

THE IMPACT OF ARABIC LANGUAGE ON SRILANKAN CULTURE: A SOCIOLOGICAL AND EMPIRICAL STUDY

M. Z. M. Nafeel

*Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya,
Sri Lanka
nafeelz@yahoo.com*

Sri Lanka is a multi-lingual, multi-religious and multi-cultural country. Demonstrating the cultural diversity of the country, three major cultural groups and two main languages are found in Sri Lanka. Cultural practices of the people who speak Sinhala language make up the two-third of the population. Tamil is another major language and the people speaking this language inherit a long and rich cultural tradition like the Sinhalese. An e

thno-religious culture practiced by the Muslims of Sri Lanka is also recognized as a separate culture in the Island. Cultures have intermixed and intermingled with one another in the course of history and as a result the impact and influence of one culture over another is evident. This study attempts to understand the socio-cultural impact of a foreign language which is Arabic, on indigenous cultures of Sri Lanka. It is a fact that the Arabic language and Middle Eastern Cultures have been gaining importance around the globe and particularly in Asian countries due to various political, economic and cultural reasons.

Arabs and Arabic language have been known to Sri Lanka from a very long time, even long before the origin of Islam and the arrival of that religion in the island. The early Arab settlement appeared in the beginning of the 5th century AD. The Chinese pilgrim Fa-Hien who visited Sri Lanka alluded to the houses of Arab merchants in Anuradhapura. Muslims of Sri Lanka are largely of Arab descendants. However in the later part of the 13th Century AD these Muslims adopted Tamil language as their home language. With the fall of Baghdad in 1258, Sri Lanka lost links with Arab countries and was largely in contact with Malabar, East coast of India where Arab colonies had been established. As a result of commercial and cultural contact with South India, Tamil language had its impact on socio-cultural life of Muslims and it became their medium of expression. This lead to the emergence of Arabic-Tamil as a common language among the Muslims.

The Arabic language in Sri Lanka holds a prominent place among the Muslims. Since the end of the past century Muslims in Sri Lanka paid great attention and special interest in teaching Arabic whereby many schools and institutions were opened in the country. The study uses a multi-disciplinary approach to understand the impact of Arabic Language on Sri Lankan Culture. Such an approach would assist in understanding the historical process that lead to the formation of a multicultural society in Sri Lanka.