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Memory and resistance in the London Tamil diaspora: reflections from the 'Tamils of Lanka: a timeless heritage' exhibition



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Abstract

This paper explores memory work in the London Tamil diaspora ten years since the end of the war, reflecting on the 'Tamils of Lanka: a timeless heritage' exhibition, organised by London's Tamil Information Centre. Examining the exhibition narrative, content and format, I argue that building spaces of shared and co-produced knowledge can be considered an act of resistance: coming together to share stories and ideas, to remember atrocity and resilience, and to document history from the Tamil perspective. Engaging with the exhibition as a space to remember - and for some in the diaspora, to encounter - the political potential of Eelam, the exhibition acknowledges the importance of such initiatives in reclaiming historical narratives and actively shaping the emerging narrative of the community.

Key words

Tamil diaspora, memory, commemoration, state violence, resistance, exhibition, community, materiality

Introduction: remembering Mullivaikkal

Ten years can pass quickly. 18 May 2019 came around with a jarring suddenness. For the Tamil community in Sri Lanka/Ilankai and globally, it marked ten years spent mourning and reflecting, organising, agitating for justice, and shaping a new politics in the wake of the mass atrocity perpetrated at Mullivaikkal. More than ten years on, Tamil knowledge production and the sharing of stories, histories and memories are part of a wider process of Tamil socio-political engagement that acknowledges the importance of reclaiming historical narratives and actively shaping the emerging narrative of the community as one defined by resilience. A recent example – which is the focus of this paper and particular to London’s Tamil diaspora – is the ‘Tamils of Lanka: a timeless heritage’ exhibition, organised by London’s Tamil Information Centre (TIC) to mark the ten-year anniversary of Mullivaikkal. This paper aims to offer reflections on the memory work conducted through this exhibition, exploring how one small non-governmental organisation worked to prompt the wider Tamil community – a complex and heterogenous community – to resist the Sri Lankan state’s erasure of the violence committed against Tamils, and perhaps, to resist forgetting. Reflecting on this work – which I observed while assisting with the exhibition – I argue that this small section of the London Tamil community, brought together by TIC, constructed a space of shared and co-produced knowledge which constituted an act of resistance. Through the exhibition, TIC brought together thousands of diaspora Tamils – largely London-based but with international participation – to share stories and ideas, to remember atrocity, commend resilience, and to document and read history from a Tamil perspective.

The conflict memory authored and promoted by the Sri Lankan state is designed to deny atrocity, to avoid accountability for war crimes and genocidal violence, and to denigrate the Tamil separatist movement as brutal, illegitimate, and apolitical (Seoighe 2017, 2016, 2016b). States often have the power to author the dominant narrative of conflict and to write the script and historical record in their own favour. This is particularly the case in situations where war ends with “a crushing victory by one side” (Reiff 2016: 12), as was the case in Sri Lanka. Victory “confers the power unilaterally to shape the collective memory of the conflict” (Reiff 2016: 12). As Schramm (2011: 12) tells us, however, oppositional voices can counter official representations of the past, “working against the smooth unfolding of a singular narrative of triumph.” Memory work has the potential to reframe the Tamil community not only as victims of state violence but also as a community defined, in part, by resilience and resistance.

By focusing on the ‘Tamils of Lanka’ exhibition as a centralised and explicit process of memorialisation and meaning-making here, I aim to document and theorise memory work in this specific part of the London Tamil diaspora, at this specific time, as an effort to mobilise broader collective resistance to Sri Lankan state violence and erasure. What I offer here is some context for understanding London Tamil diaspora dynamics and a brief, non-comprehensive description of the content of the exhibition, accompanied by photographs. This is followed by some reflections on the relationship between memory and resistance, drawing on academic insights that shaped my engagement with this memory work. I focus, in the latter part of the article, on the section of the exhibition that depicted the existence of a ‘de facto’ Tamil state in

the Northeast of the country. Finally, I offer some reflections on the relationship between memory, resistance, and hope.

The Tamil Information Centre's memory work: a community-led exhibition

In London, the Tamil Information Centre (TIC) hosted an exhibition and programme of events on 18-19 May 2019 called 'The Tamils of Lanka: a Timeless Heritage.' TIC is a small, longstanding human rights organisation based in South London. The importance of the exhibition became even more poignant following the sudden death of the much-loved and respected executive director of TIC, Mr. V. Varadakumar, two months before the exhibition. Varadakumar was TIC's sole paid member of staff before his death, and he relied heavily on volunteers to produce human rights research, which was mobilised to inform struggles for peace and justice and to inform asylum policy and processes in the UK. TIC was founded for this purpose, and to support the local Tamil-speaking community, to promote Tamil history and culture, and to organise community events and conferences.⁵⁹ TIC's inclusive language of the 'Tamil-speaking people' indicates efforts made over the years to reach out to, support and work alongside plantation Tamils, Muslims, and other Tamil-speaking people in Sri Lanka and abroad. TIC advocates for the self-determination for the Tamil-speaking people in the Northeastern 'homeland' of Tamil Eelam and centres human rights and freedom from oppression as its core principles. In terms of the vexed issue of support for the armed separatist movement led by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), TIC's approach was nuanced, historically-informed and critical: the movement mobilised in response to the Sri Lankan state's discrimination and genocidal violence and enjoyed wide support among the Tamil-speaking people, but the human rights implications of the war ought not to be ignored (TIC 1986, 2017). Working quietly and behind the scenes, Varadakumar's willingness to engage with all parties to the complicated conflict brought admiration from some and condemnation and suspicion from others.

Varadakumar's legacy as a central figure of diaspora meaning-making was manifest in the drive to honour his legacy and vision for the 'Tamils of Lanka' exhibition that energised TIC volunteers and exhibition contributors.⁶⁰ The exhibition's organising team, coming together in grief and with a commitment to delivering a project in line with his vision, was made up of mostly second-generation Tamils, with support from the older generation whose involvement with TIC was more longstanding. The legacy of a respected elder can promote, galvanise and significantly shape memory work. At the exhibition, a sari hung from the ceiling, painted with A. Sivanandan's words: 'when memory dies, a people die.' Until his death in 2018, Sivanandan was an important figure in London's anti-racist political and research circles and the emeritus director of the Institute of Race Relations. As a Tamil intellectual, he was immensely important to young, politicised Tamils. His novel – *When Memory Dies* – and his wider academic work warned of the erasure and re-writing of history, by the state and by the community itself (Sivanandan 2010, 1997, 1984). This focus on information – careful research and the avoidance of distortions – speaks to one of TIC's core aims: to empower people and improve lives through access to knowledge. The organisation of the 'Tamils of Lanka' exhibition was pursued in line

⁵⁹ See the TIC website for more details of this organisation's work and principles: <https://ticonline.org/index.php>.

⁶⁰ For more information about Varadakumar see the obituaries written by Thiagarajah (2019) and Miller (2019).

with TIC's mission to "[d]isseminate information and works of creative imagination in order to increase public knowledge on Tamil history, culture and contemporary politics" and to do this through community activities, in a community setting. The exhibition was entirely volunteer-run: dozens of activists, researchers, artists and community groups contributed by creating the exhibition content and leading and participating in the days' events.

According to the TIC, the aims of the Tamils of Lanka exhibition were:

"amplifying political and social struggles and raising awareness of and advocating justice for the decades-long list of human rights abuses throughout the island...to create awareness of the coordinated and planned actions of the Sri Lankan state - and its global backers - intended to destroy the essential foundations of the Tamil nation: personal security, health and dignity of the Tamil people; their political and social institutions; their culture, language, religion, and economy" (TIC press release, 30 May 2019).

The exhibition's aim with this memory work was explicitly evidentiary. It aimed to document and educate wider society about the catalogue of persecutions suffered by Tamils and to contribute to ongoing accountability and justice struggles. The use of the phrase 'intended to destroy' echoes the legalistic language of genocide. The Tamil nation is immediately foregrounded as a vehicle of hope and aspiration: a place where the rights listed as under threat by Sri Lankan state violence would be protected. The documentation of Tamil histories and stories in the exhibition was memory work committed to resisting state erasure and destruction. It included original research by TIC volunteers, documentation and analysis work by the Jaffna-based Adayaalam Centre for Policy Research and the International Truth and Justice Project, memory projects such as Tamil Survival Stories, and artwork reflecting on the impact of the war.⁶¹ The exhibition was a deliberate shaping of Tamil memory as counter-memory: memory work resisting the dominant conflict narrative that the state has tried to impose – a narrative of war heroes and terrorists, of a 'humanitarian operation,' and peace achieved through war (Hyndman and Amarasingam 2014; Keen 2014; Kleinfeld 2003; Seoighe 2017). The conflict memory authored and promoted by the state is in the service of denying atrocity. Violence against the Tamil people is consistently embedded in state narratives of counter-terrorism and humanitarian action to make it seem legitimate, even necessary (Seoighe 2017).

I have been associated with TIC through research and activism since the end of the war. My relationship with Varadakumar was a formative one (Seoighe 2019). This piece, conceived as a reflection on the exhibition and its place in London Tamil diaspora memory work, is indebted to autoethnographical approaches and activist-scholarship. I write from my experience of time spent with the Tamil community, particularly those associated with TIC, taking part in human rights activism, research, and community solidarity. I work from a feminist ethics of care and centralise practices such as reflexivity and collaboration in my research (Lorde 2007 [1984];

61 See the web presence of these initiatives and organisations: <http://adayaalam.org/>; <https://itjpsl.com/>; <https://www.instagram.com/tamilssurvivalstories/>.

Ahmed 2017; Ellis 1999; Ellis and Bochner 2000). In line with broad definitions of activist-scholarship, I aim to produce “politically engaged scholarship which aims at furthering justice and equality,” attentive to power dynamics in knowledge production and aiming to “bridge the divide between theory and practice and researcher and the researched subject” (Lennox and Yildiz 2020). Drawing on the insights of Coleman (2011: 264), careful activist-scholarship seeks to “unsettle attempts to read resistance through available theories, categories, and scholarly problematics” and to embrace what she calls “a critical ethos—akin to what Foucault once called an “ethic of discomfort” (1994 [1979]). This work informs my positionality between solidarity and academic writing. Writing from a place of solidarity and care, but attentive to the varied and complex histories, politics and ideological positions of the Tamil diaspora, my activist-scholarship is shaped by the embrace of complexity, messiness and discomfort in coming to understand the justice struggle. The goal, for me, is to write “meaningfully and evocatively about topics that matter and might make a difference” and to write from an ethic of care (Ellis and Bochner 2000: 742). Behar’s claim that social science “that doesn’t break your heart just isn’t worth doing” (1996, cited in Ellis 1999: 675) seems particularly resonant in relation to research with a persecuted and displaced community.

Diaspora politics and the role of memory

It is not an easy thing, in the wake of mass atrocity, to maintain resilience and struggle for justice, or simply just to live on. The Tamil diaspora in London is a complex community of established and recently arrived migrants and refugees. The community’s politics and worldview are not homogenous or fixed, either in terms of local UK party politics or Tamil-specific issues such as support for separatism or the militant Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Many fled state-perpetrated ethnic persecution throughout the war and many recent arrivals survived the final period of catastrophic violence known as Mullivaikkal.⁶² Others in the diaspora watched the war unfold from a distance: the scale of the violence at Mullivaikkal mobilised a younger generation of Tamils who were born or spent their formative years outside of Sri Lanka, purportedly with little attachment to the country (Kandiah forthcoming). Mullivaikkal generated radically different political patterns in the diaspora. While Tamil diaspora politics were traditionally dominated by first-generation males, or those who were born in Sri Lanka and fled or migrated as adults, Mullivaikkal prompted a younger generation of women and men to stage resistance and take ownership of the Tamil liberation struggle by leading and organising marches, demonstrations and campaigns (Kandiah forthcoming; Rasaratnam 2011: 10; Amarasingam 2015).

For Tamils in Sri Lanka, the brutal realities of violence and discrimination brought high levels of politicisation (Daniel 1996). The 1983 anti-Tamil riots, for example, brought enormous community coherence in the face of persecution: Daniel (1996: 170) argues that Tamils all over the island became “brothers and sisters under the trauma of persecution, arrests, torture and death”. This violence – up to 3000 Tamils were killed and many more were injured, displaced and fled the country in ‘Black July’ – brought explicit and undeniable recognition of shared

⁶² As most readers will know, Mullivaikkal is the name of the area where Tamil civilians were trapped between the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan state forces in the final military offensive by the state forces, which killed an estimated 70,000 Tamils in a period of six months (see ITJP, nd.).

vulnerability associated with the simple fact of Tamil identity. Of course, that recognition did not automatically generate straightforward support for the armed struggle led by the LTTE, though the majority of the Tamil population supported or sympathised with the LTTE (Wilson 2000: 131). The LTTE's role in much of Tamil life in Sri Lanka was complicated and experienced in a range of ways. Thiranagama (2012) describes and problematises how the organisation fashioned itself as the core of Tamil identity and ingrained itself in every aspect of community life. Black July and other incidents of mass atrocity against Tamils, however, inevitably shaped Tamil politics in Sri Lanka and the internationalisation of the conflict. The violence of Mullivaikkal in 2009 had a significant impact on diaspora engagement with Sri Lanka, particularly in terms of organising for accountability for war crimes and a newly energised separatist and nationalist sentiment (Kandiah forthcoming; Rasaratnam 2011). While conceptions of (and contestations over) 'long-distance nationalism' amongst Tamils in London are not new (Fuglerud 1999; Brun and van Hear 2012; Vimalarajah and Cheran 2010; Wayland 2004), Mullivaikkal significantly altered the parameters, shape, modes and scale of Tamil diaspora engagement (Rasaratnam 2011). As memory practices in the diaspora evolve, there are new signs of a transformed conflict script – of persecution, Tamil nationhood and decolonial liberation struggle – and challenges to Sri Lankan and international narratives of 'terrorist' Tamils both in Sri Lanka and abroad (Nadarajah, 2018; Nadarajah and Sentas, 2013; Kandiah forthcoming).

Pradeep Jeganathan's (1999) notion of living in the 'shadow of violence' is an evocative description of the aftermath of mass atrocity, where life goes on with a new awareness of the state's potential for violence. This is the environment in which the Tamil community in Sri Lanka pursue accountability processes, shape a new politics and new forms of agency without the LTTE, live everyday lives and try to recover. Mullivaikkal made clear the devaluation of Tamil life in Sri Lanka; for many it was indisputable evidence of genocidal violence. For the Tamil diaspora, the direct violence is more distant, the memories largely second-hand, but those memories are also marked by grief and trauma, anger, and horror, often coupled with the guilt of the survivor, the saved, the refugee. As Orjuela (2019: 1-2) notes, "mourners across the globe...mourn not only their loved ones who fell victim to atrocities but often also their own loss of home, motherland and life as it used to be." The stories being told by Tamils in Sri Lanka and the diaspora since Mullivaikkal make clear that violence continues, though less explicit and transformed: the state is committed to suppressing and annihilating Tamil politics and cultural life and dominating Tamil land (Seoighe 2017; Adayaalam 2017; ITJP 2018). Documentation of atrocities at the end of the war and persisting into the present represent not only evidence for anticipated accountability processes but also a powerful historical archive. As lived realities become memories with the passing of time, the field of memory studies can offer some guidance on the value of this archive as 'counter-memory' and a form of resistance to state violence. In this short piece, to integrate some insights from memory studies into understandings of atrocity and diaspora politics, I focus on TIC's effort to drive the London Tamil community's investment in memorialisation and documentation as a form of resistance to Sri Lanka's conflict narrative.

The ‘Tamils of Lanka: a timeless heritage’ exhibition

Memory work is always selective: “all policies for conservation and memory, by selecting which artefacts and traces to preserve, conserve or commemorate, have an implicit will to forget” (Jelin 2003: 18). Memory workers are those who orchestrate memory practices, who try to generate a consistent narrative about the past and create rituals to embed that narrative. This can form the centre of community life and shape understandings of politics and history. The LTTE shaped the narrative of loss, grief and aspiration among Tamils for decades. The ‘Tamils of Lanka’ exhibition – as a collective, community activity informed by dozens of individuals and organisations – appeared to leave space for nuance, for the reconstruction of memory, and the multiplicity of histories and interpretations of the past. Perhaps this was due to TIC’s Varadakumar and his spectre in the organisational process. Varadakumar, from my observations of his practice, was an unusually inclusive thinker, rare in his ability to pass knowledge on without the weight of grievance that attaches itself to history. The volunteer organisers remembered conversations with Varadakumar as guiding principles – channelling his judgment, decisions were made based on his inclusive politics and his careful navigation of the traps of narrative and grievance.⁶³ The principles he embodied energised a new generation of memory makers. Before he died, the sections of the exhibition were defined in dialogue with invited academics, researchers, artists, activists and organisers, many of whom met monthly from mid-2018 to consider the objectives, principles and scope of the exhibition and to discuss progress. Before he died, Varadakumar bore the weight of coordinating the planning of the exhibition: identifying and communicating with contributors, exploring venue options and logistics, producing documents, and mobilising volunteers to assist with the project. The project was delivered by TIC volunteers after his death, making every effort to identify and pursue all the work he began.

⁶³ In a forthcoming article, I explore the narratives of the central organising team, in order to trace Varadakumar’s legacy in the process of organising the exhibition.



Fig. 1. Photo: TIC volunteer

On entering the exhibition space, the first section of the exhibition was dedicated to the ‘ancient history’ of Ilankai Tamils, from geology to development to cultural practices, informed by Dr. Siva Thiagarajah’s (2019) book which also gave the exhibition its name. This section also included an alternative history of Sri Lanka, centralising anti-caste violence, by political geographer Sinthujan Varatharajah.⁶⁴ The history of the conflict was told through political cartoons gathered and selected by volunteers from Tamil, English and Sinhalese media. A section was also dedicated to the plantation or ‘hill country’ Tamils, their distinct history and plight (fig. 1). Walking deeper into the hall, a section on Tamil political resistance was made up of content created by TIC volunteer researchers and contributions by research and activist organisations. The history of the emergence of the armed movement was carefully explored in a detailed and referenced display, created by TIC volunteers. This display sets a narrative of discrimination against Tamils, initial peaceful resistance and political engagement, which, in the face of state repression and violence, developed into an armed youth movement led by the LTTE. Another display presented academic research into second-generation Tamil diaspora protests and political mobilisation in response to the horrors of 2009. Journalist and film-maker Nalini Sivathanas prepared a display on the use of the Tamil drum – the parai – as a form of

64 Varatharajah’s Instagram account beautifully explores Tamil and diaspora Tamil histories, lived experience and analysis: <https://www.instagram.com/varathas/?hl=en>.

resistance by Tamil refugees.⁶⁵ Research organisations Adayaalam Centre for Policy Research and PEARL created displays documenting ongoing accountability efforts and resistance to state violence: the ongoing protests by the families of the disappeared and the ongoing militarisation and displacement in traditionally Tamil areas (ACPR 2017, 2018; ACPR and PEARL 2017).



Fig. 2 Image: Tamil Survival Stories

From this section, walking past tables displaying a range of books from a personal collection related to Tamil culture, heritage and the conflict, visitors next found themselves in a section relating to the various consequences of the conflict. Memory projects of various type were presented here: Tamil Survival Stories, which gathers oral histories and beautiful photographs of diaspora Tamils, offering an insight into migratory histories, cultural transformation and political beliefs across continents, age, gender and experience (fig. 2). A volunteer research project into Tamil immigration to the UK culminated in images and stories of individuals in the London diaspora – including some public figures such as A. Sivanandan, complete with mock-ups of the British passports granted to them (fig. 3).

⁶⁵ Watch an associated film, 'Parai: the beat to freedom' here: <https://vimeo.com/321322460>.



Fig 3. Photo: Ahila Rupan

A series of documentaries created for the exhibition by TIC volunteers in Sri Lanka and London played on borrowed televisions. Some explored little-known histories of Tamil massacres perpetrated across the decades of war. Another, accompanied by an informative display, captured the experiences of conflict-affected women struggling to survive in the Northeast in the aftermath of the war. Other displays documented the destruction of sacred sites over the years of war, the displacement of Tamils, and the militarisation of the Northeast (PEARL and ACPR 2017), which Tamil activists and academics argue form part of a process of ‘Sinhalisation’ (Fernando 2013; Seoighe 2016, 2017). Researcher Phil Miller contributed a display of photographs and Foreign Office archival documents telling the story of a British mercenary company which worked for the Sri Lankan state in the 1980s, a story which intended to prompt visitors to think critically about the relationship between Britain and Sri Lanka. Miller’s book *‘Keenie Meenie: The British Mercenaries Who Got Away with War Crimes’* (2020) has since been released, and the trailer for the forthcoming documentary on the subject was played at the exhibition.



Fig. 4. Image: Tamil Guardian

In the corner of the big hall, a section was built as a reconstruction of the de facto state (fig. 4), discussed further below. The layout of the hall meant that visitors came to this section – documenting nascent Tamil nationhood – after exploring varied histories and stories of violence. The de facto state, in this historical narrative, was arrived upon by visitors as a space of hope and resistance to genocidal violence. This moment of reprieve, however – documenting the construction of a nascent state during the years of ceasefire in the early 2000s – channelled visitors towards the ‘Mullivaikkal room.’ This was a separate space in the exhibition dedicated to highlighting the massacre of tens of thousands of Tamils at the end of the war in 2009. In this room, dozens of original photographs were displayed, taken by a photographer⁶⁶ who experienced Mullivaikkal and captured the violence experienced by the Tamils at that time (fig. 5).

⁶⁶ The photographer will not be named here to preserve her anonymity.



Fig. 5. Image: TIC volunteer

Artistic responses to the horrors of this time were also displayed, alongside information of accountability projects such as the International Truth and Justice Project's 'Counting the Dead' initiative, which aims to arrive at a final number of deaths from that time – a contested and much-debated issue. Space was allocated for reconstructions of make-shift tents that people lived in, while being pushed towards the final scene of violence: the beach at Mullivaikkal (fig. 6). These displays were put together by Tamil refugee volunteers who experienced this period first-hand. To bring visitors closer to understanding the experience, a group of these volunteers cooked *kanji* – a basic rice dish that was one of the only sources of nutrition for Tamils at that time (fig. 7).



Fig 6. Image: TIC volunteer

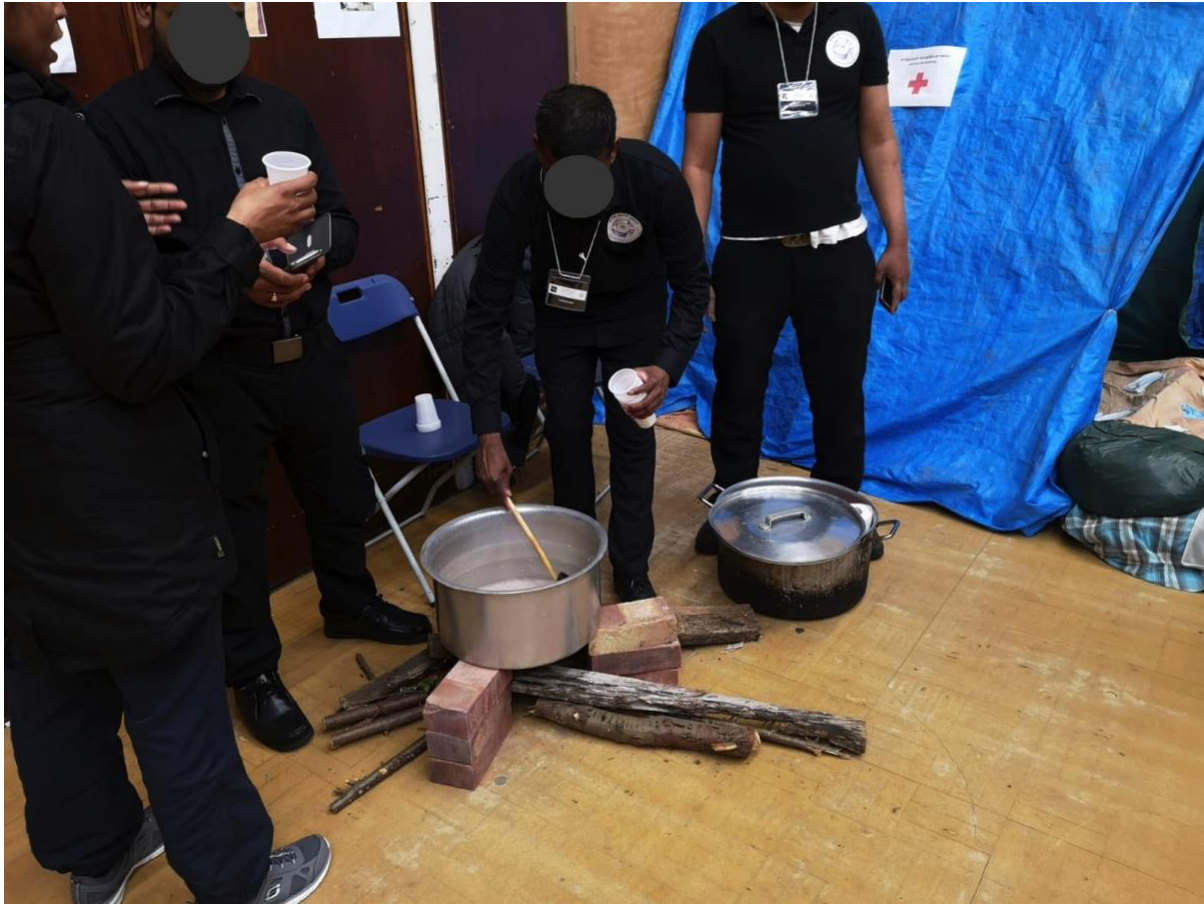


Fig. 7. Image: TIC volunteer

In a separate room, artistic content was carefully curated alongside material objects and informative displays detailing aspects of Tamil culture, focusing on food and traditional modes of cooking, Tamil architecture and its historical development across the island, musical instruments, and traditional activities such as chariot-racing (fig. 8). Photographer Sabes Sugunasabesan curated the space and included some of his work, which addresses themes of diaspora engagement with the violence of the war (fig. 9). In an article advertising the exhibition (TIC 2019), Sugunasabesan is quoted: “Despite the distance, the war affected me profoundly. My work is about connecting with the people from this distance.”



Fig 8. Image: Sabes Sugunasabesan

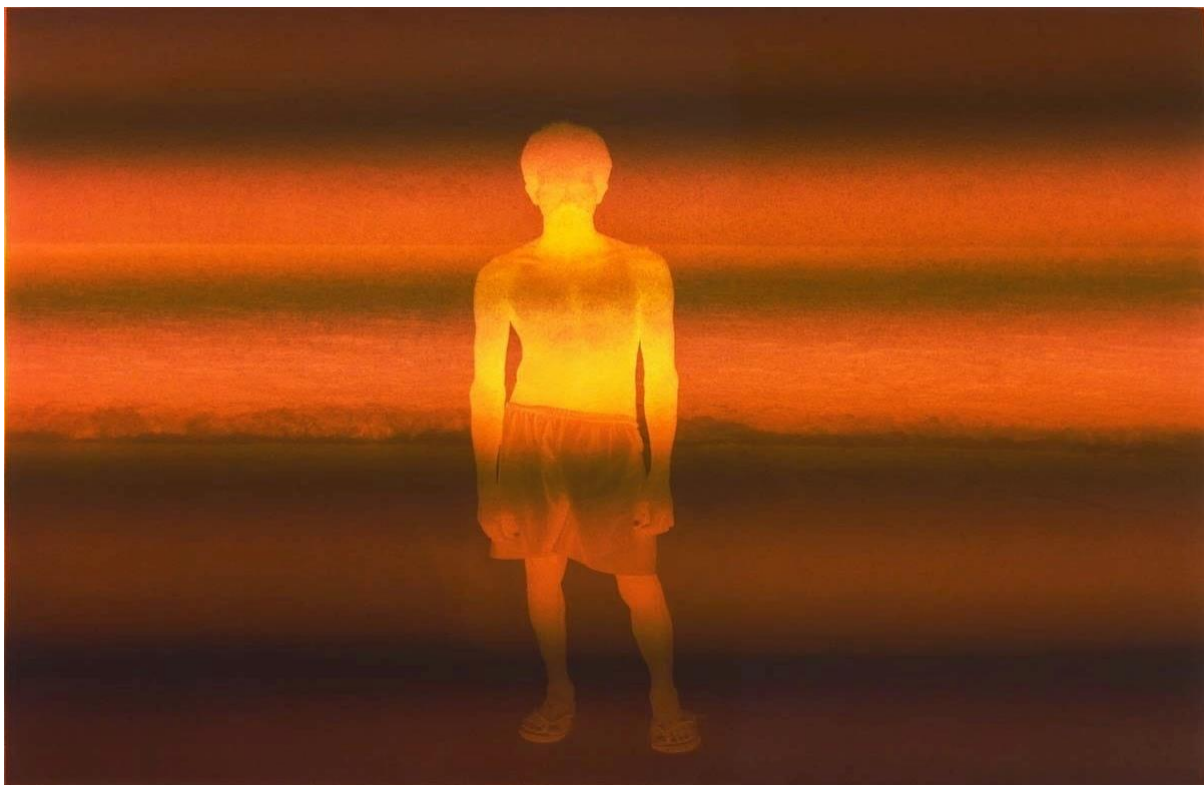


Fig. 9 Image: Sabes Sugunasabesan 'Last walk to the beach'

South Korean artist Yeni Kim, a student at Kingston University, close to the TIC offices, contributed beautiful illustrations, drawing on her interviews about memories of home with London-based Tamils (fig. 10). Kim also ran workshops with visitors about their memories of Sri Lanka as home. Back in the main hall, volunteers also ran art workshops with children, using collage and other creative methods to explore ideas of home, identity and understandings of the conflict. Some were taken home and others were hung on the wall to form part of the exhibition (fig. 11).



Fig. 10. Image: Yeni Kim



Fig 11: Image: Ahila Rupan

Memory and resistance: community memory work

From the academic literature on memory, it is clear that memory, commemoration and resistance have a close relationship. Studies of resistance have articulated the intricate and complex entanglements of power and resistance (Nadarajah and Sentas 2013; Baaz et al 2017) and, more recently and useful for our purposes here, resistance “at the crossroad of affects and emotions,” which have rarely been centralised in research, though they have been silently inherent to theories of resistance (Baaz et al 2017: 127; Scott 1990). Commemoration in its various forms – history-telling, public events and ceremonies, sites and symbols such as monuments, clothing and iconography – are often established and maintained as markers of national and other identities (Olick and Robbins 1998: 124). They can work to proffer strategies

of cohesion and struggle, and visions of nationhood: “remembered” events come to constitute a shared basis of peoplehood (Khalili 2007: 3). Collective memories, shaped and shared in ritual and commemorative practice, provide a context for identity and are powerful meaning-making tools for individuals and communities (Pennebaker and Banasik 1997: 18). Those practices, signs, discourses and material entities are bound up with emotions, which are often interrelated or intra-act with resistance (Baaz et al 2017: 128). Halbwachs (1992) describes collective memory as the active past that forms our identities, a shared memory that is collectively recalled, recognised, localised and reconstructed in a social process. Where political and social space is available, collective memory is formed as a dynamic social and psychological endeavour, a continuous conversation among affected individuals (Pennebaker and Banasik 1997: 4). This conversation is informed by both the needs and desires of the community in the present and by the identity they inhabit. Drawing on Deleuze (2000), Curti (2008: 107) understands memory as “not that of a past that ‘represent[s] something that has been, but something that is and that coexists with itself in the present.’” For Bellah et al (1985), identity is an active project constituted and maintained by social practices, based on narratives of the past that have been accepted by a community as its ‘constitutive narrative.’ I have argued elsewhere that the catastrophic events at Mullivaikkal have entered and informed the Tamil community’s constitutive narrative, both in Sri Lanka and the among the Tamil diaspora, producing new iterations of nationalism and identity (Seoighe 2017, 2016b). In line with the Foucauldian model of ‘counter-memory’ (Seoighe 2017), but also attuned to the links between emotion, affect and resistance, we can perhaps situate this exhibition as a cultural, political and social articulation of resistance which challenges the dominant official script set by the Sri Lankan state. Following Baaz et al (2017: 128), it seems important to acknowledge how “emotions make resistance possible, but also how emotions orient, embody, construct, or are the product of, resistance.”

For the Tamil community, political resistance has always been intimately linked to memorialisation, loss, and grief, particularly the commemoration of lost lives of resistance fighters, the LTTE’s *maaveerar* (Seoighe 2017; de Silva 1995; Natali 2008). The annual performance of rituals commemorating *Maaveerar Naal* (Great Heroes’ Day) on 27 November spread emotive nationalistic sentiment amongst the diaspora, creating a “transnational martial community” based on martyrdom (de Mel 2007: 18). And of course, many families in the diaspora are “maaveerar families” (Orjuela, 2019: 8), whose personal losses are collectively grieved. For the diaspora, commemorative activities enacting “performatives that keep the histories of oppression and martial success alive” have centered on the deaths of martyrs (de Mel 2007, p.18).



Fig. 12 Image: TIC volunteer

This practice was observed at the Tamils of Lanka exhibition, where a *maaveerar* gravestone was constructed in the centre of the section recreated to represent the de facto state (fig. 12). It symbolised the centrality of loss, death, and sacrifice to the project of the separate state, a powerful emotive encounter with the materiality of loss. A piece of gravestone from a *maaveerar* graveyard – one of many destroyed by the Sri Lankan state after the war (Seoighe 2015, 2016, 2017; Perera 2012) – was displayed as evidence of the state’s efforts to destroy not only Tamil lives but the Tamil nation and its constituent memory practices (fig. 13). This destruction forms an important part of claims of state-perpetrated genocide for many Tamils and “[r]eenacting the cemeteries in diasporic spaces can thus be seen as resistance against a still ongoing genocide” (Orjuela, 2019: 9). As “an engine of resistance,” the emotional bonds formed by grief, loss and collective mourning demonstrate here how emotions create communities of resistance (Baaz et al 2017: 129).



Fig. 13. Image: TIC volunteer

Tamils in the Northeast have long demonstrated that reclaiming the narrative of conflict and agitating for justice is bound up with mourning and memorialising the dead and holding on to rituals developed for this purpose. The ongoing collective memory practices of *maaveerar naal* have made that clear. Despite being denigrated and threatened as terrorists or terrorist sympathisers, and despite the destruction of graveyards, people in the Northeast of Sri Lanka and across the diaspora light candles in reconstructed spaces on this commemorative day (see Tamil Guardian 2018, 2019). The Sri Lankan state's destruction of places of mourning and memory is symbolic and highly emotive. The state knows that collective commemoration is dangerous, that it challenges its story, that it feeds justice struggles, creating communities of resistance that refuse to be quietened. Since the end of the war in 2009, this has been demonstrated by the state's concern with authoring the conflict – in discourse and physical constructions such as military installations and monuments that tell stories of heroism, victory, and nationalistic pride. These acts of 'Sinhalisation' – depicted in the exhibition content – are perceived by the Tamil people of the Northeast, whose loved ones were killed, injured, displaced and exiled by the state forces, as a harmful, cruel communication of power (Seoighe 2016, 2017).

The Tamils of Lanka exhibition took the theme of resilience as its central theme – hoping to emphasise that victims are also survivors and resisters, and that the community's culture and heritage has survived and transformed despite its traumatic history of persecution. Held on the ten-year anniversary of Mullivaikkal, the exhibition was conceived as a collective effort to make sense of this particular moment in time by listening to the horrors of the past, taking the time to revisit painful images through photographs and installations, and to learn about continuing practices of torture, displacement, and militarisation (ITJP, 2018; Adayaalam 2017). It seems that resistance is tightly bound up with, and takes the shape of, documentation, memory work, and affective and cultural memory practices, including the commitment to collectively honouring the dead. The exhibition also, as mentioned above, platformed ongoing practices of resistance by Tamil communities in Sri Lanka, for example the ongoing protests of the Families of the Disappeared. The families are calling for information on, and the return of, their loved ones who are missing or forcibly disappeared as a result of the war. As Kate Cronin-Furman (2018, n.p.) argues, the "injunction against memory is...[an] insidious silencing." The state, through "harassment and occasional violence inflicted on the protesters" attempts to suppress these emotional appeals, "warning them that their perseverance is dangerous." By raising awareness of these protests and the state repression (and physical conditions) suffered by protestors, visitors were prompted to reflect on the resilience of those pursuing justice in the local context. The exhibition demonstrated the imperative of activist memory work as a tool to pursue accountability, a form of resistance against the silencing of justice claims.

Memories of Tamil Eelam: the de facto state

Ten years since Mullivaikkal, the exhibition aimed to prompt reflection on what impact the passing of time has not only on the memory of atrocity and the ongoing struggle for accountability, but also the memory of nascent Tamil statehood. As the movement for a separate state of Tamil Eelam – its rationale, its perceived necessity, and its army and

institutions – becomes a movement to be historicised, collective memory practices are likely to shape that history. Baaz et al (2017: 130) note that “enthusiasm and devotion for ‘alternative’ or ‘prefigurative’ social institutions” can be read as emotional investments in resistance, which can orient the direction of struggle. In the case of the ‘de facto state’ of Tamil Eelam, this emotional enthusiasm was teamed with martial determination and came into tentative existence for a short time. As a counter to the state narrative of Tamil terrorism, the TIC exhibition explicitly situated the struggle to establish the separate state of Tamil Eelam in a history of resistance and a narrative of decolonial liberation. The ‘de facto state’ section of the ‘Tamils of Lanka’ exhibition was dedicated to this history and displayed rare photographs and documentation contributed by volunteers, many of whom were previously members of the LTTE. Photographs and text displays detailed the range and sophistication of state-like institutions – the courts, the police, the various welfare institutions and, of course, the expansive military machinery. Visitors were prompted, in a non-explicit way, to reflect on and acknowledge the destruction of statehood as a discrete political and emotional loss. As articulated in a TIC press release after the exhibition:

“The purpose of this section was to establish the truth that the war that ended in 2009 was not a war against ‘terrorism’, but a war against Tamil civilians and, above all, a war to destroy a fully functioning Tamil nation. This was presented not as a nostalgic relic but to preserve histories and emotions that are at risk of being forgotten and erased” (TIC press release, 30 May 2019).

As Malathy (2013) notes, the Tamil population had, and still has, an intricate relationship with the LTTE. Most people would have known a family member, friend or neighbour who was part of the movement, and it staffed the various governance structures of the de facto state (Malathy 2013). Despite its complex and violent history of power-building – described by some as “a homogenising, constraining and oppressive process” (Jeganathan and Ismail 1995) – the LTTE was largely recognised by the community as resistance fighters, the Tamil community’s “undisciplined army” (cited in Seoighe 2017) in a war against a genocidal Sri Lankan state. Recruitment to the LTTE often rose significantly in response to incidents of state violence perpetrated against Tamils (Richards 2014). Particularly in the latter years of war, the LTTE also insisted that every household give a son or daughter to the struggle (Orjuela, 2019: 8; Malathy, 2012; UTHR-J, 2007: 17:2; Richards, 2014: 32). Joining the movement was for most a means of avenging the deaths of loved ones and working towards the goal of a separate state, where Tamils could be liberated from state violence. That goal reached an unimaginable and perhaps internationally underacknowledged level of success in the de facto state (Malathy 2013).

Parasram’s (2012: 905) discussion of the efforts by the LTTE and the Sri Lankan state to territorialise Tamil Eelam – “a process of ‘writing space’ that inscribes socio-political meaning to physical geography” – argues for a postcolonial reading of this process. Relying on Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) concept of ‘de/re territorialisation,’ he persuasively argues for a reading of territory as being in a perpetual state of ‘becoming’ rather than as something static, particularly in relation to postcolonial liberation and nation-building projects. This helps us to acknowledge not only the real and lived potential of the project of Tamil Eelam, the interplay of power and

resistance and complex emotional investments in the achievement or defeat of the project, but also how the particular geopolitics and discourses of the 'war on terror' and legalistic interpretations of state-based sovereignty rendered Tamil Eelam 'illegitimate' and secured the nation for the Sri Lanka state (Parasram, 2012). For our purposes here, the exhibition hoped to create an embodied, affective interaction with the 'becoming' of Tamil Eelam – its temporary existence as a real possibility, a hopeful and secure future – in order to shape London Tamils' memories of conflict.

For the diaspora, remembering the de facto state has the potential to evoke powerful feelings of longing, loss, and disappointment for what might have been, where the community's emotional relationship to the 'homeland' is defined by exile. Orjuela (2019: 9) understands such material reconstructions of spaces of Tamil national symbolism as "[a]ttempts to materially connect homeland and new country through memorialization." Feelings of deracination, forced displacement from the homeland and memories (whether personal or collective) of statehood inform a longing for Tamil Eelam in the present, felt and presented by the TIC volunteers. Spinoza's (1996) description of longing is useful here:

"a desire, or appetite, to possess something which is encouraged by the memory of that thing, and at the same time restrained by the memory of other things which exclude the existence of the thing wanted" (cited in Curti 2008: 114).

A sense of longing for the de facto state might arise from the co-implication of memory and emotion in relation to space, place, and identity that Curti (2008) describes: "memory and emotion, their forces and trans-formations, cannot be treated as particular, disjointed drives or events...one is always a symptom of the other" (Curti 2008: 116). Drawing on Till (2005), he notes that memory is a political project that contributes to the construction and transformation of place, a project which is always sustained by emotion. Further, emotions are embodied and lived in an everyday sense, with and through others: identities are formed, and collective selves shaped through the mutually reflexive nature of embodied emotions and memories (Curti, 2008: 107). At the 'Tamils of Lanka' exhibition, visitors collectively experienced the de facto state, in a condensed but intensely informative and visual way. Surrounded by dozens of images of structures, institutions, LTTE leaders and cadres, with the grave of a *maaveerar* and the Tamil Eelam flag at the centre of the small space, visitors were transported to a moment in time, to a state that was felt to exist, even for a "fleeting moment" (Malathy 2013). Orjuela (2019: 9), in her research on the materiality of Tamil diaspora memorialisation, noted that physical sites such as this one "could be seen as an (imagined and partial) answer to the desperation of a people that had lost their struggle for a separate state, been dispersed across the globe and lacked access to a grave to mourn their loved ones." The practice of remembering through rituals and national symbols developed by the LTTE, might heal "the sores of their unfulfilled longings" and allow for a feeling of belonging to the Tamil nation (Bruland, 2015: 93–94, cited in Orjuela, 2019: 9). For second generation Tamils, who did not experience life in the de facto state, the material dimensions of the space perhaps represented a way of forging connections with this history, and between those with lived experience of the Tamil nation in its nascent state and those without.

In line with Orjuela's findings in relation to Tamil diaspora memorialisation, the violence of the LTTE in pursuit of its national goals was largely absent from the histories presented in the exhibition:

"The narrative of these events highlights the self-less sacrifice of the martyrs and brave struggle of the Tamils, while assigning blame to the Sri Lankan state perpetrating the killings and the international community which failed – and continues to fail – the Tamil people. There is, not unexpectedly, a complete silence about the numerous victims – many of them Tamil – of LTTE violence" (Orjuela, 2019: 8).

In a forthcoming article, I explore the narratives of the exhibition organisers, engaging (among other topics) with the dialogues that informed this decision not to include details of LTTE violence. It is too complicated a picture to summarise here but, briefly, volunteers were divided on the issue. Many volunteers felt ill-equipped and unwilling to contend with the contestation that would inevitably come, but uncomfortable with the selectivity of the narrative. Others were insistent that such violence should not be discussed, and that effective resistance should only emphasise the violence inflicted by the genocidal state. The exhibition did, however, open dynamic and ongoing conversations among TIC volunteers about the need to explore and acknowledge the complex, messy history of the Tamil struggle, including discussions about LTTE violence and its narrativisation.⁶⁷ As an example of memory work, the exhibition has worked in various ways to prompt more honest and complex conversations among the organisers, the visitors, and the wider Tamil community.

Conclusion: memory, resistance and hope

Reflecting on the achievements of the exhibition, we could ask whether memory, while certainly sustaining resistance and creating communities bound together emotionally, can also lead us towards hope. The Tamil community in Sri Lanka are still suffering conditions of marginalisation, dispossession, and repression in the wake of explicit violence. The possibility of accountability and justice for war crimes perpetrated at Mullivaikkal and throughout the war seems as distant as ever. But there are elements of hope. Resistance was newly articulated through memories expressed and brought to life in the work exhibited at the 'Tamil of Lanka' exhibition. The various ways in which Tamils resist and have historically resisted state violence were displayed and explored, offering new ways of conceptualising and remembering identity, persecution, survival, and statehood. It represented an active, intergenerational community space, where exhibition content and conversations forged connections between those with very diverse experiences of conflict, atrocity, and exile. The exhibition itself, led by young diaspora Tamils, can be considered as an act of resistance – an effort to resist erasure and the rewriting of history, and an effort to channel emotionally-laden memories into resilience and collectivity, rather than narratives of suffering and victimisation (Seoighe 2016). TIC's deceased

⁶⁷ In forthcoming work, I explore how the exhibition – and Varadakumar's legacy – prompted discussions within this London Tamil diaspora community on how the LTTE should be remembered, including conversations about the relationship between the LTTE, notions of nationhood and representations of nationhood, including the Eelam flag. The process of the exhibition prompted conversations that are now being pursued in popular, dynamic discussion groups.

executive director Varadakumar – whose vision shaped the exhibition – was concerned with educating the second and third generation of diaspora Tamils; implicit in this initiative was a plea to the wider diaspora community not to forget. This exhibition can be understood as one small organisation’s effort to undertake memory work, within its specific context, as a means of generating wider community mobilisation towards justice. It seems that a new politics is taking shape, and memory work as a form of resistance is at the centre of that politics.

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