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The Little Jaffna of Paris: a spatial node of Sri Lankan Tamil transnational network

World's cultural centre, Paris has been a transnational global village since centuries. In recent two decades, a new space of confrontation of global and local appeared on the capital's landscape. The so-called "*quartier indien*" also known as "Little Jaffna", situated in between the *Gare du Nord* and metro station *La Chapelle* in the 10th arrondissement, serves as a space for cultural reproduction of Tamils in exile and a node of Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora scattered worldwide. From the estimated 890 thousands of Sri Lankan Tamils in exile, about 100,000 live in France, of which the greatest number in Paris¹.

This ethnic district is fulfilling the economic, commercial, cultural and political functions for the Tamil community, especially for the Tamil community from Sri Lanka. A scene of negotiation of local and global Tamil identity, the Little Jaffna of Paris is reframing social boundaries within Tamils and between Tamils and the host society, and challenging legal borders². It is a part of deterritorialized Tamil Eelam³.

Based on ethnography of this site made in 2011, and on insights provided by Dequirez⁴, Goreau-Ponceaud⁵, Graham⁶ and Fuglerud⁷ as well as anthropological studies on transnationalism, migrant activism and refugee, this essay analyzes the genesis and evolution of Sri Lankan migration to France to shed some light on hidden political logics managing Tamil migration. Finally, it can be argued that Tamil immigrants' "flexible" citizenship and refugees' non-citizenship constitute a transnational social field⁸ encompassing those who move and those who stay behind, challenging national order of things⁹.

¹ "Politically French, culturally Tamil: 12 Tamils elected in Paris and suburbs". *Tamilnet*. 2008-03-28. Retrieved 2008-06-26. Around 125,000 Tamils are estimated to be living in France. Of them, around 50,000 are Eezham Tamils (Sri Lankan Tamils).

² Fassin, Didier (2011) "Policing Borders, Producing Boundaries. The Governmentality of Immigration in Dark Times", in *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 40:213–26

³ Appadurai, Arjun (2003) *Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy*. Online: http://www.intcul.tohoku.ac.jp/~holden/MediatedSociety/Readings/2003_04/Appadurai.html

⁴ Dequirez, Gaëlle (2008) "Tamouls sri lankais : le little Jaffna de la Chapelle", *Hommes et migrations*, n°1268-1269.

⁵ Goreau-Ponceaud, Anthony (2009) "*La Chapelle : un théâtre monde*". E-migrinter n°4 (online); Goreau-Ponceaud, Anthony (2009) "La diaspora tamoule en France : entre visibilité et politisation", *EchoGéo* (online); Goreau-Ponceaud, Anthony (2012) "*Routes et antiroutes de l'immigration tamoule sri-lankaise : des camps du Tamil Nadu à la Chapelle*". E-migrinter n°8 (online)

⁶ Jones, Graham (2003) « Le trésor caché du quartier indien : esquisse ethnographique d'une centralité minoritaire parisienne », *REMI*, vol19, n°1, pp. 233-243.

⁷ Oivind Fuglerud (2001) "Time and space in the Sri Lanka-Tamil diaspora" in *Nations and Nationalism Vol.7(2)*

⁸ Levitt, Peggy and Glick Shiller, Nina (2004) "Conceptualizing Simultaneity: A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society" in *International Migration Review*, Vol. 38, N°3

⁹ Malkki, Liisa (1995) 'Refugees and Exile: From 'Refugee Studies' to the National Order of Things. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24: 495-523.

In the end of the 1960s, when first Indian migrants from French overseas and former colonies (Pondicherry, Mauritius, Antilles) began to install in the quartier, it was mostly a working-class area with high concentration of immigrants from Maghreb¹⁰. Only by the end of 1980 when Europe entered era of asylum-related migration, the district began to be associated with “Indian presence” thanks to the multiplication of Ceylonese refugees’ commerces¹¹. This wave of Sri Lankan refugees, legal or illegal, built one of the most visible ethnic district in Paris, gathering immigrant communities who share cultural traits but not necessarily history and civic identity¹². Today, Ceylonese Tamils compose the symbolic core of the abstract Tamil (or even Indian) identity in France¹³.

Since 1983, Sri Lankan constitute the majority of asylum seekers from the Asian continent in France¹⁴. The civil conflict and discriminatory policies of the Sinhalese government drew thousands of Tamils to migrate. First, it was the English-speaking Tamil elite who emigrated in the Commonwealth countries, where Tamils were already installed. Following the restriction of the British immigration policies in 1980s, some of them had to stop their journey. Benefiting from the support of French-speaking Tamils from Pondicherry and French overseas, they settled in Paris, initially considered as a place of transit.

But the historiography of the Eelam Tamil *diaspora* begins with the Black Pogrom of July’83, also corresponding to the rise of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam movement (LTTE). It is then that lower castes and poorer segments of the community (of which the LTTE is mostly formed) started to flee Sri Lanka for asylum overseas. When, in the late 1990s, India shifted its regard towards militants in Sri Lanka, Tamil migration flow changed its principal direction to the West - in Europe and North America¹⁵.

Clearly, easily opening borders pulled the first Sri Lankan refugees denied of the refugee status in the UK to the neighboring France. But states’ foreign policies and local structures are only some of the aspects migrants take in consideration. First somewhat sporadic trajectories can form the migration routes for the following flows and lead to a gradual creation of aid societies, labor recruitment possibilities and commercial linkages and ethnic territories in the various host countries¹⁶.

Parisians witnessed the Little Jaffna growing like mushrooms after rain. By the end of 1980s, formal recognition of refugee status to Tamils, including the pending dossiers’ demanders, became systematic for the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (OFPRA). In 1999, the country even became the second (after India) territory of exile for Sri Lankan Tamils who progressively formed strong transnational connections and local community structures facilitating reception of compatriots. In only 10

¹⁰ Dequierez 2008

¹¹ Hansen, Randall (2003) *Migration to Europe since 1945: Its History and its Lessons*. The Political Quarterly Publishing, Oxford.

¹² Goreau-Ponceaud 2009a

¹³ *ibid*; Jones 2003

¹⁴ Goreau-Ponceaud 2012

¹⁵ Fuglud 2001

¹⁶ McKeown, Adam (2004) “Global Migration, 1846–1940”, in *Journal of World History*, Vol. 15 (2)

years, the district has sprung to life and begun to truly flourish. Consequently, the population movement did not stop with the official end of the conflict in 2009. Instead, OFPRA recorded an increase of first applications for asylum (33% compared to 2008)¹⁷.

Following the formation of a well-organized chain migration and growing diaspora, the district was no longer residential place for newcomers and their families. They were rather settling in cheaper suburban areas, though, well connected with Little Jaffna by public transport lines. However, based around *Gare du Nord* and metro *La Chapelle* multiple commerces oriented for the intra-cultural clientele, Hindu temples and several Tamil schools, organizations and associations determined the district's gravity. From the beginning and till now, Little Jaffna remains the core of the vast network of community solidarity, defining the strength of migratory chains¹⁸.

The first migrants, because of their small number, had to assimilate. But the newcomers do not maintain the same relationship to otherness¹⁹. Contesting their marginal position, they claim their sovereign rights for the space building symbolic frontiers between groups identities. Simultaneously, they challenge state governmentalities and develop self-regulation strategies²⁰. Ethnic commerces provide an identity support because they allow perpetuating cultural habits and consumption patterns. Tamil schools respond to a desire of parents to exclude "bad" French influences and control children's activities in a Tamil environment. Ultimately, schools ensure the sustainability of the group in face of the Parisian cosmopolitanism neutralizing the great Tamil culture. More importantly, the organizations located in Little Jaffna play a vital role in social and cultural reproduction and strengthening of the community life²¹. Bond with diverse explicitly or implicitly political Tamil associations, they overcome discriminatory circumstances and develop strategies and tactics of identity positioning in the host country, in their homeland and globally.

Grocery stores, bazaars, restaurants, real estate, travel and telecommunication agencies, newspapers, radio, television... not only it is possible to maintain the traditions being in exile and receive services in the Tamil language, but also to easily find a job (legal or not) without speaking French, invest money and so on. It could be argued that Sri Lankan Tamils are well integrated economically, socially and politically - for instance, seven candidates with Tamil origins were elected in Parisian-region municipalities in 2009²². Yet, they appear to be essentially impossible to assimilate. Moreover, ethnic commodities, restaurants enlisted in guidebooks, boutiques oriented to non-Tamil district visitors - all this contributes to a staging of otherness which structures self-identity as it provides stable reference points in presentation of self to others. The annual Ganesha festival provides a striking example of how Tamil migrants contest their place

¹⁷ Goreau-Ponceaud 2012

¹⁸ Dequierez 2008

¹⁹ Goreau-Ponceaud 2012

²⁰ Fassin 2011

²¹ Dequierez 2008

²² Goreau-Ponceaud 2009b

and role in the host society, or at least in the district recognized as theirs²³.

Highly visible on the Parisian landscape, Little Jaffna does not simply profit of its own exoticism. Rather, it has progressively become a display through which the representation of the 'Tamil' category in France is being reformulated. In a way, Franco-Tamil cultural "hybrids" from Pondicherry, Mauritius or Reunion have been gradually assimilated to these Sri Lankan "transmigrant" new comers - highly politicized and seeking recognition through displayed stereotypic otherness²⁴.

What distinguishes this group from other ethnic minorities in Paris - is the political engagement manifested by the existence of associations, newspapers and committees, contributing to the development of diasporic consciousness²⁵. Tamil associations organize multiple activities providing opportunities for group meetings to promote the community cohesion and maintain unity. In so doing, they constitute a network of social control through the temples and Tamil schools. Local media and associations keeps this highly politicized community in rhythm of their country, linking Tamils in France with the global diaspora. All important Tamil associations' offices reside in the area - Tamil Cholai (Tamil schools network), Tamils Rehabilitation Organization, the Committee of Tamil women, Hindu temples and so on. These local organisms are related to trans-state networks having delegations in more than 15 countries with strong Sri Lankan Tamil immigration, organizing therefore the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora.

Like in Jaffna and Tamil communities overseas, LTTE take on themselves the role of Tamil activism network's core - as if they were the sole representatives of the Tamil cause (Dequierez, Fuglerud). This de facto splits the diaspora into pro-Tigers and those who do not support the organization recognized as a terroristic. Indeed, although they might refer themselves to a common "ethnic community", Tamil immigrants don't form an essential group. Despite the consensual discourse, Tamils are divided along gender, generations, localities of origin, caste and class, but also by distinctions from different migration contexts implying different statuses in the host country: refugee - legal or illegal, immigrants or citizens²⁶. These divisions are linked to political considerations in connection with the conflict in Sri Lanka. Anyone who doesn't support the separatist cause and criticize Tigers for their means is considered as denying the suffering of the Tamil people and righteousness of their claims²⁷.

This social pressure of Tamil highly hierarchic network of associations is a force transforming an ethnic identity into a political one. The French branch of the Tamil Coordinating Committee (TCC) provides administrative and social assistance to newcomers and manages cultural youth associations, playing an important role in this logics. The TCC seeks these associations as means to recruit new activists. The militant cadres pay special attention to the young of the second generation - cultural "halfies" speaking the

²³ Nurse K. (1999) Globalization and Trinidad carnival: diaspora, hybridity and identity in global culture. *Cultural Studies*

²⁴ Goreau-Ponceaud 2009b, Silverstein, Paul A. (2005) "Immigrant Racialization and the New Salvage Slot: Race, Migration, and Immigration in the New Europe" in *Annual Review of Anthropology*

²⁵ Goreau-Ponceaud 2009

²⁶ Dequierez 2008

²⁷ Etiemble, Angéline (2004) "Les Tamouls du Sri Lanka en France. L'emprise du politique", *Revue française des Affaires sociales*, n° 2

language and knowing French social codes who could sensitize the French society and lobby the Tamil separatist question into the sphere of the country's concerns. Officially apolitical, l'Organisation des Jeunes Tamoules (Organization of Tamil youth - OJT) openly support LTTE²⁸.

The last and the most important (quantitatively and qualitatively) migration wave counts political refugees and economic migrants who migrate under the political refugee mask. Needless to say, the nature of this migration has implications in terms of mobilization and ideology spread within the community. In plus, if early Tamil migration routes to Europe were rather simple (mostly via East Berlin, or Turkey and Ukraine), in 1990s the countries crossed become more numerous, border control more strict and the roads more complex and expensive²⁹. It resumed in the emergence of a whole industry of border crossings not so loosely linked to the hierarchical organization of the LTTE³⁰. Finally, refugees get into enormous debts to travel, enter and install in Europe, write the story motivating the request for asylum and be accompanied in administration offices, to make their family members join them; pay dowries, buy a house, marry and so on³¹. Logically, economic support provided by associations often defines integration strategies, identification and socialization. Politically motivated Tamil elite capitalizes on these circumstances (largely induced by the same elite) just as much as on a shared trauma of ethnic persecution and socio-economic marginalization in the host society³².

Through a variety of associations based in the quartier, this political space has developed a particular way to be Tamil in France - that of long-distance nationalism of Tamil Eelam. Particularly in the first generation, Tamils in exile constitute the main supporting force for separatist movement in Sri Lanka³³. Engaged in transnational ethnic networks woven around LTTE, they participate in the propaganda of the Tamil struggle in the broader society and in fundraising. Ultimately, the LTTE stands in the heart of Tamil diaspora dynamics - not only it organizes migration destination and chains, but it also motivates young Tamil men to migrate³⁴.

A brief analysis of Sri Lankan peoples movements shows correlations between migrants' ethnicity, motivation to migrate and destination state. Actually, there are two main streams from Sri Lanka - labour and political migration. While the first flow is mostly Sinhalese and largely oriented towards economic opportunities in the Middle East, politically motivated migrants are Tamil and opt for liberal-democratic Europe³⁵.

It seems that Tamil transnationalism is essentially omni-politicized. To a certain extent, Western exile

²⁸ Dequierez 2008

²⁹ Goreau-Ponceaud 2012

³⁰ Goreau-Ponceaud 2012

³¹ Fuglerud 2001

³² Wayland, Sarah (2004). "Ethnonationalist networks and transnational opportunities: the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora". *Review of International Studies*, 30

³³ ibid

³⁴ Goreau-Ponceaud 2012

³⁵ Sriskandarajah, Dhananjayan (2002) "The Migration-Development Nexus: Sri Lanka Case Study", *International Migration Vol. 40* (5)

and diaspora are regarded as necessary to bear radical changes in their homeland, a deterritorialized battle of struggle over Tamil Eelam in the era of globalization³⁶. For Sri Lankan Tamils, migration becomes a source of sustenance and a self-reproducing goal³⁷. In Canada, United Kingdom, Germany, Norway or France - scattered around the world, the Tamil diaspora's territory is undefined. In these various states, coordinated by transnational networks Tamil refugees actively utilize local arenas and political freedoms of host countries, advanced communicational and financial resources - on the one hand, to lobby favorable foreign policies, and on the other, to reach their national goals in Sri Lanka. In contrast, "useless" refugee camps in the Indian province of Tamil Nadu remain forgotten by the diaspora³⁸. The Tamil diaspora is a social field where belonging is not enough, it requires *ways of being* (that is actual social relations and practices) that contribute to the common Tamil cause³⁹.

This transnational dimension of the LTTE politics gives insights on the real dynamics sustaining the ethno-political conflict in Sri Lanka (Wayland). Although the diaspora's support has not enabled the LTTE to reach its ultimate goal of Tamil independence, its political lobbying and remittances play a crucial role in the civil conflict for they challenging the balance of economic, political and military power in their homeland⁴⁰.

The Sri Lankan Tamil case shows how migrants' political activism is able to shift the position of states in the global order and alter internal functions of states⁴¹. A transnational ethnic network composed of non-citizen immigrants and stateless refugees can influence domestic (both sending and receiving states) and international politics⁴². Raising its voice "out of place", Tamil long-distance nationalism's political subjectivity contributes to the formation of an "international citizenship"⁴³. We can only wonder, though, whether Sri Lankan Tamils' political goals won't disappear in demographic outcomes of this massive politico-economical migration that turns to be rather permanent.

³⁶ Appadurai 2003

³⁷ McKeown 2004

³⁸ Goreau-Ponceaud 2012

³⁹ Levitt, Peggy and Glick Shiller, Nina (2004) "Conceptualizing Simultaneity: A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society" in *International Migration Review*, Vol. 38, N°3

⁴⁰ Sriskandarajah 2002

⁴¹ Levitt & Glick Shiller 2004

⁴² Moulin, Carolina and Peter Nyers (2007) "We Live in a Country of UNHCR"—Refugee Protests and Global Political Society. *International Political Sociology* vol 1, pp 356–372 (16pp)

⁴³ Malkki, Liisa (1995) 'Refugees and Exile: From 'Refugee Studies' to the National Order of Things. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24: 495-523.

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