

Advance Praise

This book offers a refreshingly new analysis of Sri Lanka's ethnic civil war and the problem of post-civil-war political transition. Bart Klem builds a rich analysis on the premise that multiple contestations over sovereignty and identity cannot be adequately explained purely from constitutional or institutional perspectives. He adopts a performative perspective to analyse how political claims and counterclaims are enacted at many levels.

Based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Sri Lanka, the author views the continuing conflict as an ensemble of contentious enactments of political order performed through the practices of a range of actors – politicians, bureaucrats, insurgents, community leaders, voters and other participants of political life. This book fills a significant interpretative gap in the scholarship on Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict.

Jayadeva Uyangoda, University of Colombo

Bart Klem covers the grand themes of Sri Lanka's contemporary history – nationalist politics, provincial devolution and the friction between the constitutional, administrative and political realities of the state – with his feet firmly planted on the ground and his eye on the smallest ethnographic detail. The result is a gripping, theoretically sophisticated and genuinely insightful account of the country.

Mukulika Banerjee, London School of Economics and Political Science

Bart Klem aptly illustrates how the state is simultaneously being destroyed and created during Sri Lanka's armed conflict. The Tamil militants delegitimise, dismantle and indeed destroy the state, while constructing an alternate version of their own. The author elegantly describes the performance of the state in the making. Sadly, the real people in whose name the war was fought became the material surface on which such abstractions are played out. Having closely interacted with the Tamil leaders before and after the conflict, Bart Klem offers a unique vantage point to explore the concepts at play. For that reason alone, this book will alter the analytical landscape of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict.

Yuvi Thangarajah, Eastern University, Sri Lanka

This original book combines sensitive ethnography collected over a period of twenty years and imaginative analysis to tell the story of Tamil nationalist politics. It is a brilliant analysis of the particularities of separatist insurgents' sovereignties by casting the eyes on performative politics. A must-read for all who seek a better and more holistic understanding of rebel governance, civil wars and strongmen repertoires of authority in Sri Lanka and beyond.

Lucia Michelutti, University College London

Performing Sovereign Aspirations

In a society that experiences secessionist conflict, many things are not what they seem. *Performing Sovereign Aspirations* adopts a performative perspective to understand the peculiar institutional landscape that ensued around the Tamil separatist conflict in Sri Lanka, both during and after the civil war. It draws on two decades of fieldwork across towns and villages in northern and eastern Sri Lanka, ethnography within Sri Lanka's civil service, and privileged access to the Norwegian-facilitated peace process. This yields a compelling analytical narrative that shows how political institutions are enacted and witnessed, rather than cataloguing them in the strictures of the law. This provides a fertile vantage point to address the to-be-or-not-to-be dilemmas that we face when seeking to interpret the legitimacy, legality and validity of the institutions that separatist movements create in aspiration of sovereign status. And as such, this book provides food for thought for broader conceptual debates concerning armed conflict and insurgency.

Bart Klem is an Associate Professor in Peace and Development Studies at Gothenburg University, Sweden. He writes about everyday life and politics amidst armed conflict. He has conducted fieldwork across Sri Lanka's northeast since 2000. He co-authored *Checkpoint, Temple, Church and Mosque* (2015) and co-edited journal issues on insurgent politics (*Modern Asian Studies*, 2018) and on legal identity under insurgencies (*Citizenship Studies*, 2024).

SOUTH ASIA IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

South Asia has become a laboratory for devising new institutions and practices of modern social life. Forms of capitalist enterprise, providing welfare and social services, the public role of religion, the management of ethnic conflict, popular culture and mass democracy in the countries of the region have shown a marked divergence from known patterns in other parts of the world. South Asia is now being studied for its relevance to the general theoretical understanding of modernity itself.

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Transition in Sri Lanka

Bart Klem



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