Religion

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rrel20

Bangabandhu as the eternal sovereign: on the construction of a civil religion

Arild Engelsen Ruud

To cite this article: Arild Engelsen Ruud (2022) Bangabandhu as the eternal sovereign: on the construction of a civil religion, Religion, 52:4, 532-549, DOI: 10.1080/0048721X.2022.2094779

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2022.2094779

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 21 Jul 2022.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 653

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 1 View citing articles

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rrel20

RELIGION
2022, VOL. 52, NO. 4, 532–549
https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2022.2094779

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

OPEN ACCESS
Check for updates

Bangabandhu as the eternal sovereign: on the construction of a civil religion

Arild Engelsen Ruud

Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

ABSTRACT

The omnipresence of his name and portrait in Bangladesh suggests that Father-of-the-nation Sheikh Mujibur Rahman – known as Bangabandhu – is more than just a national hero. He is subject of a secular deification that establishes him as the fountain of political authority and an embodiment of the sovereignty of the nation – the one without whom there can be no authority, no sovereignty, no nation. Historically he was the supreme leader of the national movement, the extraordinary individual who created the independent nation. In that founding moment a new political order was formed, an order consciously maintained by the political party he founded and by his daughter, the current prime minister. This paper addresses the secular deification of him and investigates its efficacy as fountain for national sovereignty and for the authority of the political order.

KEYWORDS

Bangladesh; sovereignty; political authority; civil religion; anomalous agency

Introduction

The image and name of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is omnipresent in contemporary Bangladesh.[1] His portrait is in every school and government office, on currency notes and on every street. Bridges, hospitals, government programmes, sports tournaments are named after him. His life is celebrated and his death mourned in national commemorations. Ministers mention him and the ideals he represents as justification and inspiration for major undertakings.

It would be easy to dismiss this symbolic promotion of Bangabandhu as efforts by an increasingly authoritarian ruling party to legitimise itself (V-Dem 2021; Ruud and Hasan 2021). With its electoral mandate in question both at home and abroad after two dubious elections (Riaz 2019), the ruling Awami League's promotion of its founder Bangabandhu as the embodiment of the nation is not undisputed. But the dispute is rather around the ruling party's effort to monopolise him than it is around Bangabandhu as the nation's exalted leader. Few question his position as Father of the Nation. Opposition leader Kamal Hussain, himself once a close associate of Bangabandhu, claimed it would be

CONTACT Arild Engelsen Ruud a.e.ruud@ikos.uio.no

[1]The author is grateful for input from members of the Oslo South Asia symposium and the Kolkata workshop on Political deification: Iconography, Populism, Resistance. Special thanks are due to invaluable input from Muhammad Mozahid Islam, Muhammad Abu Bakar Siddique, and two anonymous referees.

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

'tantamount to disrespecting Bangabandhu and defying his instruction' to claim him for one party only (*Prothom Alo*, 24 August 2019).

None the less, there is a government-pushed cult around Bangabandhu and although not necessarily against the hairs of popular appraisal of his role for the nation's independence, the cult does actively establish him as the nation's unquestionable authority above the everyday, an eternal sovereign for an otherwise struggling and conflicted nation.[2] The cult constitutes a civil religion, by which I mean a set of rituals and narratives that render the national history and its leader sacred. These rituals and narratives are replete with strong emotions, demands on loyalty, a special being with extraordinary talents, and stories of sacrifice. While largely successful, the cult also reveals the inherent conundrum of a civil religion, that it is on the one hand constructed and instrumental and on the other affective and emotive. Civil religion is, in this sense, state sponsored but draws on emotive and affective identification for its efficacy.

This contribution investigates the symbolic aspects of the Bangabandhu cult. The aim is to investigate how the independence movement's leader has become in effect a sacred symbol and the nation's immortal sovereign authority. I shall start this investigation with a brief introduction to Bangabandhu, followed by a discussion of the concept civil religion. Then will follow a discussion of four aspects of 'special being' as identified by Ann Taves, before I conclude.

Civil religion and nationalism

In contemporary Bangladesh the cult of Bangabandhu underlines the overlap of Bangabandhu with the country and the nation. Reverence for the nation is reverence for Bangabandhu, and vice versa. The cult of Bangabandhu can usefully be analysed as a civil religion as this concept refers to 'the sanctification of the nation' and the manner in which a community itself is revered. The notion of the nation as sacred derives from Emile Durkheim, who saw patriotism as 'the civil religion of modern society' (Wallace 1977, 287). Nationalism and patriotism constitute communities of 'collective piety' (Santiago 2009) in which the community or the nation itself is the object of reverence.

There are two trajectories behind the concept of civil religion: nationalism studies and religious studies. Anthony D. Smith, writing on 'the sacred dimensions of nationalism', takes a cue from Durkheim and sees nationalism as a particular form of what he calls 'political religion'. The nation, Smith argues, 'can be grasped as a 'sacred community of citizens'', as a willed communion of all those who assert 'a particular moral faith and [who] feel an ancestral affinity' (Smith 2000, 792). For strong nationalists, crucial aspects of nationalism's sacredness are that the nation is the origin of all political and social power and that loyalty to the nation overrides other allegiances. Humans who identify with the nation feel the nation must be free for themselves to be free, so that individuals volunteer for war even under autocratic leaders. It is the community itself that is invested with sacredness, and often also the territory with its ethnic memories, symbols and legends (Smith 2000, 806).

[2]I use the term 'cult' in a wide sense, as a form of veneration to a person or idea, often embedded in forms of ritualised dramatisation.

A second trajectory for the idea of civil religion is in religious studies. A central scholar is Robert Bellah, who in his article 'Civil religion in America' (1967) used the term to point out the sacral dimensions of western democracy. Most discussion on 'civil religion' focuses on European or American expressions, with the evidence from the US particularly strong (Swatos 2004). An important exception is Emilio Gentile's *Politics as Religion* (2006) which discusses both democratic and totalitarian ideologies such as Fascism and which has given rise to a tentative distinction between the civil religion of democracies and the political religion of totalitarian regimes (Gentile 2005). The two terms are difficult to differentiate but permit us to consider a democratic country's nationalist rituals such as reverence for the flag or celebration of historic national events as dissimilar to demands for submission under more authoritarian forms of nationalism while also being expressions of the same urges.

Civil religion, for most scholars cited here, is about belief in higher authority and transhuman values, and it expresses the same anthropological needs and impulses which gave rise to transcendental religions (Crook 2010, 386). Of course, there is considerable variation in what we understand as 'religion' even among the transcendental belief systems, as they vary from dogmatic Abrahamic traditions via less dogmatic 'eastern' religions and charismatic, evangelical 'new religions' to invented religions (Sutcliffe and Cusack 2016). In this great span, nationalism and civil religion place themselves somewhere away from the extremes. Civil religions do not have a superhuman being that individuals or groups may approach for benevolence or mercy. And yet they still constitute themselves as sacred communions through rituals and myths that unite 'the dead, the living, and the yet unborn along an upward, linear trajectory of time' (Smith 2000, 802). These communions have a 'sacredness' from which they can 'define the ultimate meaning and the fundamental goal of human existence on earth' (Gentile 2005, 29).

Nationalism and civil religion are crucial for political entities in another sense, beyond any need for a sacred tinge to one's own community. Both nationalism studies and religious studies acknowledge civil religion's role in establishing a higher, independent authority on which laws may be based and society regulated. Philosophers and scholars from Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Émile Durkheim via Carl Schmitt and Hannah Arendt to Claude Lefort and Giorgio Agamben, have identified as a core challenge for political entities after the fall of religiously sanctioned rule to establish a higher form of sanction, a sovereign authority beyond the particularistic demands of individual leaders or changing public will.

In historian David Gilmartin's formulation, the problem expressed in the notion of sovereignty is that 'worldly power cannot legitimise itself' (Gilmartin 2019, 1). Worldly power requires reference to a higher authority in order to legitimise its own claim to rule. Kings once legitimised their rule as appointed by God; the emperor of Rome had his authority from the ancient institutions; and the British Empire sought justification by portraying itself as a vessel for rational enlightenment. In the secular and disenchanted democratic vision of the contemporary world (Gauchet 1997), ultimate authority derives from more fuzzy notions of human equality, dignity, and mutual respect. These are widespread notions (Dunn 2014), but they are less absolute and entail a less certain ontology. They are open to constant negotiation and contestation. With God out of the picture, there remains in modern democracies an insolvable gap

between the symbolic and the real because 'The ultimate markers of certainty are destroyed' (Lefort 1988, 228). Ultimate political authority has become something abstract that can be held by no one – as it belongs to 'the people' and can only be represented temporarily. Thomas Blom Hansen uses this line of thinking to emphasise how community, society or nation is in constant search of general and accepted representations, and because everything is contested and all oppositions are made visible there is a need for 'ever new forms of representation – in elections, in texts, in speech and images' (Hansen 2004, 24). An expression of this is the populism of South India, in which, writes Partha Chatterjee, 'The sovereignty deficit of constitutional democracy is … sought to be filled by the sovereign effect of the [movie] star as political leader' (Chatterjee 2020, 99, referring to Prasad).

The inherent problem for modernity to establish an authority on which to base laws and regulate society, is most clearly so for revolutionary governments, a point which is relevant to the case of Bangladesh. Both Durkheim and Hannah Arendt have pointed to the first years of the French Revolution to underscore society's tendency to create secular gods. In her *On Revolution* (1988), Arendt discusses the utopian culture of the first French republic and its unique sacred-secular dimensions. In the disenchanted (Gauchet 1985/1997, 174–175) new republic, an undefined entity called popular will (*volonté générale*) becomes the new source of authority, and Arendt points out how invocations of this higher being 'helped resolve the intrinsic difficulties of rationalising popular sovereignty' (Crook 2010, 385).

Common to revolutionary regimes is that they are born from cataclysmic events that eradicate the ultimate authority of the pre-revolutionary regime. These events – revolutions – are events that in extent and ambition entail a fundamental and often violent transformation – not just a change of guard (Arendt [1963] 1988, 13, 21). The old order is destroyed and its ultimate authority dismissed. Revolution establishes a new order and a new ultimate authority (Arendt 1961, 136). The new order needs a new ultimate authority, higher than its mundane government, to legitimise itself. The legitimacy of the new dispensation is established by claiming the cataclysmic event as its fons et origo.

These thoughts are relevant for the case of Bangladesh, a country that gained its independence through a war that, albeit not commonly called 'revolutionary' (though many participants did speak of revolution, *biplob*) was none the less violent and bloody and a cataclysmic event with clear heroes and demons. There is a clear before and after, and the moment itself is filled with such horror and magnitude that the new order once settled cannot be challenged without disrespect to the sacrifice and suffering through which the new order came into being. The order of the previous regime was rejected, along with its sovereign authority (as defender of the faithful), and replaced by a new, secular, progressive and democratic order.

In Robert A. Yelle's (2018) critical reading of historical notions of sovereign authority, the sovereign is an antinominan force – one that can defy established norms. This force may be good and it may be violent. Creation and destruction are both moments of sovereign appropriation. To Yelle this force is not sacred but it is analogous to the sacred. It is analogous to the sacred in that it dispenses grace, receives sacrifice and rules over life and death. In this sense, Bangabandhu is not deified, but he is the sovereign whose authority is *as if* he were sacred.

This notion is strengthened by the striking parallels between the way in which Bangabandhu is hallowed and the category of 'specialness' or 'special beings' that Taves (2012; Sen and Nielsen 2022) identifies when deconstructing what it is that makes some thing or some being 'sacred'. We will in this chapter focus on four aspects that appear particularly relevant to the cult surrounding Bangabandhu. First there is what Taves calls a singularity and that these singularities are surrounded by narratives and re-enactments in rituals more than historical analysis (Taves 2012, 66). Secondly and specifically relevant to the construction of Bangabandhu's singularity, is what Taves calls 'anomalous agency' – possession of qualities beyond the ordinary (Taves 2012, 75). As we shall see, Bangabandhu is singled out as special in terms of his place in history and in terms of the sacrifice he was able to arouse others into with his will, oratory and vision. A third aspect of 'specialness' identified by Taves is the 'emotional lien' between the 'special being' and a certain social identity – whether the identity of an individual or of a collective (Taves 2012, 63). And lastly Bangabandhu is protected by legal and social taboos and prohibitions, also a point identified by Taves as indicative of the sacred.

Singularity

Historically, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was the undisputed leader of the independence movement and the supreme leader of Awami League, the party that led the independence struggle.[3] When he first entered the scene, in the 1950s, what was to become Bangladesh was a province and the eastern 'wing' of the newly established Pakistan. As a student leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman joined what was initially a movement for greater role for this largely underrepresented and underfinanced province, a movement that soon came to see a form of autonomy as its aim. The Awami League party was initiated by senior politicians, but soon the young and energetic Mujibur Rahman emerged as its leader. Throughout the 1960s he was the main front figure of the movement and earned the title Bangabandhu (Friend of Bengal) from his followers. With him at the helm as its most popular leader and charismatic orator, Awami League won with overwhelming majority the 1970 election in the eastern 'wing'. But the military leaders and the winner of the western wing refused to yield power to Mujibur and after protracted negotiations war broke out in March 1971. The war of independence that followed was fought with Mujibur as nominal head while he was imprisoned in Pakistan. The throngs and enthusiasm that met him as he returned to his now independent Bangladesh in January 1972 testify to his undoubted popularity. After Independence, he was prime minister of the fledgling nation until his assassination in 1975.

In his persona, Bangabandhu represented the making of the nation, not just metaphysically but the very practical act of state-making and of shaping the state, its constitution and the structure of its political life. The nation was born because of him, founded by him, and its earliest history marked by him.

A not uncommon hagiographic rendering of Bangabandhu's position in Bangladeshi history can be found in the special supplement to the daily *New Age* on his 93rd birth anniversary in 2013. *New Age* is generally considered critical of the ruling Awami

[3]The title Bangabandu was given him by student leaders after the Agartala Conspiracy case in 1968. His daughter, Sheikh Hasina, is now prime minister of Bangladesh (1996–2001 and since 2009).

League. Bangabandhu is here described as 'The greatest Bangali of thousand years, the great Founder of the Independent Bangladesh and the Bangali Nation, the Visionary of "Sonar Bangla" (Golden Bengal) … ' (*New Age*, 17 March 2013). The phrase 'the greatest Bengali of all time' is often used and originated in 2004 in a BBC Bangla Service poll.[4] The poll took place at a time when his daughter, Sheikh Hasina, was not in government – a circumstance which adds authenticity to the sentiment expressed. The Chief Justice in a different context called him 'this greatest son of the soil' and his death 'the most painful and scandalous chapter' in the history of independent Bangladesh (*Prothom Alo*, 20 April 2020).

These are not uncommon sentimental expressions. In Nayanika Mookherjee's formulation, Bangabandhu has become a mnemotope for contemporary Bangladesh, a 'place' around which memories and events of 1971 organise themselves (Mookherjee 2011). He is held up as the central figure, the one around whom events unfolded. The events of his life regularly figure in one or the other form in anniversary speeches, in newspapers columns, in television debates and on street-side banners. Besides these speech acts and visual communications, there are innumerable and very tangible expressions in Bangladesh of his special place. There is a Wikipedia page called 'List of things named after Sheikh Mujibur Rahman' listing close to 70 government agencies, buildings, educational institutions, streets, a sports tournament, and two parks.[5] The list is not exhaustive. Generally the more prominent institution, event, building or undertaking in any sector is named after Bangabandhu. There are also a fellowship programme, an innovation grant, a guest professorship at the University of Heidelberg and an international football cup – all carrying his name.

Even more penetrating into everyday life is the omnipresence of his image. The photo in Figure 1 is of a large street-side banner in Narayanganj, not far from Dhaka. The same portrait is in Figure 2, from a village primary school in the south of the country. This is the most iconic representation of Bangabandhu. In this representation he is neither benevolent nor approachable but he is instantly recognisable. Historically, Bangabandhu used to underline his points by raising his index finger, and in some representations the image of the finger suffices to hint at his presence and his authority (Figure 3). Similarly his glasses have become iconic enough for them to have centre place in the poster for a film on his life ('Mujib, the Making of a Nation', to be released 2022) and his black coat is prominently displayed at the War of Independence Museum and has magical properties in a novel by the same name (Imam 2015).

In analysing a French courtier's contemplations over the portrait of his king, historian Louis Marin suggests that 'The mystery of the portrait is the mystery of absolute power represented' (Marin 1988, 209). The portrait of the king was not only a representation of the person of the king but of his might and his power, his infinity. The physical or historical body of the person of the king was different from the political body of the king as represented in the portrait – not just different but less important. In some ways, the portrait became the king it represented.

[4]Mujibur Rahman was polled 'the greatest Bengali of all time' (*shorbokaler shorboshreshto bangaligon*), ahead of Rabindranath Tagore.
[5]https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_things_named_after_Sheikh_Mujibur_Rahman (accessed 101119).

Figure 1. Banner at intersection Narayanganj. Photo by author.

Figure 2. From teachers' office in a village school, southern Bangladesh. Photo by author.

Figure 3. In the logo of the Young Bangla platform, associated with the ruling Awami League, Bangabandhu is represented by his hand gesture. Source: Dhaka Tribune 251018.

In Bangladesh, Bangabandhu's portrait is practically everywhere, on currency notes, in every public office and in every school and on every street (Kuttig 2020). Following Marin, Bangabandhu's portrait and his name have become representations of his infinite power and might. But because he is not physically alive, it also follows that his portrait and name vicariously represent the might and power of those behind the cult, the current rulers and above all his daughter and the political party he helped establish, allowing them to be everywhere.

But what for a courtier in pre-revolutionary France connected to the majesty of the king (rather than the person of the king), must for citizens in a secularised age be filled with something else than hierarchical God-given awe. Bangabandhu's portrait and name would be but empty vessels without an affective symbolism to become narratives that connect with a population, narratives that bind and persuade.

Anomalous agency

Through narrative constructions Bangabandhu's life and history are made not just central but indispensable to the history of the Bangladeshi nation. These constructions are typically given shape in the many hagiographic stories told about Bangabandhu, and a few examples will suffice. National children's day (also Bangabandhu's birthday and known as such) is one occasion that allows for attributing to him extraordinary qualities, as someone particularly loved and revered by his friends, as particularly adept at school, and as respected even by his elders. In a four-volume cartoon novel of his life, he is portrayed as tall and handsome, the mastermind of all initiatives and both thoughtful and energetic (CRI 2018). In a special issue of the daily *New Age* on his birth anniversary in 2013, his daughter underlined how 'From his boyhood, Bangabandhu was fearless and courageous, and he had an extraordinary intelligence' (*New Age*, 17 March 2013).

An important avenue for officially endorsed retellings is school textbooks.[6] School textbooks are the first official introduction to the history of the country that children receive and a much-used means of communicating the story the nation wants to tell about itself, or the stories the writers of school textbooks want to tell about the nation.[7] An example is the first introduction school children receive to the issue of the nation's war of liberation (in *Amar Bangla Boi 1*, for Class 1 pupils). The text is called 'The story of the freedom fighters' and illustrated with a drawing of Bangabandhu.

> Our country is Bangladesh.
>
> This country was made independent through war. This was a huge event. The Pakistanis attacked the Bengalis. Then Bangabandhu called for independence struggle. He was/is our great leader. His name was Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. He is our father of the nation [*jatir pita*].
>
> The Pakistani soldiers were like demons. They killed hundreds of thousands of Bengalis. They burned thousands and thousands of homes.
>
> The Bengalis answered Bangabandhu's call.
>
> The war against the Pakistani soldiers started. Those who fought are freedom fighters. In their chest was courage, and love for their country. Many gave their lives. The war lasted nine months. In the end the Pakistani soldiers had to admit defeat. We had won. Over the free country flew the red and green flag.
>
> We love our country. We love the freedom fighters.[8]

Bangabandhu's centrality as the full and only force behind the mobilisation that led to the bloodshed and sacrifice, and eventually full independence, is brought out in two sentences: Bangabandhu 'called for independence' and 'The Bengalis answered Bangabandhu's call'. That was why Bengalis rose against the Pakistanis, and that is what made them fight for the country's independence. In this retelling, Bangabandhu mobilised the people and their courage. The headline and the last third paragraph are about the freedom fighters, but the opening paragraph and the illustration is of Bangabandhu and the driving force in the retelling is that of Bangabandhu.

Another important aspect of the narrative of 1971 lies in how the enemy is described. This brings us back to our point above, about how the war in some defining way was what Arendt called 'revolution'. We see this in the text cited above, for instance, where the main protagonist is Bangabandhu and the freedom loving Bangladeshis while their opponents are described as demons (*danob*). Textbooks for higher classes also describe all Bengalis who opposed independence as *razakars* – quislings or renegades. Throughout the textbooks, however, are stories that tell of burning and killing, and of sacrifice and cunning that eventually led to the defeat of the demons and freedom for the country. The implication of this construction I suggest is the notion that before 1971 there was suffering and struggle, while the demon Pakistanis oppressed, killed and burned. But the war brought a new order, one fought for by ordinary Bangladeshis, their courage

[6]School textbooks were subject to a major revision in the late 1990s under the first Awami League government and were in use until 2018.
[7]In the case of Bangladesh the telling and retelling of the national story has been subject to some controversy.
[8]Lesson 55, page 258. The books are available online (nctb.gov.bd).

mobilised by Bangabandhu. The war, consequently, constituted a break with a past that was bad and chaotic and implicitly created a new and moral order. That which was before was demon like, and so that which came after was righteous and good. In other contexts the image used is that the war 'broke the shackles of a thousand years' (*hajar bochorer poradheenotar shringkhol bhenge*).

In these nationalist retellings, there are omissions and simplifications. The many visions of what an independent Bangladesh would be like are ignored. A politically influential grouping of radical students, for instance, thought along the lines of 20th century socialist revolutions and even formed a separate guerrilla force that never coalesced with the official force. Some of them formed a radical leftist opposition in 1974 to challenge Bangabandhu's Awami League government (Raghavan 2013). Another group offering a different view was the so-called 'red' Maulana Bhashani who sought a socialist Bangladesh on Islamic principles. There were moderate voices, Maoist voices, pro-Indian and anti-Indian. The notion of newness, of a new beginning, was embedded as an inspirational element in this as in most 20th century revolutionary, anti-imperialist or anticolonial struggles, but the newness pointed in many different directions.

Crucially, his four years as prime minister (1972–1975) are also often-most omitted in nationalist retellings. These were conflict-ridden and difficult years and the story of these years is much more controversial than that of the independence movement. The war-ravaged country suffered not just from shortages but from incompetent rule, corruption in the ruling party, embezzlement and smuggling protected by ruling party leaders, widespread violence including murder of a large number of parliamentarians, and accusations of nepotism even against Mujibur himself (see for example Jahan 2005; Ahmed 1984; Ahsan 2014). In the end, to help ameliorate the dire situation, Mujibur abolished multi-party democracy and introduced one-party rule, known as Bakshal from its Bengali abbreviation. These years are now viewed with embarrassment by his own party. They were bad years, and the undemocratic introduction of one-party rule with Bangabandhu at the helm is not mentioned when hailing him. The emphasis in the narrative is on the independence movement instead.

In some ways there is nothing particular about this construction of Bangabandhu as the nation's leader. 'Every nation has its heroes,' write Reicher and Hopkins (2001) and point to how national narratives often come with 'exemplary figures' whose exploits are well known and summarised in tales that are told and retold. But to appreciate the contemporary cult it is necessary also to address how some aspects of Bangabandhu as a political persona have been edited out. In a very real sense, the official narrative of Bangabandhu has engaged in what Lars Tore Flåten in his study of Indian textbooks has called 'foregrounding' (Flåten 2017). The emphasis is on particular points while other potentially relevant points are dropped or at best feature only briefly and in passing.

This anomalous agency of Bangabandhu is foregrounded in innumerable instances, particularly focusing on how he led the way and the population rose to his call. His vision that appealed to the people is often referred to as Bangabandhu's dream (*shopno*) or his ideology (*chetona*). It is this vision that mobilised the people into action. These are terms that are frequently used in public speeches and in writing. In his greetings to the nation on the occasion of national mourning day 2020 and the 45th martyrdom anniversary of Bangabandhu, President Abdul Hamid hailed

Bangabandhu as the 'dreamer of the Bengali nation and the embodiment of great freedom' (*Bangali jatir swopnodroshta mohan swadhinotar rupokar*').

Bangabandhu's dream in this official version was the dream of a Sonar Bangla, a Golden Bengal.[9] Bangabandhu's dream was not only of political independence but of a happy, satisfied people. Bangabandhu's dream, said the president, was to establish a Sonar Bangla, without hunger or poverty (*khudha o daridryomukti*). These are often-repeated words to describe Bangabandhu's dream. Beyond this the dream remains a vague and undefined set of aspirations. Historically, Bangabandhu himself never formulated an ideology even if his activists insisted on something called 'Mujibbad' or Mujibism, which was little more than a cult around his personality.

The vague but tall aspirations presented as Bangabandhu's dream have become the political goals of the nation. They justify government action and harness submission to its cause. Bangabandhu's dream is a vision has become everybody's responsibility (*dayitva*), according to the president. Bangabandhu's unfinished work was to create a happy and prosperous country. Only when that goal has been achieved 'will we be able to show due respect [*jothajoth shomman*] to this everlasting great leader [*chironjib ei mohan neta*].'

This notion that Bangabandhu's dream remains a national obligation is typically found in official statements. Law minister Anisul Huq elaborated this official understanding of the 'dream' while engaging in some self-flagellation: 'We fully acknowledge that we have not yet been able to fulfil all our aspirations and the dream of our Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to create a Sonar Bangla free of exploitation, derivation and poverty' (*The Independent*, 31 July 2019). In another example, the Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority on its homepage writes that the establishment of economic zones is part of the prime minister's initiative 'for materializing the dream of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. [The prime minister's plan] is nothing but the resurrection of the dream "Sonar Bangla".' Similarly, the 2018 Digital Security Act 'can be considered as the revival of the Golden Bangladesh of the father of the nation Sheikh Mujibur Rahman […] The great dreamer … '.[10]

It is necessary to underscore that Bangabandhu's 'dream', even if exploited by ministries and leaders, also holds a strong emotive resonance in Bangladesh today. The dream to do away with hunger and want refers to all forms of inequality and disrespect. The generally hierarchical culture and the country's huge income gaps do stand in considerable opposition to generally held ideals of equality – for some infused by Islamic teachings of equality and for others by modern-progressive ideas of human equality. In popular renderings, Bangabandhu as a person showed respect to high and low. He ate simple food, he spoke on equal terms with anyone irrespective of class, and he concerned himself with the needs of any individual. These were qualities young supporters of his party emphasise and that resonate well with wider Bangladeshi sentiments. His daughter, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina makes oblique reference to this aspect of the Bangabandhu narrative when she claims that she is in politics to alleviate the suffering of the poor ('amader lokjon jeno koshto na hoye').

[9]This term is taken from the young republic's national anthem, originally Rabindranath Tagore's song Amar Sonar Bangla (My Golden Bengal).

[10]Digital Security Act 2018 (www.cirt.gov.bd, accessed 200320).

Stronger still than a link between what is claimed by the phrase Bangabandhu's dream on the one hand and generally held societal values on the other, is a link that speaks directly to emotions and affective reactions. Even if they took place four years apart, the war of independence and Bangabandhu's assassination have become one grand narrative of struggle against evil-doers and demons, a narrative that is brimming with feelings of loss and sorrow, and with sacrifice and pride, and with the good against the evil.

Emotional lien

The association between Bangabandhu and the nation is tightly weaved in more tangible ways, for instance by insisting that national celebrations and commemorations of Bangabandhu are the same. This links Bangabandhu and the war of liberation to sentiments of promise and loss, on affective reactions in the sense of embodied, immediate and less conscious dimensions of human feelings (Hoggett and Thompson 2012). While such affective reactions may belong among less conscious and more immediate feelings, they may also be harnessed, controlled, directed and given meaning through instrumental spectacles and rituals. Writing on Pakistan's military, Maria Rashid argues that the affective relationship constitutes sentimental links of belonging and loyalty that deflect from the realities of submission and control. The affective relationship constitutes a 'disengagement from the project of militarism' for members of Pakistan's military class, which is the instrumental aspect of the relationship (Rashid 2020, 11).

In Bangladesh, the nation is equated with Bangabandhu in ceremonial state rituals. Among the public holidays, three are directly associated with him: His important speech on 26 March 1971 that called for independence (celebrated as 'Shadhinota dibosh' or Independence day), his birth on 17 March (celebrated as the national children's day but commonly known as *Mujib joyonti*, Mujib's anniversary), and his death on 15 August 1975 (the national day of mourning, *Jatiyo shok dibosh*).[11] Besides these, other commemorations associated with the war of liberation also emphasise struggle, suffering and mourning. They include Genocide Remembrance Day and Martyred Intellectuals Day. These are national days, not public holidays, but they are marked with official engagements and engage public institutions such as the army, the government and public offices.[12] Jail Killing Day is equally marked by Awami League and in newspapers, with seminars and speeches, albeit it is not an official commemoration. A the joyous occasion marked is Bangabandhu Homecoming Day, again not an official commemoration but regularly marked in the official calendar with ceremonies, processions, flags, speeches and television programmes.

These state rituals link Bangabandhu and the nation and its history through explicit emotional appeals. The Bangladesh Liberation War Museum, Mookherjee astutely

[11] Two more public holidays mark events in the struggle for independence: 21 Feburary marks the beginning of the language movement and 16 December marks final victory over the Pakistani forces. In addition, the traditional new year (*Pahela Baisakh*), international labour day 1 May, moderne new year 1 January and nine religious occasions are public holidays. The exact number varies a little as the government may on short notice decide whether a day is a holiday or not.

[12] There were rival notions of what constituted apt symbols for the Bangladeshi state. When Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) was in power it instituted a 'National Revolution and Solidarity Day' and encouraged its supporters to celebrate it. This day was in commemoration of a military uprising on 7 November 1975 that helped Ziaur Rahman to power a few months after the assassination of Bangabandhu. Ziaur Rahman is the founder of BNP. Awami League denounced the day and it was scrapped by the unelected Caretaker Government in 2007.

Figure 4. Barisal 2018. Photo by author.

observes, portrays the Bangladeshi nation as based on suffering (Mookherjee 2011, S78). Commemorations on 15 August, the official day of mourning, brings the sense of loss out particularly strongly – a typical representation is given in Figure 4 of a banner on that occasion from 2018. The banner is subdued, sombre, and portrays a thoughtful Bangabandhu on the left and on the right other members of his extended family who were killed along with him.[13]

Such expressions of lament are not an uncommon. The largest Bengali-language newspaper *Prothom Alo* (15 August 2014) reported that 'the world's most barbaric carnage' took place on this day and in an editorial the same day called it 'a day of pain and sorrow'. *Prothom Alo* is generally seen as independent of the ruling party. The more government-leaning *Dhaka Tribune* (25 August 2016) in a different context called the night of the killing 'the darkest night in the history of the country … August marks the month of mourning in Bangladesh, as we mourn the death of our leader … '. Although not an official designation, 'the month of mourning' is propagated by ruling party activists and used in the public sphere. The month of mourning also includes commemoration of an assassination attempt in 2004 on the life of then opposition leader and now prime minister, Sheikh Hasina. The assassination attempt cost the lives of more than 20 people, including several senior leaders of Awami League.

A central element in the message of mourning is that Bangabandhu's life and work were cut short by his assassination and that his party and those who uphold his 'dream' only came back to power 'after 30 years'. The great horror of that assassination and the opportunity lost make it all the more imperative for the nation today to strive to fulfil the promises embedded in the struggle and sacrifice of the liberation war.

The programme for marking August 2020 – i.e., the month of mourning in the Mujib year, the centenary of his birth – included voluntary blood donation and plasma

[13]This particular banner is from Barisal, August 2018. One of the victims of the assassination was Bangabandhu's brother-in-law Abdur Rab Serniabat, from Barisal. His son now dominates political life there, as MP and district commander, while a grandson is mayor of the city.

collection plus flag ceremonies (half-mast and black flag) and special prayers at 'all mosques across the country' and at temples, pagodas, churches and all places of worship (*Prothom Alo*, 1 August 2020). The birthday anniversaries of his wife, often titled Bangamata (Mother of Bengal) and of his sons and in particular the youngest son are also marked with ceremonies and especially so in 2020 (the official Mujib Year). Their contribution to the nation is emphasised and their death lamented as national losses. The prime minister often speaks publicly of their killing or that of other leaders in terms of violence suffered, the horror of loss, the great injustice perpetrated, and mourning.

The message of mourning runs parallel to and in mutual reinforcement with the sentiment of sacrifice that is constituted by the memory of the war of liberation four years earlier. Mookherjee suggests that the memorialisation of the valour and loss in the war memorials in Bangladesh reflect an emphasis on melancholia (Mookherjee 2007, 273). Similar sentiments are found in poetry and popular songs performed at commemorative events. A much-cherished song called 'More ekti phulke banchabo bole juddho kori' ('We will go to war to save a single flower') contrasts the beauty of the landscape with the horrors of war, but a war they gladly joined to save the country. These are in striking ways parallels to the tradition of martyrdom running through South Asian history (Maclean 2015). Again, in these popular renderings, the memory of war is infused with a strong sense of sacrifice and suffering that is held up as admirable, as gestures that demand respect and awe. The bravery of such gestures are also connected to the colonial British and Pakistani stereotype of the Bengalis as 'effeminate' as opposed to the more 'martial' peoples of western India. Bangabandhu himself referred to this stereotype to instil pride in the achievements of the war – saying the war proved that the Bengalis are not cowards (*kapurush*).[14]

Taboos and prohibitions

Lastly, Taves points out that special beings are often surrounded by taboos. These taboos protect special beings from profanity and from being reduced to something ordinary, and from defiling or mocking (Taves 2012, 67). As we shall see, this seems to be particularly salient with regards to the cult of Bangabandhu, which has increasingly become surrounded by a strong sense of humourlessness as well as taboos and legal prohibitions.

Increasingly there is tendency to use the full designation – Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman – when referring to him in public. This is part of a broader picture of an increased public sensitivity to potential distortion of his public image, and it extends beyond his name to historical events associated with him or his image – that portrait which is power, following Marin. But there is also forceful legal protection of his name and reputation. Legal protection was first and most forcefully instituted in Section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology act of 2013 and later in the 2018 Digital Security Act, section 21. In this section it is stated that any 'propaganda or campaign against liberation war, Cognition of liberation war, Father of the nation, National Anthem or National Flag' is punishable with imprisonment for a term 'not exceeding 10 (ten) years or with fine not exceeding 1 (one) crore taka or

[14]In his speech at Bangladesh Military Academy's first graduation parade: www.youtube.com/watch?v=1QMKKYg2xc0

with both'.[15] The law has been widely criticised as 'draconian' and its effect on public life much criticised (Ruud and Hasan 2021). Previous legislation on defamation and that still deals with non-digital forms of defamation, in particular section 499 of the Bangladesh Penal Code, carries a sentence of maximum two years. More crucially, defamation of Bangabandhu is a cognisable office and non-bailable. This means the police can arrest immediately and the accused must stay in prison until the matter has been decided upon by a court. If the accusation comes from a politically important quarter, action will often be taken immediately. A case in point is that of a local government official in Barisal who had a child's drawing of Bangabandhu printed on an invitation card for a celebration of Bangabandhu's birthday – also celebrated as the national children's day. He posted a photo of the card on social media, enabling the use of the digital laws. He was accused of 'defamation of the nation' because the drawing was an 'insult to the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman', it was claimed (*Dhaka Tribune*, 20 July 2017). The accusers were local Awami League leaders, including a local Member of Parliament. The accusation caused widespread condemnation and the prime minister intervened to say the drawing was fine, and so eventually the case was dismissed by the court. However, the official had spent a night in jail by then. Although the matter has several other aspects to it, including personal revenge and local power-play, it is indicative of official sensitivity to Bangabandhu's sacredness that an official of the government could be jailed by the court for having printed a child's drawing in what was obviously a celebration of him.

In another case, thirteen school teachers were accused of having defamed Bangabandhu because an exam question they had prepared had somehow compared Bangabandhu with a local elected official. Three of the teachers were sent to jail (*The Daily Star*, 26 September 2017). In 2021 Professor Serajul Islam of Dhaka University and two others were sued for having defamed Bangabandhu by suggesting in a paper that Bangabandhu before 1971 and after 1971 was not the same (*The Business Standard*, 19 October 2021).

There are many similar instances of individuals landing in jail or being publicly chastised for not paying sufficient respect to Bangabandhu's image. A controversy erupted in 2021 when Muslim clerics voiced opposition to public statues of Bangabandhu on the ground that it was not Islamic (*New Age*, 29 November 2020). Although clerics had previously with some success opposed a statue of Lady Justitia in front of the Supreme Court building, in the case of Bangabandhu's statues their opposition was effectively supressed after the Awami League general secretary claimed that this vandalism was 'an insult to the nation' (*The Financial Express*, 6 December 2020).

A central clue to understanding the consequences of the Digital Security Act is what human rights activist and barrister Jyotirmoy Barua calls the 'pick and choose' method used by the police (*Dhaka Tribune*, 10 August 2018). 'The government, police and the ruling party men are using the law against those they do not like', he held. And yet the various cases indicate how sensitive the name and image of Bangabandhu are and the taboos and prohibitions surrounding his name and portrait. Allegation of defamation of Bangabandhu has the force of moving the police, the courts and party activists into

[15]One crore taka is 10 million taka, or approx. 100,000 euros. Although 'one crore' is a precise sum, it is also a ludicrously large sum.

action, even to the extent that individuals are arrested – even when the accusations come from interested quarters and the allegations are part of a power game.

Conclusion

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is firmly established in Bangladeshi history and consciousness as the supreme leader of the independence movement and indeed as the father of the nation. His organisational talent, his oratory and his visonary leadership shaped the movement that ultimately led to the war of independence, which was fought with him as its nominal leader. In spite of mounting criticism during his rule after independence, he continued to enjoy tremendous personal respect and popularity.

These fundamental aspects of his place in his country's history notwithstanding, there is no doubt that an official cult around his persona has been actively cultivated and promoted by the Bangladesh government after his daughter Sheikh Hasina became prime minister for a second time in 2009. The omnipresence of his name and portrait as well as official commemorations of important dates in his life are testimony to a conscious government-sponsored effort to establish him as something beyond a political leader. The narratives that insist it was his oratory and vision that mobilised the population to rise against the oppressors constitue one expression of this effort, and that his visions, his dream, continues to be an obligation on every Bangladeshi fifty years on is another.

This contribution argues that it is meaningful to regard the cult of Bangabandhu as a civil religion as it places him central to a larger context replete with myths, rituals, established forms of reverence, affective demands for loyalty, taboos and sacred symbols that denote the community as hallowed. Civil religion in this context means a nationalism that sanctifies the nation and its history and that through rituals and myths unite the dead, the living and the yet unborn and from which the community draws ultimate meaning. In this civil religion, Bangabandhu holds the place of the creator of the community, as its fons et origo and hence as its ultimate authority – its sovereign. Bangabandhu's role as its ultimate authority tallies well with the need political philosophers have identified for other post-revolutionary polities, the need for an authority beyond the everyday on which to legitimise the post-revolutionary order.

This place is made possible by honing his image into that which Taves calls 'a special being'. Taking a cue from her suggestion that certain attributes mark 'special beings', I have here identified and described four attributes that are particularly salient to the active cult of Bangabandhu. These are his singularity, his anomalous agency, the emotional lien, and the taboos and restrictions surrounding his name and memory. Of these four, the emotional lien is perhaps the most important for the cult to achieve efficacy. It draws in large part from coalescing the war of independence with its many dead, courage and violence together with the assassination of Bangabandhu and most of his family four years later. These two separate events a joined together by the themes of suffering and loss created by acts of intolerable violence from enemies of the nation and of mourning for that which was lost.

The efficacy of the cult of Bangabandhu stems further from his spearheading the establishment of a new order. Again, he is more than a political leader: He is the creator, the Father of the Nation. The war of independence was a revolutionary moment in the sense

given by Arendt, a moment that destroyed all that was before and created a new order with a different set of principles on which it based its laws. From the Pakistani state's militaristic and authoritarian protection of the Muslim faithful, the new Bangladesh under Bangabandhu's leadership established itself on principles of democracy, secularism and Bengali nationalism. In a sense, Bangabandhu willed the destruction of the Pakistani state and willed the creation of an independent Bangladesh.

This pivotal role in the transformation, in the revolutionary moment, is what the cult foregrounds. Although never explicit, Bangabandhu's place in the narratives and in the cult is that of the sovereign in the sense of the one who destroys the old order and creates a new one. He masterminded the transformation and his visions formed the new and just order – even though his life-work was cut short by assassins. Later generations and subjects of this order are obligated by his visions, and his successors' authority is derivative of his.

Bangabandhu cannot be sacred in the sense of having god-like attributes. That would be unthinkable and blasphamous in an Islamic context. But the cult surrounding his name and persona with its emphasis on his singularity and his anomalous agency as well as the humourlessness and the taboos all suggest that he is revered as a sovereign beyond the everyday, as the founder of the nation, hallowed *as if* he were sacred.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Arild Engelsen Ruud is professor of South Asia Studies at University of Oslo. His recent publications include *Masks of Authoritarianism* (Palgrave 2021, co-edited); *Mafia Raj* (Stanford University Press 2018, co-authored); *Outrage* (UCL Press 2019, co-edited) and *South Asian Sovereignty* (Routledge 2019, co-edited).

References

Ahmed, Moudud. 1984. *Bangladesh: The Era of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman*. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH.
Ahsan, Syed Badrul. 2014. *From Rebel to Founding Father: Sheikh Mujibur Rahman*. New Delhi: Niyogi Books.
Arendt, Hannah. 1961. *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: The Viking Press.
Arendt, Hannah. (1963) 1988. *On Revolution*. London: Faber & Faber.
Chatterjee, Partha. 2020. *I am the People: Reflections on Popular Sovereignty Today*. New Delhi: Permanent Black.
CRI. 2018. *Mujib: A Graphic Novel*. Dhaka: CRI Prakashana.
Crook, Tom. 2010. "Civil Religion and the History of Democratic Modernity: Probing the Limits of the Sacred and the Secular." *Religion Compass* 4 (6): 376–387.
Dunn, John. 2014. *Breaking Democracy's Spell*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
Flåten, Lars Tore. 2017. *Hindu Nationalism, History and Identity in India: Narrating a Hindu Past Under the BJP*. London: Routledge.
Gauchet, Marcel. 1997. *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*. Translated by O. Burge. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Gentile, Emilio. 2006. *Politics as Religion*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.
Gentile, Emilio. 2005. "Political Religion: A Concept and its Critics – a Critical Survey." *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 6 (1): 19–32.
Gilmartin, David. 2019. "Introduction." In *South Asian Sovereignty: The Conundrum of Wordly Power*, edited by David Gilmartin, Pamela Price, and Arild Engelsen Ruud, 1–34. London: Routledge.
Hansen, Thomas Blom. 2004. "Politics as Permanent Performance: The Production of Political Authority in the Locality." In *The Politics of Cultural Mobilization in India*, edited by John Zavos, Andrew Wyatt, and Vernon Hewitt, 19–36. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
Hoggett, Paul, and Simon Thompson, eds. 2012. *Politics and the Emotions: The Affective Turn in Contemporary Political Studies*. New York: Continuum International.
Imam, Neamat. 2015. *The Black Coat*. London: Pericope.
Jahan, Rounaq. 2005. *Bangladesh Politics: Problems and Issues*. Dhaka: University Presses Limited.
Kuttig, Julian. 2020. "Posters, Politics and Power: Mediated Materialisation of Public Authority in Bangladesh Party Politics." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, doi:10.1080/00856401.2020.1767901.
Lefort, Claude. 1988. *Democracy and Political Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Maclean, Kama. 2015. *A Revolutionary History of Interwar India: Violence, Image, Voice and Text*. London: Hurst & Company.
Marin, Louis. 1988. *Portrait of the King*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Mookherjee, Nayanika. 2007. "Mourning, Melancholia, and the Martyred Intellectual Memorials in Bangladesh." *Space and Culture* 10 (2): 271–291. May.
Mookherjee, Nayanika. 2011. "'Never Again': Aesthetics of 'Genocidal' Cosmopolitanism and the Bangladesh Liberation War Museum." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 17: S71–S91.
Raghavan, Srinath. 2013. *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Rashid, Maria. 2020. *Dying to Serve: Militarism, Affect, and the Politics of Sacrifice in the Pakistan Army*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
Reicher, Stephen D., and Nick Hopkins. 2001. *Self and Nation*. London: Sage.
Riaz, Ali. 2019. *Voting in a Hybrid Regime: Explaining the 2018 Bangladeshi Election*. Singapore: Palgrave Pivot.
Ruud, A. E., and Mubashar Hasan, eds. 2021. *Masks of Authoritarianism: Hegemony, Power and Public Life in Bangladesh*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.
Santiago, Jose. 2009. "From 'Civil Religion' to Nationalism as the Religion of Modern Times: Rethinking a Complex Relationship." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48 (2): 394–401.
Smith, Anthony D. 2000. "The 'Sacred' Dimension of Nationalism." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 29 (3): 791–814.
Sutcliffe, Steven J., and Carole M. Cusack, eds. 2016. *The Problem of Invented Religions*. London: Routledge.
Swatos, William H., Jr. 2004. "Book Review." *Implicit Religion* 7 (2): 193–198.
Taves, Ann. 2012. "Special Things as Building Blocks of Religions." In *The Cambridge Companion of Religious Studies*, edited by R. A. Orsi, 58–83. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
V-Dem. 2021. *Autocratization surges – resistance grows. Democracy report 2020*. V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg.
Wallace, Ruth. 1977. "Emile Durkheim and the Civil Religion Concept." *Review of Religious Research* 18 (3): 287–290.
Yelle, Richard A. 2018. *Sovereignty and the Sacred: Secularism and the Political Economy of Religion*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.