

ISA ONLINE GUEST LECTURE

POLITICAL FACTIONALISM, RITUAL AND POST-DISASTER SECURITY IN SRI LANKA

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Based on fieldwork in southern Sri Lanka between 2005 and 2013, this paper provides an analytical account of the bahiravā puja in southern Sri Lanka, a ritual aimed at the expulsion of spirits of the dead [prēta] from land. I argue that the widespread resurgence of the ritual following the Asian tsunami of 2004 provides a platform for local villagers (Sinhalese) to establish political alliances in a socio-political landscape fractured by the impacts of the tsunami event and the policies implemented by the state in response to the disaster. In this regard, the ritual also serves as an act of resistance to the rapid and unchecked development of village land by foreigners and Sinhalese from other towns in Sri Lanka. For local villagers, prēta represent the troubled spirits of friends, family and community members, a nostalgic embodiment of a past sense of community, transformed by post-tsunami development and the resultant encroachment of foreigners on village land. Within this context, prēta are used metaphorically to map out rivalries between village factions, subvert outsider control over land, and draw villagers into political alliances aimed at challenging outsider control over their locality. This analysis is offered as a platform for reflecting on the role of ritual in revealing community responses to crises and the insecurity they engender.



Maurice Said has his B.A. (Hons) and MRes in Anthropology from the University of Malta and his Ph.D. in Socio-cultural Anthropology from the University of Durham. He has been lead researcher on various research projects dealing with crises and has taught anthropology and development at the University of Bath and at the University of Durham. Maurice is currently Visiting Lecturer in anthropology and humanitarian action at the Department of International Relations, University of Malta, and honorary research fellow in the Department of Anthropology at Durham University.

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