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(RE-)DEFINING COMMON GROUNDS

CONSTRUCTING A TAMIL COMMUNITY IN CANADA

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Building Bridges: Constructing a Tamil Community in Canada

Since Black July 1983¹, masses of Tamils have fled from Sri Lanka fearing violence, abuse, and torture from the Sri Lankan government. Today, the situation for Tamils in Sri Lanka has changed little, if not worsened: Tamils still are persecuted for being Tamil. In line with this, a recently published report by Human Rights Watch uncovers sexual violence by Sri Lankan security forces against 31 Tamil men, 41 Tamil women and 3 boys under the age 18 in state custody between 2006 and 2012². Bearing these shocking truths in mind about what it means for Sri Lankan Tamils to be Tamil, I will dedicate this essay to the question on how to construct a Tamil community in Canada.

Due to insufficient available national data, it is difficult to number the Sri Lankan Tamil communities existing outside of Sri Lanka. However, an unofficial approximation in 1997 suggested a total number of 700,00 Sri Lankan Tamils living abroad³, while more recently a number of “perhaps 80 million people”⁴ was estimated. Whatever number might be ‘correct’, it is to say that we are talking about a significantly large group of Sri Lankan Tamils living in North America, Europe, India, and Australasia⁵. For Canada, the 2011 census on immigrant languages indicates a population of 143,000, which makes Sri Lankan Tamils the 16th largest immigrant language group in Canada. Most Canadian Tamils live in Toronto, which is a number of 102,700 people (5.7% of Toronto)⁶.

What do these Tamils living outside of Sri Lanka share among each other? Whereas the common ground among Sri Lankan Tamils is at the least given by the fact of exclusion, harassment, and persecution by the Sri Lankan government in every-day life, defining a common ground for the construction of a Tamil community in Canada might turn out to be a difficult project.

Defining common grounds

There are some cultural⁷ features which are mentioned repetitively when the question of a common Tamil identity arises⁸ which could serve as common ground for the Tamil community in Canada.

¹ July 1983 marked a turning point in the Sinhala-Tamil conflict in Sri Lanka which led to the mass exodus of the Tamil minority. The killing of 13 Sinhala soldiers on 23 July 1983 led to riots in Colombo and other towns in which “probably 2,000 to 3,000 of Tamil civilians were killed”. Spencer, Jonathan (1990): Collective Violence and Everyday Practice in Sri Lanka. In: Modern South Asian Studies 24: 3. pp. 603-623. p. 616.

² Human Rights Watch (2013): We Will Teach You a Lesson: Sexual Violence against Tamils by Sri Lankan Security Forces.

³ Fuglerud, Oivind (2001): Time and space in the Sri Lanka-Tamil diaspora. In: Nations and Nationalism 7: 2. pp. 195-213.

⁴ Healy, Jack (2013): The Tamils in Sri Lanka: From Tigers Into Lambs. Huffington Post, 3rd April 2013. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jack-healey/the-tamils-in-sri-lanka-f_b_2806610.html.

⁵ Sriskandarajah, Dhananjayan (2005): Tamil Diaspora Politics. In: Encyclopaedia of Diasporas. New York: Springer Science and Business Media Inc. pp. 492-500.

⁶ Houle, René (2011): Immigrant Languages in Canada: Language, 2011 Census of Population. Catalogue no. 98-314-X2011003. Statistics Canada.

⁷ If we are – as suggested by the essay topic – thinking about the formation of ethnic communities as *construction*, we implicitly do not regard ethnic groups as biologically determined entities: we assume that there is no such thing as a ‘Tamil gene’ which could make a person behave Tamil by nature. Thus, I will only consider *cultural* -not biological - features in the following discussion on common grounds of the Tamil community in Canada.

Taking part in Tamil culture, one might suggest, is an essential feature to pass as Tamil. An authentic Tamil has to have access to Tamil literature and music, one of the oldest pieces of art in the world. However, if being a proper Tamil implies having a deep understanding for Tamil high culture, does that mean that only those Tamils are proper Tamils who hold a degree in Tamil studies since they are the ones who really have got a deep understanding for Tamil culture? Moreover, we are familiar with the struggle of second generation Canadian Tamils with Tamil language. Should we exclude those who cannot read and write in Tamil or should we draw the line between those Tamils who speak fluently and those who do not? (And what if a white person wrote and spoke Tamil fluently; does that make him/her a Tamil?). Disregarding the fact that the line would have to be drawn arbitrarily, do we really want to exclude thousands of young Tamils who might be identifying with Tamil culture but do not speak Tamil fluently? And would the preference of older members of the Tamil community in Canada who have been educated in Sri Lanka, over broad numbers of young Canadian Tamils not mean we have failed translating the Tamil past into Canadian presents? There must be more to it.

We could broaden our understanding of culture, from high culture (literature, dance, music) to every-day culture (customs, traditions). We could define that only those Tamils who are able to cook Tamil food are real Tamils. Being able to prepare a good Tamil dish and having the family gathered around the table to eat might make up the core of Tamil every-day culture. But then again, how many Tamil men are able to cook a tasty dish of puttu together with several curries? Does that make half of the Canadian Tamil community less of a Tamil? Furthermore, we could determine that only those Tamils who live in arranged marriages, are real Tamils. Arranged marriage, one could argue, is an important institution in Tamil culture which determines the values parents teach their children and which shapes every-day lives of Tamil families in contrast to other “western” lifestyles. Nevertheless, as Renuka Kumarasamy uncovers by referring to A. K. Ramanujan’s English translation of *Kuruntokai*, an anthology of Tamil Love lyrics recorded during the first three centuries A.D, we find that Tamil poets of the Sangam Period have glorified romantic love way before the idea of love marriages has been established in Europe after the 12th century⁹. Thus, the analysis undertaken by Kumarasamy displays that the institution of arranged marriage in contrast to romantic love has not at all times been a core feature of Tamil culture. Which brings up the question why it should be today.

⁸ see i.e. articles published within the past six month on the platform “Tamil Culture: the first online Tamil lifestyle magazine” by second generation Tamils living in Canada, “How Tamil are you?” and “What’s in a Name?” by Anu_Ksomething and “I am still Tamil” by Sriram Pakeerathan. <http://www.tamilculture.ca/how-tamil-are-you/>; <http://www.tamilculture.ca/whats-in-a-name/>; <http://www.tamilculture.ca/i-am-still-tamil/>; last accessed: 29th April 2013.

⁹ Renuka Kumarasamy (2006): Caste, Dowry and Arranged Marriage in Tamil Society. *Ilankai Tamil Sangam*, the Association of Tamils of Sri Lanka in the USA. http://sangam.org/taraki/articles/2006/11-20_Marriage.php?uid=2057. Last accessed: 29th April 2013.

Now that we have considered different features which could be regarded as common ground for constructing a Tamil community in Canada – participation in Tamil high culture, language, food, marriage customs – we are left with the problem that either, we would have to exclude too many people who regard themselves as Tamils or who any other Tamil would spontaneously identify as Tamil, or that those features themselves turn out to not be really Tamil in the first place. At this point, the endeavour of constructing a Tamil community in Canada based on one shared Tamil identity might result in the conclusion that there is no such thing as a Tamil essence.

Does this mean we are not Tamils? Who am I then?

The question ‘Who am I?’ leads us straight to modern subject philosophy. By stating, “cogito, ergo sum”¹⁰ - I think, therefore I am - René Descartes (1641) introduced the subject of modernity into philosophy. Before Descartes, the individual was thought of as inseparable from its society, a mere product of its inner and outer nature. In contrast, the modern subject is characterized by autonomy, a “free reasoning subject”¹¹ which is capable of cognition and thus, controlling its inner nature, together with its ability for rational, purposeful agency, hence, controlling its outer nature. It was this paradigm shift introduced by modern subject philosophy in 17th century Europe which spread the idea of the subject separated from its society, the idea that every individual has got a core inner essence, irrespective of society’s influence.

More than 300 years later, this dominant idea of European enlightenment was questioned by Michel Foucault. Instead of asking ‘who am I?’, he asked ‘how do we come to identify with what we think we are?’. Obviously, his approach to subject philosophy does not take up on the Cartesian idea of an essentialist ‘I’. Furthermore, he brings back society into the picture by emphasizing the ‘we’. In doing so, Foucault introduced the term “discourse” into the philosophical debate in order to describe specific historical formations of power and knowledge. These formations of power and knowledge, he assumes, are producing identities which serve as basis for “self-making and being-made”¹², thus the constitution of the subject. In *The Will to Knowledge (Vol. I) (1976)* Foucault exemplified his concept of ‘identity as regulation and production of knowledge’ by analysing the development of the sexual discourse of modern bourgeois society in Europe. From Foucault’s perspective, the emergence of new scientific fields, such as medicine and psychology, in 17th century marks a significant turning point regarding the regulation and the production of knowledge on sexuality. Taking these developments into account, he concludes that there are both, juridical and productive modes of

¹⁰ Descartes, R. (1984). *The philosophical writing of Descartes (Vol. II)*. Translated by Cottingham et al. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Original work published 1641.

¹¹ Strozier, Robert M. (2002): *Foucault, Subjectivity, and Identity: Historical Constructions of Subject and Self*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press. p. 16.

¹² Krause, Kristine and Katharina Schramm (2011): *Thinking through Political Subjectivity*. In: *African Diaspora* (4). pp. 115-134. p. 127.

power. These are regulating and generating knowledge, creating identities reciprocally and forcing individuals to act according to these discursively originated identities. Thus, the subject recognises him/herself only through identities which are produced and regulated by discursive formations.¹³

Transferring Foucault's considerations to the production of ethnic identities, the emergence of the idea of the nation state in 19th century Europe is a distinctive turn of history- or as Foucault might have put it: a point of generation of knowledge. The regulation of nation state boundaries in 19th century Europe¹⁴, and again in the postcolonial South after 1945¹⁵, has led to the production of knowledge on what makes up nations and who belongs to which nation. Still today, "nation-building is an ongoing process full of revisions and reversals, as is illustrated by the recent introduction of dual nationality laws in many countries, the abandonment of white preference policies in U.S., Canadian, and Australian immigration law, or the recent shift to a partial *ius sanguinis*¹⁶ in Germany"¹⁷. Because nation-building is an ongoing process, there still is a distinctive knowledge regulated and produced on what it means to be Canadian or to be Tamil although these identities cannot be defined in terms of hard criteria¹⁸, as I have illustrated above. In order to legitimate a nation's existence as nation state and to justify the exclusion of some and the inclusion of others, narratives of common heritage are produced and performed through national anthems, national holidays, etc. Individuals are encouraged to act accordingly, to internalize national identities and to perform nationhood¹⁹. It is in this context, the discourse of the nation state, which brings up the question of ethnicity in the first place.

After looking at parts of the philosophical debate on identity, let's get back to the earlier posed question, "are we not Tamils and what am I then?". First of all, the second part of the question displays the need to be something, to be forced to have an ethnicity since there is no space outside of the discursive formation, as Foucault would have put it. Secondly, the first part of the question could be answered like this: we *are* not Tamils but we recognise ourselves *as* Tamils as part of our subject constitution in the context of the nation state discourse.

¹³ c.f. Foucault, Michel (1978): *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality* (vol. I). New York: Pantheon Books. Original work published 1976. pp. 21-33.

¹⁴ c.f. Glick Schiller, Nina and Andreas Wimmer (2002): *Methodological nationalism and beyond: nation-state building, migration and the social sciences*. In: *Global Networks* 2: 4. pp. 301- 334. p. 308.

¹⁵ c.f. Krishna, Sankaran (1999): *Postcolonial Insecurities: India, Sri Lanka, and the Question of Nationhood*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

¹⁶ a principle of nationality law based on ancestry rather than location of birth (= *ius soli*). C.f. Brubaker, Rogers (1992): *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

¹⁷ Wimmer Andreas (2009): *Herder's Heritage and the Bounday-Making Approach: Studying Ethnicity in Immigrant Societies*. *Sociological Theory* 27: 3. pp. 244-270. P. 255.

¹⁸ c.f. Brubaker, Rogers and Frederick Cooper (2000): *Beyond „Identity“*. In: *Theory and Society* 29: 1. pp. 1-47.

¹⁹ c.f. Butler, Judith and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2010): *Who sings the nation-state? Language, politics, belonging*. London: Seagull Books.

Ethnicity is not. Anymore than the nation.

Sankaran Krishna, a postcolonial scholar who has taken up on Foucault's critical subject and identity theory, has analysed the narratives of nationhood in Tamil nationalisms in *Postcolonial Insecurities: India, Sri Lanka, and the Question of Nationhood (1999)*. More specifically, he has researched the narrative of Eelam among Sri Lankan Tamils and that of Dravidinadu among Tamil Nadu Tamils in India. After describing the development of these nationalisms, he highlighted how the nation states of India and Sri Lanka feared both Tamil nationalisms as a thread to each of their nation building processes. From his perspective, this fear led to an increased marginalization of Sri Lankan Tamils during Jayawardene's presidency from 1977 to 1989 which finally resulted in the persecution of Sri Lankan Tamils. Krishna was accused of giving a biased account of Sinhalese's problems, taking up a Tamil-friendly perspective in his analysis²⁰, which is why it might seem surprising that he states very clearly: "Ethnicity is not. Any more than the nation."²¹. This statement is evoking Frantz Fanon's "The negro is not. Any more than the white man"²². What Krishna expresses here by referring to Fanon's famous quote, is the conviction that yet we *are* not Tamils, we not only recognise ourselves *as* Tamils due to the nation state discourse, also it is this discourse that fuels the oppression of Tamils in Sri Lanka. And that as long as this oppression against Tamils persists ("Any more than the nation"), it does not make any sense to give up acting *as* a Tamil group. Stuart Hall, who has taken up on Fanon's work as well, has called this strategy the "irreducibility" of the identity concept when it comes to the "politics of exclusion"²³. Bearing the anti-essentialist claims of Foucault in mind, Hall stresses that he defends a concept of identity which is "a strategic and positional one"²⁴.

Redefining common grounds

When thinking about how to construct a Tamil community in Canada, we should bear these de-essentializing thoughts on identity in mind. Nevertheless, in the context of the nation state discourse, we are not only identifying but also identified as Tamils. This becomes obvious through the ongoing persecution of Tamils in Sri Lanka by the Sri Lankan government and through acts of categorization by the Canadian government²⁵. We should not just take up on these identifications by building up a Tamil community in order to simply perform "Tamilness" as an end in itself. We would not find an agreement on what makes a proper Tamil community, anyway. This is due to the

²⁰ c.f. Philipson, Liz (2001): Review of *Postcolonial Insecurities: India, Sri Lanka, and the Question of Nationhood* by Sankaran Krishna. In: *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 34: 2. pp. 433-435.

²¹ Krishna, S. (1999). p. 59.

²² Fanon, Frantz (1967): *Black skin, white masks*. New York: Grove Press. Original work published 1952. p. 231.

²³ Hall, Stuart (2002): Who needs 'identity'? In: du Gay, Paul et al. (eds.): *Identity: a reader*. London: Sage Publications. p. 16.

²⁴ *ibid.* p. 17.

²⁵ The earlier mentioned national census 2011 serves a s good example. C.f. Houle, René (2011): *Immigrant Languages in Canada: Language, 2011 Census of Population*. Catalogue no. 98-314-X2011003. Statistics Canada.

constructed nature of ethnicities: they are not natural entities and therefore contested in their distinctiveness.

However, there actually is a common feature we all share among each other, which could serve as common ground and which is worth forming a “strategic and positional” identity: the experience – our own or through our parents – of being persecuted and being expelled from Sri Lanka because of being recognised as Tamil. In contrast to the ideas of “community” or “Identity”, this experience is not and does not need to be constructed. This experience is actual and remains part of our family histories. Our experience as expellees and as offspring of expellees taught us how essential access to statehood and human rights is – living as Tamil minority in Sri Lanka or starting up a life as migrant in Canada. We have got an experience-based conscience for the fact that one cannot live under a state power which does not provide protection against systematic persecution. We have got an experience-based conscience for racism in the ‘Western’ hemisphere, also as citizens of Canada²⁶.

In my opinion, we should take this two-folded conscience as common ground to construct a Tamil community, whatever idea of what it means to be Tamil might be essential to each community member. Starting from this point, especially we, the second generation Tamils, should bear our parents experience in mind and take up on it as responsibility to raise awareness and to accuse human rights violations in Sri Lanka, in Canada and in other parts of the world.

²⁶ c.f. i.e. Razack, Sherene H. (1998): *Looking white people in the eye: gender, race, and culture in courtrooms and classrooms*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

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