

Religious Nationalism at a Sufi Shrine in Sri Lanka

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Tuesday, 19 November 2024

1:30–3:00 pm (Japan Time)

**Tonantei (Room 201),
Inamori Center, CSEAS, Kyoto University**



Frank J. Korom

Professor Emeritus of Religion
and Anthropology,
Boston University



Abstract

The rise of Sri Lankan Buddhist nationalism has been growing slowly since the end of the protracted civil war between the government and the secessionist Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Now that hostilities between Sinhala Buddhists and Tamil Hindus have declined, the new target of Buddhist nationalism is Islam. Although violence against the island state's Muslim minority dates back to a pogrom in 1915, there is a current push to reclaim sacred Islamic sites by arguing that Buddhist monuments were destroyed in order to erect Muslim ones. My presentation will focus on the Sufi shrine of Dafthar Jailani, which is located in the southwestern portion of the island on the southern escarpment of the Kandyan Hills known as Kuragala, roughly twenty-two kilometers from the town of Balangoda in Sabaragamuwa Province. Named after Abdul Qadir Jilani, the so-called "saint of Baghdad," the Sufi shrine has become contested terrain in recent years, despite a long and officially recognized history of its importance as a trading and pilgrimage route for Muslims visiting the island from the Middle East, since it was a stop along the way to both Ratnapura (the center of gem trading) and Adam's Peak (the place where the first man fell to Earth from Paradise, according to Muslim belief). A Sinhala Buddhist nationalistic group known as the Bodu Bala Sena ("Buddhist Strength Society") has been actively engaged in reclaiming the site and has already started the process of dismantling it. I argue that the phenomenon of systematically targeting Sufi shrines for destruction has become more politically charged since the end of the civil war, using "national heritage" as a rallying cry to bolster Buddhist majority claims.

Bio



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Frank J. Korom is Professor Emeritus of Religion and Anthropology at Boston University. He also holds an adjunct appointment at Harvard University and co-edits the journal *Asian Ethnology* based at the Anthropological Institute of Nanzan University. A South Asian specialist by training, he has conducted extensive fieldwork throughout the region, as well as in the diaspora. In addition, he nurtures a secondary interest in the Tibetan diaspora and modern Tibetan studies. Korom was awarded a Humboldt Forschungspreis in 2021, which is sponsoring his periodic stays at the University of Heidelberg's South Asia Institute. He is currently researching Sri Lankan Sufism and continuing his ongoing research on a variety of topics in West Bengal.

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