

## FRIDAY SERMON (*KHUTBAH*) IN CHARACTER BUILDING AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN A MINORITY CONTEXT: THE CASE OF MOSQUES IN SRI LANKA

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### **Abstract**

*Friday sermon known as 'jum'ah khutbah', is a major programme of all jum'ah mosques in Sri Lanka. Traditionally, Friday sermon is a significant occurrence and mosques placed great emphasis to make it successful. For instance, the entire Friday khutbah from one of the prominent Friday mosques is usually broadcasted at national level by the 'Muslim service' unit of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Cooperation (SLBC). This paper explores the potentiality of the Muslim tradition in individual character building and social improvement by looking at how this useful instrument has been used in Muslim community to expound on individual as well as social issues. The findings reveal that the traditional structure allow khaṭībs to communicate with the congregation predominantly on a devotional rather than political and social. Consequently, the content of khutbas include mainly rituals and theology. It praiseworthy that the content is also extended on maintaining unity and cooperation among Muslims in minority Sri Lanka. Relatively bodies of the very few regions operate to make Friday sermon relevant to their space and time factors.*

Keywords: *Friday sermon, Muslims in Sri Lanka, Jum'ah mosque.*

### **1. Introduction**

The Friday sermon *khutbah* is in practice from madinan period as an effective medium to communicate with the Muslim community who live close to or happen at the time to be in the neighbourhood of the mosque on a concern issue of the time. *Khutbas* are delivered to achieve objective such as educating, reminding, advising and admonishing (Wardak, 2002). The *khutbah* is being an act of worship (*ibadah*) in Islam, therefore, the congregation should listen in silence, and any kind of talking or conversation is prohibited. Furthermore, it is obligatory for men to attend Friday congregational prayers. This demonstrates level of authority the *khutbah* possesses and the image of authority is clearly presented by the elevated location of the minbar above the congregation (Azodanloo,1992). consequently, it makes a significant impact on the worldview of its listeners, who are attending *khutbas* from their childhood (Samuria, & Hopkinsb, 2017). Despite Muslims having diverse interpretations of Islam, they are most likely willing to set aside their factional allegiances to listen to the universal Islamic values expounded in the *khutbah* (Calder, 1986).

Muslims in Sri Lanka form a religious minority community in a predominantly Buddhist country. Today an estimated 9.6% of the total population are Muslims, making Islam the fourth religion to be practiced in Sri Lanka. Over two million Muslims live scattered throughout the country with a higher concentration in few districts, namely: Ampara, Batticaloa and

Trincomalee in the Eastern province and Colombo in Western province of Sri Lanka. However, they do not constitute an absolute majority (50%) in any of these districts. In a Muslim minority context, mosque can play a significant role in shaping Muslim life through its multi-functional and complex role related to religion, social, culture, and politics in its community ((Jazeel & Ghani, 2012). It is striking to note that Muslims in Sri Lanka organize themselves along some Islamic institutions but primarily around mosques. Historically, these mosques played a very important role in their lives. The history of mosque in Sri Lanka is as old as the presence of Muslims themselves in the country. C.W. Nicholas, and S. Paranavitana (1961) stated “The modern definitive history of Sri Lanka noted that by the end of the 8th century there were communities of Muslims at seaports including Colombo, now the metropolis”. During the last few decades, a considerable number of mosques have been established in each city where Muslims live. Today, there are about 2000 registered mosques in Sri Lanka including *jum’ah* mosques and other mosques (Jazeel & Zulkiple, 2013).

In Sri Lanka, as it is in all over the Muslim world, the mosques are customarily categorized into two main types, according to their functions and status: ordinary mosque and *jum’ah* mosques. The five times daily prayers are compulsory for the individual and can be performed in the mosque. Daily prayers can be performed in a congregation that has higher merit. A mosque providing for the individual and daily congregational prayers is a first category mosque. However, a *jum’ah* mosque is a mosque which can accommodate the daily congregational prayer and also the gathering of the whole Muslim community for the Friday prayer (performed once a week). *Jum’ah* is an Arabic term that denotes Friday prayer. "Grand Mosque" or "Great Mosque" is the common terms. The term “*jami*”, an Arabic reference to gathering the faithful from all corners of the built area, is rarely used.

## 2. Method

The main purpose of the study is to undertake an exploration of the potentiality of the Muslim tradition in individual character building and social improvement by looking at how this Friday sermon as a useful instrument has been used in Muslim community to expound on individual as well as social issues. This research study is primarily based on the qualitative approach, but it does not advocate the exclusive use of extreme qualitative techniques. This study is primarily based on an analysis of in-depth interviews conducted among the experts, activists and Muslim scholars. In addition, the analysis of data that collected using the interview survey from 218 randomly selected mosques and field notes of the observation were applied as a supplementary.

## 3. Results and Discussion

Historically, from the early Islamic period, the mosque was a community centre in which whole angle of political, economic and social problem were addressed, disputes mediated, advice sought, and vital information passed. The *khutbah*, therefore, when it was inculcated into the *jum’ah* and the two *‘id* prayer, was institutionalized as the platform for communication between the leaders, the followers and with other communities as well, when necessary. Consequently, the *minbar* in the mosque represented religio-social and political authority. In later period, the

*khutbah* continues to become an effective medium, not only in religious–culture, but also in social and political elements. It is observed that,

“It was used by nationalist movements during anti-colonial struggles and then by postcolonial states for legitimating and justifying development, modernization, or simply power. Islamic movements have since recognized the utility of the sermon and have used it for spreading their messages, organizing campaigns, and charting programs” (Tayob, 1999).

However, in Sri Lanka, the congregation is almost made compulsory once a week in the Friday prayer. Its traditional structure allows the *khaṭīb* communicating with the congregation on matters almost or strictly devotional. Typically, the *khutbah* can covers a range of topics such as Islamic doctrine (*aqeedah*), worship (*ibadah*), Islamic affairs and practices and Islamic ethics (*muamalah*) etc. The topics of *khutbah* in Sri Lanka, are often more on ritual and theological rather than social or political. Most Muslims regarded that the *khutbah* delivered from the minbar possesses extraordinary religious and even ritual legitimacy since the *minbar* and the *mihṛāb* or prayer niche is located in the most sanctified area of the mosque. Particularly, those who predominantly view the mosque as a house of worship argue the *khutbah* is not regarded as an ordinary way of communication. It is to be conducted in Arabic and not in the local language which is understood by the people. They seem to derive their opinion from *qur’ānic* verse which refers to the Friday *khutbah* as a ‘*dhikr*’ and they argue this pure act of *dhikr* has to be in Arabic. This view is not agreed by all Muslims, but it results in two types of customs. In few mosques, a speech in local language is rendered by the *khaṭīb* before he claims the *minbar*, and he conducts two parts of the *khutbas* in Arabic only. Comparatively, in most of the mosques, the first part of the *khutbah* will be bilingual, in Arabic and local language (almost Tamil), where the Arabic portion is considered as *khutbah*. However, the entire second *khutbah* is delivered in Arabic. Nevertheless, there is concern to make the *khutbah* (portion of local language) delivered in a simple language understood by the congregation, and tailored to the congregation’s level of intelligence.

Though there are views which insists that the sermon of the Friday noon-prayer be enunciated in Arabic, it is regrettable that only a small group could possibly understand it. Further, it might be argued that in this circumstance, it preserves the *khutbah* almost as a cultural symbol and a sacred and time-honored ritual practice of mysterious spiritual value rather than providing mechanism to bestow it on Muslim community as a tool of social change, community development and national empowerment on the one hand and of personal purification, spiritual uplift and divine blessings on the other hand – all in one complete package. Furthermore, there is no enough room to accomplish the outcomes of the *khutbah*. which probably consists of one or more purposes: educating Muslims; increasing their faith; raising their level of awareness; reminding them about their responsibilities; motivating them to stop evil and promoting good in their lives as individual, families and community; giving them hope and encouragement; inform the Muslims about the condition of the *ummah* and the world; discussing and dealing

with the daily problems of the Muslim society; and give enlightenment from the torch of Islam etc.

A permanent Imam of the particular mosque will usually deliver the *khuṭbah*, though occasionally, a mosque will invite a notable scholar as the *khaṭīb*. The *khuṭbah* is usually delivered and subdivided according to a set of rules, mostly formalized based on *shāfi'ī* school.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, the *khuṭbah* consists of two parts: of standing delivery and their division is by the act of sitting down on the part of the *khaṭīb* are a religious duty (*farīdah*) and consequently an indispensable part of the service. In most of the mosques, the *khuṭbah* is customarily preceded by the lesson. Before the *khaṭīb* claims the *minbar*, the *mu'adhdhin* will address the congregation on matters of Islamic law, usually quoting from the *qur'ān* and *ḥadīth*, and ethics of listening to *khuṭbah*. This ensures that the congregation would listen attentively and silently throughout the *khuṭbah*. Some mosques avoided it, arguing it is contrary to the established prophetic tradition.

Both parts of *khuṭbah* have the introductory extracts, which includes the praise to God (*ḥamdalah*), profession of faith (*sahādah*), the praise and blessings on prophet and his family and companions (*tasliyah*) and recitation of verses from the *qur'ān*. The longer initial *khuṭbah* usually consists of “the exhortation” (*Al-waziyyah*). After this set of introduction, the *khuṭbah* introduces the theme illustrated by the *Qur'ān*. *Khaṭīb* completes his discussion of the topic in the first *khuṭbah*. In the much shorter second *khuṭbah*, it is largely devoted to supplication. He calls upon Allah to shower his blessing upon the Holy Prophet, reciting relevant *ayāt* from the *qur'ān*, and then offers *duā* (supplicatory prayers) for the believers, both men and women. In Sri Lanka, where Friday is a working day, Friday congregational prayer and *khuṭbah* usually takes one hour. The *khaṭībs* are urged to make the sermon short, especially in urban areas, by *Jammethul Ulamā*. This is in accordance with the *ḥadīth* “Make your *salāt* long and *khuṭbah* short.” It is appropriate to note here that reformist scholars are partially drawing on the formalized traditions of the prophet (*ḥadīth*) by prescribing a number of other norms for the organization and the delivery of the *khuṭbah* in an effective way.

The below table depicts the responses to the question on how much emphasis is placed on matters related to *jamā'at*, family or personal practices by the mosques in their Friday sermons and teachings. The table suggests the vast majority of the mosques (ranges 65% - 75%) attempts to emphasize each of the areas mentioned. It is praiseworthy to note that the mosques place great emphasis on maintaining the unity and cooperation among the Muslim brethren in a minority context such as Sri Lanka. Here, the Muslim unity is often disturbed by many factors. The vast majority mosques consider the abstinence from immorality and *munkarāt*

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<sup>1</sup> The *shāfi'ī* scholar described the rules of the *khuṭbah* in the following manner: five *arkān al-khuṭbah*: the *ḥamd* Allah, the *ṣalāt ala l-nabi*, the exhortation to piety (*al-wasiyah bi-l-taqwa*), the prayer for the believers (*al-du'a li-l-muminin*) and the recitation from the *qur'ān* (*al-qirāh*). And these pillars distributed among the two sermons, 1-3 are in both sermons and 4 should only occur in the second sermon. Regarding the sermon itself, three are obligatory: the *ḥamdalah*, the *ṣalāt* on the prophet, admonitions to piety in both *khuṭbas*, prayer (*du'ā*) on behalf of the faithful, and recitation of a part of the *qur'ān* in the first *khuṭbah* or according to some doctors, in both. It is commendable (*sunnah*) for the *khaṭīb* to be on a pulpit or an elevated place; to salute the audience when directing himself towards them; to sit down till the *adhān* is pronounced by the *muadhdhin*; to lean on a bow, a sword or a staff; to direct himself straightway to his audience; to pray (*du'ā*) on behalf the Muslims.

(sins) as the second higher area for their teachings as the Muslims are greatly affected by either the non-Islamic or anti-Islamic environment in the island.

Table: The areas emphasized in the Friday sermons and teachings by the mosques

Area	A great Deal	Quite a Bit	Hardly at all
1. Devotion to personal worship and other rituals (N=213)	69%	25%	5%
2. Abstinance from immorality and <i>munkarāt</i> (sins) (N=216)	70%	23%	7%
3. Observing Islamic way in daily life (N=215)	68%	29%	3%
4. Understanding Islamic beliefs and theology (N=215)	67%	27%	6%
5. Maintaining unity and cooperation (N=214)	75%	22%	3%

Source: Survey

However, the interpretation of the theme of the *khutbah* is not easy. It varies between each mosque as it is influenced by a wide variety of contexts and factors including ideology, affiliation, type of the mosque and its location (whether in villages, town, urban city, or prosperous suburbs). However, in general, the *khutbah* is much concerned with the symbolic message of Islam, ranging over a variety of topics, including ritual (the obligation of worship, such as prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage), theology, religious history, and *sīrah*. The majority of *khutbah* therefore encases in a formal ritual framework of individual prayer, calls to prayer, congregational prayer, and numerous prayer formulae that punctuates the worship and the *khutbah*. The considerable *khutbas* have ethical intent –for example, how to treat one’s wife, one’s children, one’s neighbors, one’s kinsmen, respect for one’s parents etc. The classification is not wholly satisfactory as a number of *khutbas* is both ritual and ethical in content and in *Ramaḍān*, it leans towards theological and ethical content, stressing both the heavenly rewards of the completed fast and the high standard of right conduct demanded during the month. As an example, it is emphasized that fasting alone is not enough as it is also necessary to refrain from slander and idle gossip.

It is clear that the timing and contents of the *khutbas* are sometimes related to some factors: The Muslim calendar, the calendar of religious history, the agriculture calendar, day-to-day events. It can be said that some themes are seasonal, thus providing an opportunity for selection of subject and weighting of interpretative categories. Perhaps more importantly, it is an opportunity for the preacher to articulate the formal religious message of Islam with the needs of the community. For instance, the *khutbas* on fasting and pilgrimage are always given during the months when those rituals become obligatory; the *khutbah* on prophet’s *hijrah* migration to *madīnah* at early month of *Muharram*; the *khutbah* on *sīrah* is customary in the month of *rabī al-awwal* and a *khutbah* commemorating his *mi’rāj* journey at the end of *Rajab*; the *khutbah* on *lailathu qadr* during the month of *Ramaḍān* as well the *khutbah* on the obligation of giving the alms-due *zakāt* is given at the end of the month when businesses are assessing

their inventory. In agricultural areas, *khutbah* related to it is given during the harvesting season.<sup>2</sup>

In some mosques, especially in large city or town, *khutbah* on Muslim world affairs is usually delivered when there are major events. For instance, the struggle for Palestine and Middle East affairs. A number of *khutbas* are closely related to events that have occurred in the particular area in the previous week or shortly before. Many *khutbah* subjects are related to more than one calendar and might be given at different times of the year. The *khutbah* on supererogatory alms or *ṣadaqah* is appropriate to the ritual calendar, as indicated above, but it is also appropriate to day-to-day events in the village. It is important to note that the general subject of a *khutbah* is not necessarily an indication of the content of the *khutbah*. It is well-known that collections of traditional “canned” *khutbas* are also used by some *khaṭībs* even today.

The contents of the *khutbas* are classified in terms of their dominant theme as follows: religious history; ritual; theological; ethical; life cycle crisis; and political. *Khutbas* on ritual, theology, and religious history are popular themes as it stresses the importance of the ritual pillars of the faith, key theological events (such as *mi'rāj* and *lailat al-qadr*), revelation of the *qur'an*, judgment day, and key events in religious history (such as *milād*, *hijra* and *hajat al-wadah*).<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the weighting is clear and significant. Generally, political matters are given little weight. The great majority of *khutbas* were apolitical, though this may not always be the case in large towns and cities. The *khutbas* delivered in village mosques, in stark contrast to urban *khutbas*, had minimal political content. Although most *khutbas* are primarily ethical in intent, they are not legal in content or ethos and do not include discussions of kind quoted above. That is, they are not concerned with legal questions such as the division of inheritances or the rules governing a proper marriage or divorce or ritual-legal norms of prayer. However, even when the *khutbah* touches upon these matters, they are mostly concerned with religio-ethical principles that underlay them.

In some instance, as it was noted by some interviewees, (Ibraheem, 2014; Rifai, 2014) *khutbas* do not focus on a main topic. They tend to touch on various issues in a single *khutbah* which distracts the audience, involve with a theoretical session and discuss controversial issues. In cases where different mosques affiliated with different sectarian are located closed by, the *khutbas* seem to refute each other and project a distinctive interpretation of faith. Although the process of Islamization has continued in Sri Lanka for over 1000 years, little is known about the process by which Islamic norms have been transmitted to the vast bulk of populations. Little is known about the content of these norms, the character of their transmitters- the Islamic *khaṭībs*- or about the implications of these norms for social change and the transformation of the families, communities, and polities to whom they are addressed.

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<sup>2</sup> This is mainly based on the discussion of workshop on “*Khuthba* Discourses and Contemporary Needs” workshop for Ulama organized by (All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU))-Kalmunai, August 22, 2002. The researcher is one of the organizer of the workshop.

<sup>3</sup> This is also based on the discussion mentioned above.

Despite the *khutbah* has potential effect when delivered by a khatib with considerable oratorical skill and powerful religious references, there is no religious authorities or designated individual at national level, to control and instruct what *khutbah* topics and contents to be prepared, how to prepare them, or when to deliver them. This illustrates that the *khaṭīb* is not operating within the great religious tradition of Islam in a minority context. The *khaṭīb* is not constrained in his selection of topics for *khutbas* and he develops them in a way suitable for a sermon. More importantly, no weekly schedule of *khutbah* topics is stipulated; the *khaṭīb* is free to choose appropriate *khutbah* topics on the occasions he deems suitable, taking into account the day-to-day events of the village life.<sup>4</sup>

However, there are official bodies operating in some areas in the names of ‘*Majlis ash-shūra*, federation of all mosques, and Islamic foundation. They exercise the control in way of suggesting weekly topics of the *khutbah*. It might be argued that many *khutbah* topics were chosen to correspond to themes being pursued by these bodies (Razick, 2014; Sabeel, 2014). Most importantly, these suggested *khutbah* topics are empty frames into which a variable content can be poured. Rather than being constraints, these topics are, on the contrary, relatively open to interpretation. The analysis demonstrate that some mosque managements enact some policies and pronouncements on the *khutbah*. Thus, although the *khaṭīb* is most likely affected by these policy and the pronouncements, he possesses a considerable degree of autonomy with respect to the subjects of *khutbas* and their content and obtain opportunities to influence the congregation.

According to Islamic tradition, the oral presentation in the mosque delivered by the preacher during the Friday congregational prayer service covers –and always has covered –a much wider range of topics. In the early Islamic period, the content of the *khutbah* would have likely covered topics related to: dispute against the enemy, a pronouncement of views on political questions, or an announcement of legal decisions as an edifying moral discourse, a laying down of ritual obligations, or a theological lecture. These wide-ranging content can be understood better when it is realized that the mosque is a multifunctional institution (Errihani, 2011; Borthwick, 1967; Muzakki 2008). The implication of Islamic tradition of *khutbah* for the community leadership is strongly profound. From the beginning, the *khutbah* is delivered by the head of the community. Therefore, the *khutbah* is not an isolated event which narrowly pertains to the religious ritual and beliefs of the community, but, rather, an act which cannot be separated from the leaders who produce it or the Mosques within which it is produced. According to Abdul kader Tayob (1999), the religious corpus and historical contexts both create possibilities and impose limits on the sermon. Mosques and leaders are explained as both products and creators of religious discourse; and the sermon/*khutbah* becomes a prism reflecting the idiosyncratic faith and vision of the Imam who presents it, and of the community to which it is delivered; as well as of the community's history and the detailed configurations of its authority, power and prerogatives (Tayob, 1999).

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<sup>4</sup> Field notes, May 24, 2014.

#### 4. Conclusion

Sri Lanka is a pluralistic country where Muslims are second largest minority. The prominent Islamic institution mosque is to play a role in shaping the Muslim life in all its aspects. The Friday sermon *khutbah* is compulsory component of the programmes of all *jum'ah* mosques. The Muslims most likely perceive the mosque as house of worship and they regarded that the *khutbah*/sermon delivered from the *minbar* possesses extraordinary religious and even ritual legitimacy. This is because the *minbar*, along with the *mihrah* or prayer niche, is located in the most sanctified area of the mosque. It is perhaps an inevitable consequence to conduct the *khutbah* and, more often than not, make its contents more devotional. However, to the certain extent, there are *khutbas* delivered on social importance emphasizing the unity and solidarity among Muslims in minority context.

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