In recent years a new wave of study has emerged within the peacebuilding field which underlines the importance of community-based approaches specifically, the positive impact of arts and culture on reconciliation in post-conflict settings (Cohen, 2005).

1.1   Problem statement

Reconciliation in the aftermath of violent conflict especially where it has involved mass atrocities, divided communities and destroyed lives, is an immensely difficult challenge. Rational or traditional processes alone are inadequate in transforming relationships of antagonism into relationships of mutual trust and, rational processes alone remain ineffective in restoring the capacities required for reconciliation among people who have experienced severe trauma and protracted marginalisation.

1.2   Rationale for this study

A major reason as to why many conflicts prove so difficult to resolve is that they are often driven by issues of identity and culture as much as by competition over resources or social and economic grievances (Baily, 2020). The use of arts and culture is a growing area of interest to academics, practitioners and professionals working in the area of conflict resolution and peacebuilding (Cohen, 2005). Trying to engender feelings of trust amidst such ethnic conflicts is always going to be challenging. However, artistic and cultural practices have successfully been shown to help bridge the gap between differing cultural perspectives (Lebaron, 2003).

Indeed, peacebuilding scholars and practitioners are increasingly recognising that sustainable peace requires more than cognitive, rational engagement (Naidu-Silverman, 2015). Cultural work and the arts is being acknowledged as a credible platform for peacebuilding through which relationships can be transformed in the aftermath of violence as well as building the capacities required for sustainable peace (Cohen, 2005). There is a recognition that using these media can provide a creative and safe space for the individual to express what they have experienced or witnessed which otherwise they cannot articulate through the spoken word (Kim, Kollontai & Yore, 2015).

The international community has also come to recognise that there are innovative approaches to global security and stability. In its Sustaining Peace Agenda, the United Nations (UN) calls for a greater focus on the prevention of conflict and a greater role for civil society organisations in peacebuilding after conflict (UN General Assembly, 2015). The arts and culture therefore merits exploration in the search for new solutions to addressing post-conflict fragility and reconciliation in Sri Lanka.

1.3   Aims and approach

As furtherance of this trend, this papers' main aim is to evaluate the potential role of arts and cultural work as a tool to contribute to peacebuilding and the reconciliation process in post-conflict Sri Lanka. This paper examines the academic evidence for the role that arts and culture can play as part of a spectrum of interventions linking culture, peacebuilding and reconciliation. This examination derives from a desktop review of the current literature by searching multiple databases to identify relevant academic publications, books, journal articles, programme evaluations and other influential sources, including data from peer-reviewed journals. In addition, some documents included in this review consist of grey literature publications such as newspaper articles and reports by the UN, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Human Rights Council (HRC). In order to meet the objectives of this study this article draws from existing frameworks on the potential of arts and culture in reconciliation processes. The discussion thereof together with the main results of the reviews are included in this article to strengthen one's understanding of the potential role of arts and culture to the peacebuilding process.

In order to gain context this article's approach will begin by looking at the Sri-Lankan civil war in brief, followed by an analysis of key terms like reconciliation, arts and culture. This is important to gain a common understanding of certain terminology and how these terms will be presented in this research. This paper will then examine Sri Lanka's post-conflict efforts at peacebuilding with the intended purpose of understanding the reasons why these efforts have failed in its attempt at reconciliation. Subsequently, the role of arts and culture in peacebuilding and reconciliation will be analysed, followed by a brief cautionary analysis of the potential of arts and culture to exacerbate conflict through propaganda. This paper will then advocate for a strategic-based arts and cultural agenda to be included in any reconciliation policy or response plan to post-conflict reconciliation. The conclusion will then summarise the potential benefits of arts and culture in the reconciliation process for Sri Lanka.

1.4   Knowledge gap

Despite a growing body of evidence showcasing arts and culture as a 'go-to' peacebuilding tool, which has the potential to overcome many of the problems that more traditional responses to legacies of violence and atrocity face (Baily, 2020), and despite calls for the arts to be 'mainstreamed' into peacebuilding activities, the value of arts-based reconciliation and peacebuilding is yet to be fully realised in Sri Lanka (Mary-Ann & Page, 2014). There remains a huge knowledge gap on the potential to achieve peace and reconciliation in post-conflict Sri Lanka through previously under-explored methods that go beyond traditional post-conflict means of, for example, the establishment of COIs. This paper will attempt to lessen the gap by exploring the value of arts and cultural-based reconciliation in the peacebuilding process in Sri Lanka.

1.5   Scope and limitations

This paper's particular focus is on Sri Lanka where little is known about the impact of reconciliation activities and programmes and for many, reconciliation in all its guises, still remains elusive. Whilst this paper refers to some examples of the role of arts and culture in other post-conflict countries, it is done for illustrative purposes. It is in no way meant to be exhaustive and a detailed analysis of specific

examples of arts and culture in the reconciliation process of different jurisdictions remain outside the scope of this paper.

There are two specific limitations to this study. Firstly; in the bibliographical research a limited amount of work related to the role of arts and culture in the Sri Lankan post-conflict reconciliation process was found on the recent literature. This article is therefore meant to reinforce the small amount of studies published, showing that the field is still incipient with opportunities for research. Secondly; even though this paper will look at the case of Sri Lanka in particular, it is hoped that the discussion contributes to a growing scholarly and practical awareness of how arts and culture can play a crucial role in post-conflict peacebuilding and reconciliation..

2. Terminology
2.1 Reconciliation

Reconciliation is frequently cited as a key goal of transitional justice and peacebuilding. Indeed, it is seen by some as an "absolute necessity" (Bloomfield, Barnes & Huyse, 2003, p 12). Justice, peace and reconciliation in this sense is viewed as mutually reinforcing objectives. The term "reconciliation" itself means different things to different people (Verdoolaege, 2008; Mirzaagha, 2016).

Whilst practices of and attitudes toward reconciliation is largely dependent on different personal, cultural, religious, professional and political contexts (Cohen & Yalen, 2003), it is possible to articulate a widely accepted, general understanding of the concept. Reconciliation, for the purpose of this paper means more than simply the absence of violence or the establishment of a reluctant coexistence between parties. Reconciliation here is focused on finding ways of understanding and healing a traumatic past and ensuring forgiveness or, focusing on the future by creating the basis for social repair or reconstruction (Kerr, 2017). In this sense reconciliation implies "building or rebuilding relationships today that are not haunted by the conflicts and hatreds of yesterday" (Hayner, 2003, p 161). Therefore, while the meaning of reconciliation varies across contexts and is open to interpretation by different stakeholders, reconciliation here refers to a set of deep processes designed to re-build and transform relationships steeped in hatred and mistrust into relationships of trust and trustworthiness (Cohen & Yalen, 2003). The point of reconciliation is that this happens in the context of rebuilding (or building) relationships founded on mutual respect (Bar-Tal, 2000; Worthington, 2001). Moreover, reconciliation is not about achieving a shared narrative or single truth but is fostered through tolerance of difference (Kerr, 2017).

Various scholars (Hayner, 2003; Daly & Sarkin, 2007; Verdeja, 2009; Cohen, 2003) note that for true reconciliation to be realised stakeholders at multiple levels need to; (i) address injustices, (ii) acknowledge the wrongs of the past, (iii) tackle inequalities and other root causes of the conflict, (iv) rewrite new narratives that acknowledge the truths of the past, (v) recognise the suffering of others and (vi) make available spaces for forgiveness and healing.

What this means is that the rebuilding of society in the aftermath of violence requires careful context-specific interventions. These interventions could enable societies to re-imagine new cultures of peace, justice and equality. They could also facilitate trust building, empathy and respect for others as well as create platforms for dialogue, healing and forgiveness (Naidu-Silverman, 2015). This also means that there is no single path to reconciliation.

Further defined as an "ongoing process of establishing and maintaining respectful relationships" (TRC Canada, 2015), reconciliation is conceptualised as a long-term and open-ended process in which competing and contested narratives and sometimes-paradoxical imperatives are negotiated and where competing tensions can be mediated of for example, truth versus forgiveness (mercy) and peace versus justice (Lederach, 1997). This conceptualisation of reconciliation as a process rather than an outcome and the focus on building relationships of mutual respect, that emphasises reconciliation as a dialogue, suggests a potential for alternative approaches to peacebuilding and reconciliation like the informal space/platforms of arts and culture (Kerr, 2017).

2.2 Arts and culture

The arts refers to a very wide range of human practices of creative expression, storytelling and cultural participation and includes but is not limited to visual and performing arts. The arts encompass multiple diverse and plural modes of thinking, doing and being in an extremely broad range of media

(Fraleigh, 1987). Whilst art is the expression of creativity that provides a snapshot of history and contextualises things that happen in a society, culture is more than just paintings, music, theatre or dance. Culture is seeped into all the activities and expressions that extend below the surface and unite individuals under a common sense of self (Bar-Tal, 2000). "Culture" involves multiple identities and includes the language, dress, customs, ethnicity, race, sexuality and gender that groups share (Bar-Tal, 2000). It is fluid and dynamic, overlapping and adapting, informing how we define ourselves, shaping how we perceive the world and how we enact our identities (Lebaron, 2003; Fortier, 2008; Shaheed, 2012). As LeBaron (2003, p 1) observes, "…..cultures are like underground rivers that run through our lives and relationships, giving us messages that shape our perceptions, attributions, judgements and ideas of self and other".

Since culture is linked to identity and shapes our understanding and meaning of the world, it intersects with conflict (Naidu-Silverman, 2015). In recognising that conflict is a necessary part of daily life and interactions, LeBaron (2003) highlights that when boundaries between groups are threatened, culture informs how we perceive this threat, whether we react violently to the threat and the outcome of the threat (Lebaron, 2003). Seeing that culture plays a starring role in conflict especially ethic wars, culture and conflict are therefore inextricably linked.

3.   The conflict

When Sri Lanka, formerly known as Ceylon, became independent from British rule (Seoighe, 2017), the country saw decades of ethnic tension resulting from persecution and discriminatory policies by the Sinhalese majority against the minority Tamils, culminating in a civil war in July 1983 that initially began as a low-level insurgency. In the years following independence, the Sinhalese who resented British favouritism toward Tamils during the colonial period,[2] disenfranchised Tamil migrant plantation workers from India and made Sinhala the official language (Lunn, Taylor & Townsend, 2009). The Sinhalese majority passed laws that discriminated against Tamils, particularly the Indian Tamils brought to the island by the British (Deane, 2016). In 1972, the Sinhalese changed the country's name from Ceylon and made Buddhism the nations primary religion. The adoption of the *Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948* effectively barred Indian Tamils from holding citizenship, making stateless people out of some 700,000 Tamils (Jain, 1963).[3] This Act, along with the laws that immediately followed, withheld citizenship from the Indian Tamil population, while creating a path for educated, property-owning members of the Sinhalese community to circumvent the Act to gain citizenship and it further denied Indian Tamils the right to vote (Shastri, 1999). Perceived by the Sinhala elites as an "unassimilated alien population with no long-term interest in the island", Indian Tamils were excluded from legislative reforms and constitutional protections (Shastri, 1999, pp 73-76). This view was compounded by the xenophobic fear that the Indian Tamils "would swamp the indigenous population" and still have "foreign loyalties to India" (Wolozin, 2014, p 12). It has been argued that the "cultural discrimination against minorities, like inequitable educational opportunities, legal and political constraints on the use and teaching of minority languages and constraints on religious freedoms were some of the sources of internal conflict in Sri Lanka" (Uyangoda, 2016, p 3).

Increasing anger against such discriminatory policies and practices gave rise to the LTTE in 1976 under the leadership of Velupillai Prabhakaran. The LTTE campaigned for a separate Tamil homeland in northern and eastern Sri Lanka, where most of the islands Tamils reside (Deane, 2016). Fraught relations together with "the heavy-handed response of the government to early militant tendencies among the Tamils", exacerbated existing ethnic tensions (Kanapathipillai, 2009, p 175). Consequently, after decades of gradual increasing ethnic tension, anger over the discriminatory and prejudicial measures fuelled the bloody rioting that broke out repeatedly in the following years.

The next few years saw an escalation in violence as the Tamil insurgents used car bombs, suitcase bombs and landmines against Sinhalese military and civilian targets (Szczepanski, 2019). In 1983 after the LTTE ambushed an army convoy which killed thirteen soldiers, it prompted violent reprisals against Tamil civilians by their Sinhalese neighbours. In response thereto, ethnic riots quickly broke out in the capital, Colombo and other cities triggering riots in which 2,500 Tamils died (Mehta, 2010). In 1987, India, which

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[2] Within these two groups, Sinhalese tend to be Buddhist and Tamils tend to be Hindu, displaying significant linguistic and religious divisions.
3 This was not remedied until 2003, when the Sri Lankan Parliament passed the Grant of Citizenship to Persons of Indian Origin Act 35 of 2003.

has its own Tamil population in the south, deployed a peacekeeping force but left three years later amidst escalating violence (Bose, 1994). During the ensuing conflict, the LTTE emerged as a fearsome terrorist organisation, famed for suicide bombings and the recruitment of child soldiers (Uyangoda, 2016). During that same year in 1987 the US State Department placed the LTTE on its international terror list.

In 2002, Norway brokered a cease-fire agreement between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government. However, despite the peace talks having broken down in 2003, experts posit that the fragile truce held mainly because of the devastation brought on by the 2004 tsunami (Kaplan, 2005), which caused around thirty thousand deaths on the island (Uyangoda, 2005). The August 2005 assassination of Sri Lanka's foreign minister, Lakshman Kadirgamar, reignited the conflict (Adam, 2014). For the next two years, both the government and rebels repeatedly violated the cease-fire agreement. The escalation of the conflict since 2006 has been marked by widespread human rights abuses and war crimes by both sides, including deliberate and indiscriminate attacks against civilians, hundreds of enforced disappearances, unlawful killings of aid workers, arbitrary arrests, torture and the use of child soldiers (Deane, 2016).

In January 2008, the Sri Lankan government formally withdrew from the truce, prompting Nordic monitors to pull out of the country (Bajoria, 2009). Since the end of the cease-fire, the Sri Lankan military had been trying to root out the LTTE, and in May 2009, the government claimed that it had defeated the rebels and liberated the country (Gunaratna, 2012). This victory was presented as the beginning of a new era of peace, national reconciliation and development (Melegoda, 2013). However, for many of those in the north and east of the country, where the worst of the war was experienced, that harmony cannot materialise when so many scars of war remain (Candela & Aldama, 2016).

The end of the conflict was marked by a massive humanitarian crisis and grave human rights abuses of civilians by both sides (The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2009). During the conflict period approximately 65,000 people were killed and over 800,000 people displaced (Welhengama & Pillay, 2014). Additionally, during this civil war Sri Lankans suffered terrorist massacres, government security force attacks including the bombings of Tamil areas (including schools, hospitals and temples) and mass arrests of citizens who were frequently held incommunicado, routinely tortured and often killed while in detention (Hyndman, 1988; Hyndman, 1987; Leary, 1981). Thousands of children were systematically recruited and used as fighters and in other roles by the LTTE. Furthermore, Muslim and Sinhala communities were forcibly expelled from the North and civilians indiscriminately killed in terrorist attacks on public places and transport by the LTTE. Despite these serious violations, impunity prevails (Deane, 2016). According to the current discourse, despite the end of the civil war the ethnic conflict is still on-going with no war conditions and with an absence of a holistic approach to solve it (Candela & Aldama, 2016).

3.1   Current situation

Despite the end of the war and promises of reconciliation a large portion of the Tamil population remains displaced and they continue to be disenfranchised. While there are fewer political and civil rights issues, instances of torture and enforced disappearances persist even in recent years (Anandakugan, 2020). In addition, the Sri Lankan military still occupies predominantly Tamil areas designated as "high-security zones," though to a lesser extent than during the war (Anandakugan, 2020), and the government's *Prevention of Terrorism (Proscription of Extremist Organisations) Regulations No. 2 of 2021*, is designed in such a way that it currently targets mostly Tamils.

On February 3, 2021 tens of thousands of Tamils marched through the streets of Sri Lanka to demand justice and accountability for Sri Lanka's war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide and the right to remember those who gave their lives in the Tamil struggle for freedom (The Tamil Guardian, 2021). In addition, an increase of attacks against Muslims by Sinhala Buddhist militants in 2018 raised fears of a new round of communal violence and put religious minorities at risk (Johanssen, 2018). The march was therefore aimed at raising awareness of the current plight of Tamils and Muslims[4] on the island and to call upon the UN and the international community to heed calls for justice and accountability (UNCHR, 2021).

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[4] Muslims joined the protest due to the mandatory cremation policy implemented by the Government and which is a violation of their religious beliefs.

A recent report aimed at tracking Sri Lanka's current, deteriorating human rights situation warned that the failure of Sri Lanka to address past violations has significantly heightened the risk of human rights violations being repeated and it further highlighted a concerning trend over the past year of deepening impunity, increasing militarisation of governmental functions, ethno-nationalist rhetoric and intimidation of civil society (OHCHR, 2021). It is therefore crucial that to heal divisions Sri Lanka must act to create new opportunities for reconciliation whilst addressing the root causes of mistrust, hostility and fear (Mehta, 2010).

4.   Sri Lanka's efforts at peacebuilding and reconciliation

The Sri Lankan government has taken steps to address the immediate issues and the related negative consequences after the dramatic military collapse of the LTTE in various ways (Pannilage, 2017). For example; in May 2010 the Government appointed the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC), to examine the period between the failure of the ceasefire in February 2002 and the end of the armed conflict in 2009 (International Crisis Group, 2011). Following the publication by the LLRC of its final report, it was noted that the report makes sensible recommendations on governance, land issues and the need for a political solution but it did not adequately address the alleged violations of international humanitarian and human rights law. Calling for an independent investigation, the international community noted that without such an investigation, a lack of accountability and an absence of a full understanding of the nature of the violations that took place, these omissions would allow for the seeds of future conflict to fester (Human Rights Council, 2012).

A Panel of Experts (PoEs) addressing accountability was thereafter appointed in June 2010 (UN, 2010). However, despite the Panel concluding in 2011 that there were (i) credible allegations of a wide range of serious violations of international humanitarian law and human rights law by both the Government and the LTTE, some of which could amount to war crimes (OHCHR, 2021) and crimes against humanity, and having recommended (ii) an international investigation, the PoEs report was rejected by the Government (Human Rights Council, 2012; UN, 2010).

In August 2013 a commission to investigate complaints regarding missing persons was established (Paranagama Commission, 2015), but which also failed to credibly establish the truth, ensure accountability and provide redress to victims. Given the continued failure of domestic mechanisms to conduct credible investigations, in March 2014 the OHCHR undertook a comprehensive investigation (OHCHR, 2021), eventually finding that credible evidence did exist to show that both the Sri Lankan security forces and the LTTE were responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity (OHCHR, 2021). It further documented the absolute failure of domestic mechanisms, including past presidential COIs (OHCHR, 2013).

Subsequently in January 2015, a new Government made important commitments to confront the past, strengthen democratic and independent institutions and end impunity. The Government undertook to ensure justice, provide redress to victims, achieve reconciliation and undertake important legal and institutional reforms to prevent the recurrence of violations (Paranagama Commission, 2015). It renewed these commitments in two further HRC resolutions in 2017 and 2019. In the resolutions, Sri Lanka committed to "establish a judicial mechanism with a special counsel to investigate allegations of violations and abuses of human rights and violations of international humanitarian law" and affirmed that "a credible justice process should include independent judicial and prosecutorial institutions led by individuals known for their integrity and impartiality" (OHCHR, 2021, p 4). It also affirmed "the importance of participation in a Sri Lankan judicial mechanism, including the special counsel's office, of Commonwealth and other foreign judges, defence lawyers and authorized prosecutors and investigators" (OHCHR, 2021, p 5). Sri Lanka has not yet established these mechanisms.

From 2015, Sri Lanka took some steps in strengthening democratic institutions and opening up democratic space, including for civil society and the media. Of fundamental significance was the adoption of the *19th Constitutional Amendment* in April 2015, which strengthened the independence of key institutions and checks and balances on executive power. These gains were tested by the political events of 2018, specifically the Easter Sunday terrorist attacks of April 2019, which killed 277 people and injured another 592 (Gunasingham, 2019). In the aftermath, there was communal violence against the Muslim

minority leading to a state of emergency, emergency measures being implemented and the extraordinary deployment of the military.

The Government has committed to establish four crucial transitional justice mechanisms: a commission on truth, justice, reconciliation and non-recurrence; an office on missing persons; an office on reparations and a judicial mechanism with a special counsel to investigate allegations of violations of human rights and of international humanitarian law (Paranagama Commission, 2015). Neither the previous nor the current Government have as yet established the truth and reconciliation commission (TRC) or the special judicial mechanism. However, on 21 January 2021, President Rajapaksa appointed a three-member COI to assess the findings and recommendations of preceding COIs (International Commisson of Jurists, 2021).

In Sri Lanka, the transition from a conflict to post-conflict society has proven to be a long and complex process and in order to be successful it must be carried out with a clear political vision as to the direction of post-conflict Sri Lankan society (Pannilage, 2017). It is clear that nearly 12 years on from the end of the war, domestic initiatives for accountability and reconciliation have repeatedly failed to produce results, more deeply entrenching impunity and exacerbating victims' distrust in the system. Building and maintaining the trust of victims and their relatives will be essential to the success of these institutions. It is also clear that Sri Lanka remains in a state of denial about the past, with truth-seeking efforts aborted and a lack of accountability for past crimes. This has direct impact on the present and the future. There remains a very real concern that Sri Lanka's current trajectory sets the scene for the recurrence of the policies and practices that gave rise to grave human rights violations. This is in clear contravention of the Government's stated commitment to the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda (UN General Assembly, 2015). Tamil and Muslim minorities are being increasingly marginalised and excluded from the national vision and Government policy (Johanssen, 2018), while failure to give recognition to past atrocities risks generating further polarisation and violence.

4.1   A case for the arts and culture

The major challenge for Sri Lanka is to build peace and harmony in society. Post-conflict the Sri Lankan government should look not only to economic improvement and the reconstruction of infrastructure but to heal broken relationships as well. It should be noted that the term 'post- conflict' does not mean that all conflict has ended, as can be seen from the current situation in Sri Lanka. Although conflict may have officially ceased, some level of violent conflict still persists, since issues giving rise to the conflict and the atrocities committed during the conflict have not yet been appropriately addressed (Rausch, 2006).

Reconciliation measures and the measures required to confront the dynamics and structures of violence to transform them towards peace, cannot be found in institutions and organisations coming from above or abroad (Galtung, Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2002). It can however be found in broad social involvement in building peace. It is clear from the above initiatives that the absence of a shared understanding among the different constituencies on the meaning of reconciliation poses a real challenge in advancing Sri Lanka's post-conflict peacebuilding initiatives (Pannilage, 2017). This lack of clarity on the very idea of what reconciliation means to Sri Lanka adds to the contentious nature and multiplicity of responses to what reconciliation should actually entail. Peacebuilding in Sri Lanka should go beyond formal or traditional structures. Post-conflict reconciliation should also focus on social reconstruction in which social and emotional issues are addressed through platforms like the arts and culture.

Arts and culture can create a context sensitive approach to reconciliation rather than merely attempting social restoration based on idealistic principles (Herath, 2012). Until such time as traditional means alone can successfully be used toward the peacebuilding process other non-traditional methods like arts and culture should be explored.

5.   The role of arts and culture

Given the shortcomings of conventional approaches, various scholars advocate for creative approaches to reconciliation. Cohen for example writes that the arts are very well placed to address "the challenges of reconstructing... lives and adapting to change" because they engage people in sensory experiences that capture attention for a fixed period of time and space, and they "mediate tensions"

that create reciprocity among people where there was none before (Cohen, 2005, p 10). The importance of transforming attitudes into more peaceful interaction is a long-term process that requires changing the way people think about themselves and their former "enemies".

The research base on the contribution of arts and culture in post-conflict reconstruction, peacebuilding and reconciliation is growing (Cohen, 2005; Naidu-Silverman, 2015; Breed, 2008; British Council, 2012; Chu, 2010; Grant, 2017; Preis & Mustea, 2013). A review of the current literature found that arts has a particular ability to engage people in a way that resonates with their local society (Baily, 2020). This is why community-based activities that promote dialogue and respect for difference are crucial to the long-term success of peacebuilding efforts (Premaratna & Bleaker, 2010). However, although artists and cultural workers are already having an impact in many conflict regions throughout the world, there is little recognition for their work among policymakers and peacebuilding practitioners (Brandeis University, 2021).

The following discussions will analyse the transformative role that arts and culture can play in reconciliation and how it can contribute to moving Sri Lanka out of deep-seated patterns of conflict (Premaratna & Bleaker, 2010). This is then followed by a cautionary tale of how arts and culture can be used as propaganda to further political goals, if not utilised for the good of the entire community.

5.1   Breaking language and other barriers

In the aftermath of violence and loss individuals emerge traumatised and unable to verbalise or make sense of the many emotions that they experience. Edkins argues that for survivors coming out of situations of gross human rights violations, firstly; there is no language that is able to convey the trauma that they feel and secondly; because language gains its meaning through family and community, and since violence destroys the very social fabric of life, everyday verbal language is inadequate to relay the extent of trauma and the depth of emotions that survivors experience (Edkins, 2003).

The benefit for reconciliation of working with culture and the arts is that they allow people who have experienced severe trauma to become aware of and communicate in ways that are less threatening than ordinary speech. In Sri Lanka for example, the intolerance towards the Tamil language and culture was a major contributor to the civil war. It is argued that the arts can transcend language and allow for non-verbal communication (British Council, 2012). Music, dance, photography and paintings can be appreciated by humans, regardless of what language they speak (Sandoval, 2016). In peacebuilding initiatives, the arts can embody reciprocity to encourage connectivity and mutual understanding and it can be used to facilitate engagement in a non-coercive manner that allows conflicting communities to address their differences (Cohen, 2003).

In other conflict regions around the world like Colombia, Syria and Rwanda research has demonstrated how arts and cultural programmes can be adapted to local contexts and used to engage communities in their own cultural languages (Baily, 2020). The research conducted highlights the strength of arts and cultural programmes as a medium to peacebuilding by giving dignity to the oppressed and exploited communities and enabling cross-cultural communication (Lederach, 2005). The use of metaphor and of visual material enables engagement while creating enough distance to prevent re-traumatisation (Wise & Nash, 2012). In this way artistic interventions have the potential to fill a gap which everyday language cannot and that is to portray the extent of trauma and the depth of emotions that survivors experience (Edkins, 2003).

5.2   Breaking down stereotypes

The arts also present an opportunity for conflicting parties to meet in a neutral, positive and creative context. Art can break down stereotypes and the barriers of mistrust between adversarial communities, paving the way for reconciliation. For example; in Sri Lanka the Tamils associate the Sinhalese with an oppressive state and a brutal military apparatus. The Sinhalese, by contrast, see the Tamils as a disruptive and dangerous terrorist group.[5] These antagonistic attitudes become insinuated into the day-to-day ways in which people articulate their views and interact with others (Richmond, 2005). The resulting stereotypes act to continuously fuel conflict and dehumanise the enemy (Cohen,

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[5] These extreme examples are used as a point of analysis here and it is acknowledged that the range of attitudes and behaviours of Sri Lankans cannot be reduced to these extreme positions regardless of the context.

2003). Whilst breaking down stereotypes and deep-seated antagonisms will be a long and arduous process, it can be a start in acknowledging the deep hurts of a society ravaged by ethnic conflict.

With their approach to and understanding of peace and the relational processes through which that understanding is developed, the Sri Lankan theatre group, Theatre of the People; *Jana Karaliya* in Sinhalese or *Makkal Kalari* in Tamil; provides an example of how to successfully break down stereotypes (Premaratna, 2018). The *Jana Karaliya* is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious theatre group which was established in 2004 and has been touring the island with the objective of promoting mutual understanding, tolerance and trust within and among the communities. Living and working together as a multi-ethnic group, their notion of peace is largely based on coexistence and collaboration (Richmond, 2005). Their performances and experiences show that it is very possible to showcase personal experiences with conflict and which are then transformed into narratives that are less vengeful and more accepting of others (Premaratna, 2018).

Their experience has also highlighted the importance of placing local actors at the heart of programmes, from design to implementation stage (Richmond, 2005). Projects based around grassroots actors and local culture is seen to be more acceptable to the communities and will be more effective in reconciliation. Local ownership is particularly important in the highly politicised context of civil wars, to avoid the risk of projects being compromised through co-option by state or non-state actors involved in the conflict (Baily, 2020).

5.3   Helps the community to grieve

Arts and culture create a unique medium to express the pain of loss and war, share the burden and potentially begin to heal from it (Hutchison & Bleiker, 2008). Many forms of art can circumnavigate language and cultural differences. Campaigns to reduce violence and support recovery after conflict have used a variety of approaches including humour, music, dance, visual art, written and theatre arts, museum exhibits and interactive and temporal displays (Baily, 2020). For example; dance has been cited as a reconciliation activity in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (Piotrowska, 2015) and serves to create a sense of shared, rather than individual, suffering. At their best, these efforts can address the loss of dignity along with feelings of fear, mourning and mistrust that people experience (Long & Brecke, 2003). At the same time, they show the need to seek justice, the hope for a shared future and efforts aimed at breaking down stereotypes. Seeing the humanity in opposing groups is essential to building bridges after conflict.

In Burundi, Ghana and South Africa, countries that have seen their own share of prolonged violence, genocide and conflict, drummers spoke about the power of drumming to create feelings of equanimity in the aftermath of loss and to sustain relationships across ethnic divisions (Slachmuijlder, 2005). Lena, in her research carried out in Rwanda indicates that drummers have consistently given testimony to the catharsis and transformation that they experience within the drumming circle (Slachmuijlder, 2005). Nicholas further describes how people were able to access and express their feelings about the genocide through the bounded form of a drumming performance (Djanie, 2003-2004). These experiences show how the non-representational sound and rhythm of the drum can be both a cathartic expression of painful feelings for the individual drummer and a means of communicating solidarity between the drummers (Yalen, 2013).

Other research has shown how cultural workers adapt traditional rituals to help communities grieve losses (Huyse, 2008). Whilst musicians create opportunities for wordless collaborations across differences, visual artists construct physical spaces where the histories and cultures of opposing groups can be validated and shared (Doyle, 2017) and theatre helps people from communities in conflict develop more nuanced understandings of their own and each other's narratives. As an instrument in trauma healing for example, the arts and culture help to acknowledge and grieve losses and to positively imagine a different future. It can be a place of truth telling, testimony and taking responsibility (McPherson, Mamattah, Moore, Cifuentes, & Moualla, 2018). It can bring together individuals from opposing sides of any conflict, break down physical and mental barriers, help create empathy and contribute to reconciliation.

The work required for reconciliation necessitates revisiting painful memories, mourning losses and acknowledging harms which can be extremely difficult and since cultural and artistic forms rely on symbols, metaphors and abstraction, it is well suited for this indirect approach to difficult subjects.

5.4 Arts and culture give identity

As a vehicle for identity and meaning, culture and art shape perceptions, judgments and ideas about what constitutes '*us and them*'. The unique power of aesthetic forms of expression and creative activity can help to challenge fixated, destructive patterns of behaviour and thought as well as to transform stereotypes and prejudices about *the other*, which can be deeply engraved in the collective memory of a group (Yalen, 2013).

For example; research has highlighted how theatre has been a part of Rwanda's efforts to build a new relationship and shared national identity (Baily, 2020). Rwanda is a notable example of where cultural programmes drawing on shared cultural heritage have been central to the government's efforts to create a unified Rwandan identity and heal ethnic divisions exacerbated by the conflict (Bentrovato, 2015).

In addition, Syria's sectarianising of the conflict has damaged traditional values of co-existence between Syria's majority and minority communities and disrupted the sense of a common Syrian culture and identity. A number of projects like theatre, dance and musicals have been used to foster trust between different communities and help them build a stronger sense of belonging (Aubrey, Aubrey, Brodrick, & Simpson, 2016). Art and culture can therefore help communities reflect upon existing patterns of thought and behaviour and provoke a culture of internal reflection.

5.5 Arts therapy around the world

With the integration of art in many recovery efforts, best practices are emerging. A review of the literature has shown how the role of arts and culture can assist in repairing the damage that conflict does to the social fabric (Baily, 2020). One research has highlighted how music has been a source of unity during Colombia's difficult transition to peace after decades of internal conflict (Ubaldo & Hintjens, 2020). Other reports showcase how after the 1994 genocide that killed almost a million people, Rwanda has used art in its national reconciliation effort, including film, music, crafts, architecture and theatre (Chu, 2010). Theatre has also played a large part in Rwanda's efforts to build a new relationship and shared national identity between the different sides (Smith & Webb, 2011).

In 2018, the University of the West of Scotland commemorated the 25-year anniversary of the devastating violence in Rwanda by conducting a case study to determine the impact of post-conflict cultural activities on peace (McPherson, Mamattah, Moore, Cifuentes & Moualla, 2018). In these case studies researchers ascertained that activities fostering understanding through deep cultural exchange in the arts offered a neutral ground for mutual understanding more than explicit peacebuilding. A shared creative expression provided more of a common ground than a direct addressing of issues related to the conflict. These programmes saw the arts as having benefits by improving community cohesion and resilience.

In another study, a theatre project between Theatre without Borders and Brandeis University used 14 case studies (Brandeis University, 2014) of performance and peacebuilding in various international conflict regions (Remond-Tiedrez, 2019). They focused on the contributions of performance and highlighted the need to create a space where the conflict can be examined but with deep cultural knowledge and understanding of the nature of conflicts. They found that it was a delicate operation to delve into the pain of conflict but that participants need to internalise and consider how they can take that healing back to their communities. In Syria, arts-therapy and theatre initiatives for street children have been used to help process the trauma of conflict and build a stronger sense of belonging (Hakki, 2018).

In South Africa, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation's projects on Memory, Arts, and Culture speak to the importance of "democratising the narrative" after centuries of colonialism and apartheid (Doyle, 2017). Reconciliation at the local level involves writing new histories from the perspective of historically marginalised populations and reinvigorating interest in indigenous performing arts. The stories are then converted into cathartic performances. As an example; the Baxter Theatre's production of "The Fall", performed by University of Cape Town alumni depicted the diverse views and actions around the #RhodesMustFall student movements that were fighting for the decolonisation of higher education (UCT Film Society, 2016). The production efficiently captured many sides of the same debate.

Overall, research suggests that the arts are impactful in helping communities rebuild after a conflict. Arts and cultural programmes are most successful when they engage in a deep understanding of local and cultural traditions and link to wider reconciliation and recovery efforts (Baily, 2020). Approaches that involve art and culture can play a role in building links between culture, peacebuilding and reconciliation (Hughes, 2019).

5.6   Negative effects of the role of the arts in peacebuilding and reconciliation

It must be noted however that whilst the arts can provide a 'creative pathway' to reconciliation, breaking silences, transforming relationships, communicating across cultural divides and providing a means of dealing with trauma and restoring human dignity (Rush & Simic, 2014), at times arts and culture have been used to undermine security and stability and pursue violent, nationalist and other agendas (Grant, 2017; McCoy, 2009; Gourevich, 2000).

For example; arts was used by Nazi Germany during the World War where creative posters were distributed widely and that depicted the allied forces as the source of evil, which then encouraged many patriotic Germans to join the fight (David, 2005). The arts were used here as an instrument of political propaganda and inflamed the political sentiment of the masses. The propaganda was used to manipulate human emotions by displaying facts selectively. In addition, broadcasts were emitted across Germany with powerful language and speeches that were designed to legitimise and promote Nazi activities. Nazi propaganda was especially successful as it tapped into existing political culture and beliefs (Allen, 1970). Hitler himself in "*Mein Kampf*" (My struggle) claimed that "All propaganda must be presented in a popular form and must fix its intellectual level so as not to be above the heads of the least intellectual of those to whom it is directed…………The art of propaganda consists precisely in being able to awaken the imagination of the public through an appeal to their feelings, in finding the appropriate psychological form that will arrest the attention and appeal to the hearts of the national masses" (Hitler, 1939, chp 6)

Art with a political or hidden agenda can be very dangerous. Where it is used as propaganda, the arts can worsen divisions between adversarial groups and it can lead to re-traumatising communities that have previously suffered from violence (Baily, 2020).

The transformative power of the arts lies in artistic integrity. Artistic integrity is achieved where the arts are free from political agendas and where the aim is for the greater good of every community. The idea is that arts and cultural programmes should be used to heal, not to reopen old wounds. Where there are agendas other than reconciliation and transformation for examples, the potential of an artist's work for peacebuilding is severely compromised. These risks can be minimised through collaboration and careful consideration of the cultural nuances of each community in a conflict situation. If two artists from opposing societies can collaborate on a peacebuilding project, the chances of success are greatly improved (Premaratna, 2019).

In summary, solutions to various forms of conflict, whether political, religious, environmental or educational, will require creative approaches in the future. Arts-based peacebuilding initiatives can help communities to identify the source of conflict and to craft appropriate solutions for conflict resolution and reconciliation. The academic evidence demonstrates the particular value of arts and cultural programmes in supporting reconciliation in post-conflict contexts, whilst also stressing the potential for negative effects under certain conditions. Art and cultural activities have as much potential to build peace and facilitate processes of reconciliation as they do to fuel cultures of violence and conflict (Baily, 2020). For example; works of art that are inclusive and focus on transformation and healing will have the concomitant effect of transformation and healing, whilst works that are divisive will create tension and intolerance, which becomes a breeding ground for the possibility of further conflict arising. It is also important to engage in collective works of art as they are participatory in nature and focuses on community level affirmation of past suffering (Clarke, 2019). This will help to transcend various societal barriers.

6.   Policy considerations

To bring about sustainable peace and transformation in all of Sri Lanka there must be significant change in policy. The Sri Lankan government's attitude of impunity towards those that committed atrocities and their lack of accountability must change. There must be an acknowledgement of the harms

done and changes to all policies and laws that have the potential to lead to further conflict. In addition, given culture's important role in these conflicts, what is required is an inclusive development system whereby post-conflict response policies make explicit provision for the arts and culture in the reconciliation process. Such policy work can provide impact at scale through working with government to integrate cultural policies into regional and national-level development strategies.

Unless policies are developed with art and culture as an integral part of peacebuilding, Sri Lanka may find itself consistently entangled in a net of complexity, limited by their own rose-tinted lenses. Arts and culture can be utilised as a key tool for disentangling and managing multi-layered, cultural conflicts. It therefore becomes important to include arts and culture in response or policy plans with the aim of reconciliation. If strategically harnessed within a policy with the goal of rebuilding a just and peaceful society, arts and culture can indeed contribute to lasting peace and reconciliation.

7.   Conclusion

The armed conflict in Sri Lanka may have formally ended in 2009, but its root causes still remain. This is becoming increasingly apparent from recent reports on progressively rising tensions amongst the different ethnic groups. Whilst the Government in post-conflict peacebuilding processes have established and proceeded with various traditional initiatives like the establishment of COIs and the LLRC, it has been unsuccessful in achieving concrete peace, stability and reconciliation.

It is becoming clearer that Sri Lanka needs an approach to peacebuilding that addresses the ground level societal issues and conflict which would also translate to policies and system changes. Since there is a growing acknowledgement of the value of arts and culture in the peacebuilding process, policies and system changes must include a cultural component to peacebuilding. Indeed, this paper has shown how arts and culture are just as important as other efforts at post-conflict peacebuilding and reconciliation.

Evidence has shown that in various post-conflict settings strategic arts-based peacebuilding and reconciliation interventions have flourished. In this context, this research has outlined four areas where arts and culture can help with reconciliation and peacebuilding. These areas are breaking barriers, helping communities grieve, giving identity and breaking stereotypes. Although far from exhaustive, this paper documents a few illustrative examples of what has been accomplished by art and culture in reconciliation to bring some form of peace and acceptance in conflict countries. It has highlighted how artists, practitioners and institutions are harnessing the transformative potential of the arts and cultural interventions to engage communities in post-conflict settings in order to build relationships, create safe spaces, to catalyse dialogue and to support healing. Additional examples referred to in this paper has further highlighted practitioners and communities using arts and cultural programmes in conflict affected contexts around the world in both indigenous and multi-faceted ways.

Despite these approaches being as diverse as the artists and community members who design them, some commonalities exist. Arts and culture have a unique value in healing, communicative and reconciliatory roles. It can be used to articulate emotions and to learn from others. Arts and culture can inspire and facilitate collaboration. The beauty of collaboration is that it is inclusive in nature and such initiatives can allow messages to more easily resonate with the broader community setting the stage for reconciliation.

Whether examining music and stereotypes among the Rwandan and Syrian communities, grieving and dance in the DRC, oppression and social inequality in South Africa, drumming and political upheaval in Ghana and Burundi, intra-cultural collaboration in Sri Lanka, or cultural identity among vulnerable populations in Columbia, it is clear that people from all over the world rely on the power of art and culture to preserve, heal, reconcile and build peace. To be effective though, the inclusion of arts and culture towards the reconciliation process should form part of a formal policy in order to show true commitment towards inclusivity and peacebuilding efforts. This paper therefore invites practitioners and policymakers in the dialogue and reconciliation space to consider the different ways in which the arts and culture can be used to promote reconciliation in post-conflict Sri Lanka.

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