

Tamil Militancy in Sri Lanka and the Role of Religion

Summary

From the late 1970s to its defeat by the Government of Sri Lanka in 2009, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fought for Tamil independence in Sri Lanka. The ultimate aim of what was often considered to be one of the world's most disciplined and efficient insurgency groups was to create an independent Tamil homeland (which they called Tamil Eelam) in the northern and eastern parts of the island. The LTTE based itself on a unique mix of Tamil nationalist, socialist, and feminist visions of a new future for the marginalized Tamil communities of Sri Lanka. The LTTE became feared for its extensive use of suicide missions, carried out by soldiers of both Hindu and Catholic backgrounds. Because of the marginalization of the Tamil-speaking Muslims from the Tamil nationalist project, none of the LTTE soldiers were Muslims. Generally speaking, religion played—and in the 21st century continues to play—a minor role in the ultimate nationalist goal of establishing Tamil Eelam. Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka centers around Tamil culture, language, literature, and regional identity, not religion. The LTTE's official ideology was strictly secularist, expressing a clear separation between religion, the state, and politics. The LTTE accepted individual religious practices in its ranks—for example, having a personal crucifix or a holy picture within military camps, but did not facilitate institutionalized religious practice. Yet religious formations, controversies, and practices have been important, if not crucial, to Tamil separatism and, ultimately, to the LTTE itself. In a short period of time, the LTTE developed a unique martial culture and martyr cult, drawing on numerous cultural and religious sources in Tamil society. This martyr cult encompassed references to the Christian tradition of martyrdom, Hindu bhakti (devotional) literature, and classic Tamil heroic poetry. Each martyr's self-sacrifice formed part of a symbolic universe that was fundamentally nationalistic, but Christian and Hindu references and ritual language were employed to help to legitimize the sacrificial act. The ideology of martyrdom transcended the martyrs' religious backgrounds, and instead of a place in paradise or release from the cycle of reincarnation, it promised eternal life in the memory of the nation. Within the cultural and political universe of the LTTE, the nation and its territory became sacralized, and the LTTE's meticulously articulated martial culture began to take on quasi-religious qualities. At the ideological level, the LTTE propaganda machinery managed to balance secularism, deep religious sentiment, and religious diversity, and religion functioned as a multilayered concept used for a variety of purposes by military and political leaders. Religion can also be identified as various "fields" within the movement: "civil religious," "Śaiva religious," and "Tamil Catholic religious," allowing for overlapping yet distinct Hindu, Catholic, or nonreligious identities under the sacred canopy of Tamil nationalism.

Historical Background

Understanding the role of religion in the Tamil insurgency requires an understanding of Sri Lanka's cultural mosaic and of the development of modern nationalism before and after independence from British colonial power. Sri Lanka is a geographically small yet culturally rich and complex island, with numerous ethnic, linguistic, religious, and caste subgroups. The majority of the population identify as ethnically Sinhala, and they speak Sinhala, an Indo-

European language. The great majority of the Sinhalese are Theravada Buddhists who live mostly in the south and central regions of the island. A small minority of Sinhalese are Catholics, and some also belong to evangelical Christian churches. The largest minority group in Sri Lanka is the Tamils, who speak Tamil (a South Indian Dravidian language) and comprise several subgroups. The largest of these are the so-called Sri Lankan Tamils, who traditionally have lived in the north and east. The so-called Indian Tamils are labor immigrants from India who were brought in by the British to work in the plantation sector in the highlands. The majority of Tamils are Hindus of the Śaiva Siddhanta tradition, but there are also a significant number who are Catholics and a few to smaller Evangelical denominations. The Tamil Muslims identify based on religious belonging, not on a common ethnic identity, and they speak Tamil. Historically, the Muslim communities were scattered throughout the island; they form a stronghold in urban trading centers in the south but are also farmers in the Tamil-majority Eastern Province. Social stratification based on caste and regional identities was strong in precolonial Lanka, but later colonial classifications of the island's inhabitants produced new identities with intensified religious and racial signifiers. These were reproduced in the emerging Tamil and Sinhala nationalisms of the late 19th century.

Fundamentally, the conflict in Sri Lanka is about failed nation-building in the postcolonial state, demographic politics, access to resources, and political influence, and it follows ethnic and linguistic lines. Religion—that is, Buddhism—has come to play a pivotal role in Sinhala nationalism, to the extent that the term “Sinhala Buddhist nationalism” is often used. According to the hegemonic Sinhala Buddhist version of history, the island is sacred Buddhist land, entrusted to the Sinhalese by the Buddha himself, in which Sri Lanka's many minorities are subordinate to the Sinhala Buddhist majority. Along similar lines, in the 1950s, Sri Lankan nationalism came to be conflated with Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, and there was little understanding among the Sinhala Buddhist majority population of the growing concerns of the Tamil-speaking minorities about their place within the postcolonial state.

Up to the early 1950s, Tamil nationalism lacked coherence and cohesion, despite its insistence on regional autonomy and linguistic parity in the state.¹ The increased Sinhala Buddhist dominance from 1956 onward resulted in a more defensive ethnic nationalism on the Tamil side. Importantly, however, this nationalism was not only a reaction against Sinhala Buddhist dominance; it should also be understood as a result of internal strife within the Tamil community in Jaffna. These internal contentions show that in the case of early Tamil nationalism—the forerunner of more recent movements such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)—the question of religion is complex and contradictory. Prewar Tamil nationalism must be understood in the context of the caste conflicts in Jaffna society, Hindu reform movements, and the increasing Sinhala Buddhist hegemony.

Prewar Jaffna society was highly conservative and extremely sensitive to caste issues; for example, “untouchables” were not considered to be “Tamil” and were denied entry into Hindu temples and access to village wells, and “untouchable” women were not allowed to cover the upper part of their bodies. The dominant caste in Jaffna society was the landowning *veḷḷālar* caste, who made up approximately half the population.² The *brahmins*—though ritually superior to the *veḷḷālar*s—constituted a numerically small group that was under *veḷḷālar* domination. Other Tamil groups were often referred to as “minority Tamils,” of which the strongest caste

group was the *karaiyar*, a seafaring and warrior caste that had traditionally served the king in Jaffna but in modern times has mostly been involved in fishing. One of the first communities to convert to Catholicism in 16th-century Sri Lanka, the *karaiyar* still has a strong Catholic community. The *karaiyar* never accepted *vellālar* domination, and the LTTE martial culture can be seen as a way of restoring *karaiyar* culture in Tamil society.

Although caste is a social stratification system used throughout the Indian subcontinent that is independent of religious, cultural, and linguistic differences, it is also true that caste plays a particular role in Hindu society in terms of temple administration, the priesthood, and ritual performance. In the 1960s and 1970s, caste rivalries between the dominant *vellālar* and the “minority Tamils” were about to tear Jaffna society apart; an example is the so-called temple-entry crisis, in 1968. This event concerned demands by “untouchable” castes who insisted on having access to the Maviddapuram temple, located in the Jaffna district. The government in Colombo threatened to intervene on behalf of the marginalized castes, and Buddhist missionaries travelled to Jaffna to present Buddhism as an alternative to “caste oppression.” Significantly, as Bryan Pfaffenberger argues in his study of Tamil nationalism, the call for Tamil regional autonomy thus first emerged from the conservative sections of the *vellālar* caste, “which deeply resented Colombo’s interference in what they considered the ‘private’ matters of caste relations and temple worship.”³ In other words, religious conservatism and caste privilege were important factors in the early calls for a separate Tamil state.

Another historical point worth mentioning is the Hindu religious reform in the 19th century. The inflow of Protestant missionaries after the British gained full political control of the island, in 1815, led to increased political awareness and a sense of the need to protect Tamil Hindu culture. A crucial figure in this process was Arumuka Navalar (1822–1879), who initiated a Hindu reform movement in Jaffna. Navalar, responding to Christian critiques of Hindu practices, offered a reformed and “purified” form of Hinduism, based on a strict interpretation of Śaiva Siddhanta texts. He was not, however, concerned with social reform of the rigid and conservative caste society in Jaffna.⁴ However, and ironically perhaps, his insistence on textual authority gave the “Minority Tamils” a new tool in their fight for status elevation and entry into Hindu temples; for example, as when they argued that if they followed the proscriptions laid down in Śaiva Siddhanta texts, they would be sufficiently pure to enter the Brahmin temples (under *vellālar* patronage). In the 1960s, the question about temple entry for “untouchables” was a delicate issue for the Federal Party, which was pressured by organizations such as the All-Ceylon Śaiva Practices and Observances Protection Society to not allow “untouchables” into temples. The Federal Party had everything to lose by taking sides with either the conservative sections of the *vellālar*s or with the “Minority Tamils,” who by now had gained the support of various militant Tamil youth groups. As Bryan Pfaffenberger argues, in the 1960s and 1970s, the Federal Party had everything to gain by redirecting its Tamil constituency away from divisive issues such as caste to causes that would unite Tamils, for example in calls for state protection of Hindu Tamil archaeological sites, such as Koneshwaram in Trincomalee. Furthermore, as the Federal Party and its leader, S. J. V. Chelvanayagam, sought to unite all Tamil speakers under one political umbrella, the differences within—and among—Tamil-speaking groups were downplayed. It is therefore reasonable to argue that both internal strife and social change intensified the Tamil defensive ethnic nationalism.

Leaving internal caste issues in Jaffna society aside, one cannot understand the position on religion in Tamil nationalism without seeing it in relation to the ever more aggressive, exclusivist, and self-confident Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. In 1956, the “Sinhala only” policy excluded Tamil-speaking elites (mostly *vellālar*) from holding posts in state institutions (including the military⁵), and by the end of the 1960s, a process of “Sinhalization” and “Buddhicization” had alienated the Tamil communities from the state. Frustration on the Tamil side grew deeper after the 1972 Republican Constitution made Sinhala the only official state language and provided special protections for Buddhism. The Republican Constitution was seen as the ultimate expression of the Sinhala Buddhist suppression and exclusion of the island’s many minorities. In response, the Tamil leadership, represented by the Tamil United Front (TUF), adopted a six-point program that included demands for linguistic rights, a secular state, and the abolition of the caste system.⁶ A secular state was conceived as a precondition for equal treatment of Sri Lanka’s citizens, and abolishing caste would secure a unified popular Tamil mass movement. Modernist Hindu movements, such as the Vivekananda Vedanta Society, in Colombo, suggested to the Constitutional Drafting Committee that the new constitution should recognize Hinduism, but their effort did not succeed.⁷ This political call made by a Hindu group was more the exception than the rule, however, as Hindu organizations were eclipsed by Tamil nationalist parties and thus not vocal in national politics in Sri Lanka.

The Birth—and Death—of the LTTE

The 1970s witnessed increasing militancy among Tamil youth, as a reaction against exclusionary state policies in the university sector and state repression, but also out of impatience with the more moderate and conservative Tamil leadership. Founded in 1976, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was one of several militant Tamil youth formations that took shape in the early 1970s.⁸ Tamil militancy—as well as the severe countermeasures taken by the state—resulted in a growing feeling that coexistence between the Sinhala and the Tamil “nations” was impossible. This led to the Vaddukoddai Resolution, in 1976, a declaration that establishing a separate state, Tamil Eelam, was the only way to save the Tamil nation. LTTE ideologue Anton Balasingham, for example, concluded that the Tamil nation was subject to the domination of the Sinhala Buddhist ruling class, and that it was in need of liberation in order to survive as a nation.⁹ Tamil Eelam was to be an independent, socialist, and secular state. Judging from the writings of Tamil intellectuals of the LTTE, such as Balasingham or the more loosely associated Sivaram, it becomes clear that religion (however defined) did not play an important role in the Tamil nationalist discourse.¹⁰ Yet, with regard to its view of the “Tamil nation,” it is significant that the LTTE paid particular attention to heritage and its special “Dravidian potential” rather than to a specific history, as in the Sinhala nationalist case. Thus, instead of fashioning itself around a particular and defined historic past, Tamil nationalism, particularly in its LTTE incarnation, was devoted to Tamil culture and its literary canon, including an exceptional dedication to linguistic purity. The choice of the tiger as the LTTE symbol alludes to the South Indian Chola Empire (AD 850–1200), but as Mark Whitaker argues, this implies, not a desire to re-establish the Tamil kingdom, but “rather the sort of ‘Tamilness’ that formed it.”¹¹ Also crucial to LTTE ideology was the veneration of the land as mother (*tamiltay*) and loyalty to the leader of that particular territory, the latter point expressed in the devotion to the LTTE’s highly charismatic and authoritarian leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran.

From the 1980s onward, the LTTE eliminated other Tamil militant groups and came to see itself as the “sole representative of the Tamils.” In four so-called Eelam Wars, the movement challenged the numerically much stronger Sri Lankan Armed Forces. By the 1990s, the LTTE had developed into a regular army, with an infantry, navy, and air force. Important in its armed resistance efforts was a group of elite, highly esteemed soldiers known as the Black Tigers (including the Black Sea Tigers who conducted sea operations), who engaged in military operations in which the chance of survival was minimal. The Black Tigers were recruited from among the ordinary LTTE cadres, and their identity as Black Tigers was kept secret. Black Tiger suicide missions became an important part of LTTE military tactics against the state, but it should be noted that the death of individual soldiers was not an aim in itself.¹² These operations were often referred to as acts of “suicide terrorism,” which, strictly speaking, is not correct because the majority of them were carried out against military, not civilian, targets.¹³ That is, the LTTE suicide missions were neither a strategy for obtaining individual salvation nor a nihilistic display of “spectacular violence” against civilians, as in the jihadist attacks that have taken place in Europe in the early 21st century.

The actual number of LTTE soldiers—as well as the actual number of Black Tiger attacks—is impossible to establish accurately.¹⁴

The first suicide mission took place on the July 5, 1987, when Captain Miller drove a truck filled with explosives into an army camp in Jaffna. According to the LTTE martyr book’s own estimates, by 2001, approximately 240 Black Tigers had sacrificed their lives. On Black Tiger Commemoration Day, in 2007, the LTTE reported that a total of 322 Black Tigers had been killed in action. Peter Schalk reports that, by 2008, the total number of Black Tiger deaths was 378,¹⁵ but again, these numbers are uncertain because we do not know how many more were killed in 2009 during the extreme brutality of the final months of the war. The Black Tigers have been accused of numerous political assassinations, including of India’s prime minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan president Ranasinghe Premadasa, as well as an attempted assassination attempt of president Chandrika Kumaratunga. As a result of the terrorist allegations and high-profile political assassinations, the LTTE was proscribed in India in 1992, in the United States in 1997, and in the European Union in 2006.¹⁶ With the Sri Lankan government’s military victory over the LTTE in 2009—the majority of its leaders killed or held captive—the organization formally dissolved. Still, its supporters continue to work for the Tamil nation in Sri Lanka (and elsewhere) through various transnational formations, such as the Global Tamil Forum.

LTTE Martyr Cult

Within a remarkably short time, beginning in 1987 and lasting throughout the 1990s, the LTTE succeeded in waging a comprehensive campaign for the commemoration of its dead soldiers to ensure that they were not remembered as casualties of war, but rather as national heroes or martyrs to the cause of independence. In English-language LTTE materials, the word “martyr” often appears, but the Tamil words used to describe the deaths have different meanings. Crucial to LTTE martyr ideology was the idea of *tiyākam*, or “abandonment of life,” and the most commonly used word for martyr is *tiyāki*, one who abandons, or a “renouncer.” The abandonment of life was considered a gift to benefit the living. The Tamil “martyr,” in contrast to the common Christian usage of the word, is not someone who surrenders to suffering and

death but someone who opposes it violently: “The *tiyāki* combines what is unthinkable for a martyr in the original Judeo-Christian tradition, to get killed in the very act of killing.”¹⁷ Every fallen LTTE fighter is considered a martyr. The aim, however, was survival, not death. All fighters wore a cyanide capsule around their necks to be used as a last resort if they were captured by government troops, to avoid being tortured and raped. The necklace with the cyanide capsule became a symbolic token of commitment to the cause.

The other concept is expressed in Tamil is *māvīrar*, “great hero,” the great warrior of Tamil classical literature who is destined to die on the battlefield. Only dead soldiers are considered heroes, and importantly, LTTE heroes are venerated, not for killing enemies, but for sacrificing their own lives. Again, this concept of martyrdom differs significantly from the Christian concept of martyrdom in that the focus is on *planned* heroic death for a just cause, not on suffering.¹⁸

The Black Tigers (*karuppulli*) were trained to sacrifice their lives, knowing that survival was highly unlikely. This is linked to a particular notion of *uyirāyutam*, or “life as weapon,” but was more a strategy than an ultimate goal. The Black Tiger emblem is a picture of Captain Miller, the first soldier to engage in a suicide mission.¹⁹ The Black Tigers were considered brave heroes, and after death they—and their families—would receive special honors during ritualized acts of remembrance on July 5, Black Tiger Commemoration Day. These commemorative rituals would take place at the site of Captain Miller’s suicide mission, in 1987, a public school then occupied by the Army, where a shrine was later built in his honor.

LTTE’s martyr cult was mediated by the LTTE propagation office (the Office of the Great Heroes belonging to Tamil Eelam, established in 1995) through official statements, press releases, propaganda films, and Heroes’ Day speeches held by Prabhakaran. In addition, LTTE cadres—who were in fact often martyrs-to-be—wrote martial lyrics in praise of their fellow soldiers glorifying death and the willingness to self-sacrifice. In much of this poetry one becomes a great hero not just by dying, but by embracing death, consciously sacrificing oneself. One of the poems reads, “Consciously having given their own body for the land. The life for Tamil, they go—courageous with the pride of youth in their body.”²⁰

Three tropes stand out in this poetry. The first is the *hero as seed* out of which new life sprouts. The second is the *hero as immortal history*, and the third trope regards *the hero as a victim* who sacrifices him- or herself. The poet-soldiers of the LTTE did not praise acts of sacrifice for the sake of individual salvation, but for the future of the Tamil community. One poem written by a certain Ko. Tirunamam describes “great heroes”—“seek[ing] the final resting place they go—their names mentioned they go on to live as history, in the hearts of the Tamils tomorrow.”²¹

This was represented symbolically through the metaphor of the dead body as seed: the martyrs were regarded as the seeds of the nation, expressed in the notion of “body-seed” (*vittutal*). The symbolism is powerful: new life grows out of the battlefield; new life grows out of the blood-soaked soil. The hero-martyrs were the seeds that following martyrdom would be planted in the earth of the liberated Tamil motherland.

In this process, the soldiers' deaths were transformed into something inspiring. Rather than loss, their deaths were acts of self-sacrifice, heavily laden with meaning both for the individuals involved and for the Tamil community, in both Sri Lanka and the wider Tamil diaspora. What the LTTE's opponents saw as grotesque brainwashing, with fatal consequences for the security of Sri Lankan society, was interpreted by the LTTE's supporters as a necessary and legitimate sacrifice for the goal of securing their nation's survival. The life of the individual thus gained a meaning that went far beyond that of the individual concerned.

In addition to speeches and poetry, the LTTE ideology of martyrdom was communicated and enacted through a set of commemorative practices. From 1989 onward, martyrdom and heroism were celebrated in "state-sponsored" rituals (if we accept that the LTTE operated as a quasi-state at the time). The LTTE organized a ritual calendar that set aside ten days of commemoration, the most important being Heroes' Day (*māvīrar nāḷ*), November 27.²² The *māvīrar nāḷ* commemorates the first fallen hero, Lieutenant Cankar, who was killed on November 27, 1982, but it is also a day of remembrance for all the fallen heroes who died in the war.²³ On this day, oil lamps are lit to honor the fallen and the LTTE flag is hoisted. Heroes' Day celebrations still take place throughout the Tamil diaspora communities, organized by Tamil organizations sympathetic to the LTTE, and can be considered worldwide events that connect the transnational Tamil community.²⁴ In these celebrations thousands of Tamils—of both Hindu and Catholic backgrounds—pay their respects to those who sacrificed their lives for the cause. The event is organized across the world around the same core activities: saluting the heroes in silence, lighting the flame of sacrifice (*tiyākam*, "abandonment of life") at 6:05 p.m. Sri Lanka time, the hoisting of the tiger flag by the mother of a fallen hero, and saluting pictures of the heroes at display in a "heroes' gallery". People lit candles and put down flowers and flower garlands for their dead relatives, or for prominent fighters, such as Lieutenant Cankar (LTTE's first battle death), Thamilini (the most famous female soldier), Anton Balasingham (LTTE chief theoretician), or Tamilselvan (leader of the political wing of the LTTE). Thus the "heroes' gallery" may include Black Tigers, "ordinary" heroes, and famous LTTE leaders who died of an illness, such as Balasingham. It should also be noted that among the most cherished heroes are LTTE cadres who sacrificed their lives in hunger strikes, thus not inflicting violence on others. What they all have in common is a selfless dedication to Tamil Eelam. The *māvīrar nāḷ* is highly organized and standardized across the global Tamil diaspora, though some modifications are allowed. For example, the organizers would be careful to include pictures of those heroes with a particular connection to a given community, so that Tamils in Norway are given a chance to honor and mourn their loved ones, Tamils in Canada will have their heroes in the gallery and so forth. The LTTE heroes' gallery, then, follows a scheme, but in a way that allows for local adaptations. No hierarchy or distinction is made between heroes of Christian or Hindu backgrounds, or between "ordinary heroes" and Black Tigers. The only way to know the difference is by looking at their names. The Black Tigers are identified in the text below their pictures, and in some cases, they wear the Black Tiger emblem on their berets. Importantly, Vellupillai Prabhakaran does not figure in the heroes' gallery; this is because many LTTE sympathizers believe that he is still alive, despite the evidence to the contrary.²⁵

During the war, the LTTE built numerous war cemeteries in its territory for its fallen heroes. These cemeteries were called *māvīrar tuyilum illam*, or "the home of sleeping great heroes," and name, rank, and martyr status were inscribed on the identical, otherwise plain stone slabs that

marked each grave. It is worth noticing that the inscriptions did not contain any religious references.²⁶ During the war, Heroes' Day celebrations inside LTTE-controlled territory would take place at these "sleeping places." The building of the cemeteries was linked to important changes in LTTE funeral practices; until 1990, the LTTE had cremated its dead soldiers, following the Hindu custom of cremation. Several explanations have been given for this rather exceptional and sudden change to burial in a cemetery. One is that by adopting a practice of celebrating dead soldiers in a way similar to practices found in Western armies, the LTTE would gain an aura of being a conventional army. As such, the change exemplifies the so-called political life of dead bodies, constituting an important part of the overall nation-building project to make Tamil Eelam a "proper state." After the Sri Lankan Army's victory over the LTTE, declared on May 19, 2009, the army destroyed the cemeteries. They are, however, kept in the memories of the Tamil nation in digital spaces, where one can enter a virtual cemetery and pay homage to the eternal flame that burns in memory of the fallen soldiers.²⁷ Furthermore, at the Heroes' Day celebrations replicas of graves and elements from LTTE memorial grounds are constructed as objects of commemoration of fallen heroes. The Heroes' Day has become the most important social event for the Tamil diaspora communities, occasions to remember their war loss, but also to remember the political goal of the LTTE, the dream of an independent Tamil motherland.

Female Fighters: Armed Virgins or Rape Victims?

As women began to play an increasingly important role in the Tamil nationalist struggle, the LTTE, in 1989, formed a separate female military unit, the Malathi Unit. The first female battle death had happened in 1987—when a young Malathi woman took cyanide—but it was from 1994 onward that women began to be actively recruited as Black Tigers—that is, as suicide martyrs. Using women had a strategic advantage in that the respect granted to the female body in Sri Lankan society allowed the woman suicide soldier to slip through multiple security barriers to gain her access to her targets. Female Black Tigers who attacked in civilian spaces—in civilian clothes—were thus of high strategic value to the LTTE. Of the total 240 suicide missions recorded by the LTTE by 2001, 63 (or 26%) were carried out by women.²⁸

One of the very few sources we have indicating how female Black Tigers themselves thought about their role and mission (as opposed to what is stated in the official LTTE ideology) is the documentary film *My Daughter the Terrorist*, which was based on interviews with two female Black Tigers, Dharsika and Puhachudar. These female soldiers, who both happen to be from Catholic backgrounds, show the ideal female Black Tiger as committed, highly disciplined, and militant. They exhibit great self-confidence, handling weapons and driving military vehicles, activities that were unthinkable for a Tamil woman before the war.

The LTTE wanted to break away from the patriarchal structures of traditional Jaffna society in which the ideal woman was morally pure, virtuous, and obedient. The Tamil concept that sums up these qualities is *karpu*, literally "chastity." Furthermore, in traditional Jaffna society, the ideal was the *cumankali*, the real or potential mother whose sexual power had been "tamed" through a proper marriage and who was considered to be the most auspicious being in the Tamil universe. Spearheaded by the prominent Australian women activist Adele Balasingham (the wife

of Anton Balasingham), the LTTE developed a particular feminist and nationalist agenda in which emancipation of the nation went hand in hand with the emancipation of women.

The role of female Tigers was hotly debated during the war; they were seen as victims of an authoritarian movement or as breaking away from conservative Tamil society, but these two positions are not necessarily contradictory. The authoritarian nature of the LTTE cannot be denied. For example, although female liberation was high on the agenda, it was also clear that this agenda was subject to the will of the LTTE leader.²⁹ Still, it remains a fact that the LTTE opened up new positions for women in Tamil society equal to those of men, including suicide missions.

By the mid-1980s, the LTTE's militant nationalist discourse had reformulated women's militant agency in relation to two dominant images: the female fighter as "armed virgin" or "rape victim." Vanati, a female Tamil Tiger poet articulated a new and revolutionary role for women of Tamil Eelam:

Her forehead shall be adorned not with *kunkumam* But with red blood What is seen in her eyes is not the sweetness of youth But the graves of the dead . . . On her neck will hang no *thali* But a cyanide capsule She has embraced no men But weapons!³⁰

Few other poems capture LTTE notions of female asceticism and militancy better than this one does. It illustrates the LTTE's reinterpretation of Hindu symbols into new cultural forms perfectly: the *kunkuman* is changed to blood; the *thāli* is changed to a cyanide capsule. She embraces a weapon, not a man. Such poems were most likely read by all female cadres, including Catholics, but to what extent poems written by Catholic female Tigers existed, and to what extent their poetry might have had different religious connotations remains unclear.

In addition to the notion of the armed virgin, the LTTE increasingly conceptualized the Tamil female body in terms of rape victims, because of the many cases of sexual violence against Tamil women by either the Indian Peace Keeping Forces (1987–1990) or the Sri Lankan Army. As pointed out by Ransirini, "The reformulation of the gendered body of the female suicide bomber in the nationalist project as self-sacrificing and heroic relied on the dominant image of the female body as violated by the enemy. In order to be celebrated as the site of resistance, the body of the woman suicide bomber has to be first politicized as the site of oppression."³¹ Female Tamil fighters were thus presented, by both the LTTE and in academic accounts, as armed virgins or rape victims or both. However, in spite of a few references to sexual violence by Darshika's mother, this theme is absent in the interviews with Darshika and Puhachudar presented in *My Daughter the Terrorist*. To what extent this implies that earlier accounts of female fighters went too far in accepting the official LTTE ideology of the female body—and that female fighters did not necessarily self-identify with the trope of armed virgin or raped victim—is hard to say.

LTTE Politics of Religion

Within the movement we are not concerned with religion (*mata*). We believe there is some power (*śakti*) above us, but it doesn't matter which god (*kadavul*) you believe in.

Puhalchudar (age 24), Black Tiger³²

LTTE's official ideology was strictly secularist, expressing a clear separation between religion, the state, and politics. It was declared that the future state of Tamil Eelam would "not bend towards (any) religion (Tamil: *matacārparra*)" and that all religions would receive equal treatment. Peter Shalk notes that the LTTE presents itself as a secular movement, but in a way that differs from the Federal Party or the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), which defined themselves as protectors of all religions, resembling Indian constitutional notions of secularism.³³ "Secular" in a LTTE context, Schalk points out, means being "beyond religions, areligious, not nonreligious."³⁴ Furthermore, Schalk (who more than any other Western scholar has been close to the LTTE) has formulated a response to those who charge that the LTTE is a cult or a religious movement:

There is the insight of the LTTE that if it were to appear as a religion on the religious scene, it would create dissent within the movement. Most of its members are ardent Caivas or Christians who do not imply that they have to change religion in order to achieve *cutantiram* (liberation). They reach it as Caivas and as Christians. The LTTE is not involved in polemics with representatives of traditional religion.³⁵

Here, the official line is that the goal of national liberation (*cutantiram*) supersedes individual denominational difference and, moreover, that engaging in intrareligious disputes would endanger *cutantiram*. This official "areligious" and "secularist" position should not be missed if one is to understand the LTTE self-understanding of its ideological project, and this "secularist" politics of religion is widespread among LTTE supporters in the diaspora today.³⁶ As previously noted, the LTTE's secularist position needs to be understood as a wider secularist trend in Sri Lankan Tamil nationalism, which was both a reaction against Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and a form of "defensive ethnic nationalism" aimed at overcoming internal caste strife. In addition, Sri Lankan Tamil nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s was influenced by Indian Tamil separatist politics, by way of the Dravidian Progressive Federation (*Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam*, DMK). The influential Tamil intellectual known as Taraki—or Dharmeratnam Sivaram³⁷—argued that Sri Lankan Tamil nationalism was strongly influenced by the modernist and hyperrationalist currents found in Dravidian nationalism, in addition to the indifferent—if not hostile—position toward religion.³⁸ Nonetheless, acknowledging this official secularist position at the political and ideological levels is not the same as claiming that the LTTE—as a military institution, cultural innovator, and political body—can in any meaningful way be said to be "secular." Religion informed LTTE practices in both implicit and explicit ways.

Religious Background and Caste Identities of the LTTE

While official LTTE ideology was explicitly secularist, religious identities made a difference in a number of ways. For example, religious background mattered for the recruitment of soldiers, given that Tamil-speaking Muslims were excluded from the Tamil nationalist project. Based on

regional loyalties, in the early years of the Tamil militant struggle, some Muslims had identified with the Tamil cause and participated in it. However, as the Sri Lankan state played local divide-and-rule politics between Tamils and Muslims in the 1980s, and the LTTE increasingly regarded the Muslim communities as fifth columnists and a security threat, few, if any, Muslims were recruited into the Tamil militias. Furthermore, the LTTE expulsion of more than 70,000 Muslims from the Northern Province during a few days in 1990, as well as the killing of more than a hundred Muslim men who were at prayer in a mosque in the east just months before,³⁹ resulted in much resentment among Sri Lankan Muslims toward the LTTE.⁴⁰

The majority of the LTTE cadres were of Hindu background, but with a strong Catholic presence within its ranks. The majority of the LTTE leadership, including Vellupillai Prabhakaran and leader of the LTTE intelligence unit Shanmugalingam (or “Pottu Amman”), were born to Tamil Hindu parents, although some prominent LTTE members, such as Anton Balasingham, had been raised Catholic. The religious background of the LTTE leadership was downplayed, however, and personal views on existential questions were not part of the official LTTE discourse. Finally, it should be noted that the LTTE leadership was dominated by the *karaiyars* and that the LTTE had a strong recruitment base among this caste group. The LTTE’s anticaste politics must, therefore, also be understood as a tool for emancipation from what they saw as the oppressive caste politics the *veḷḷālers* used against them.

The question of the religious identity of the LTTE was also of concern to the Sinhala nationalists. On some websites it was even held that leading LTTE figures, such as Prabhakaran and Tamilselvam, were all Christians.⁴¹ In this discourse, the LTTE is anti-Hindu and pro-Christian, and it was claimed that the LTTE was part of a neocolonial Christian conspiracy to undermine Buddhism and the Sinhala race. As a consequence of the activism for the Tamil cause of several prominent Catholic priests, Sinhalese nationalists often portrayed them as being Tigers.

The Role of Religion in LTTE Martial Culture and Suicide Missions

As several scholars have pointed out, despite the official secularist LTTE ideology, a close analysis of the LTTE martyr cult shows that it clearly drew on religious semantic fields to communicate the importance of sacrifice. In fact, there are good reasons to regard the LTTE as projecting a polyreligious semantic field, with a strong preference for Tamil Hindu religious symbols and practices. For example, the very notion that death generates new life—as exemplified in the practice of “planting heroes” or regarding Heroes’ Day also as a “Day of Rising”—falls completely within the cyclical Hindu cosmology of destruction and regeneration. That being said, it should not be forgotten that the theme of death and resurrection is not entirely unknown in the Catholic context either, and it might well be sufficiently polysemantic to provide meaning to Tamil Catholics as well.

The Tamil words used for heroes, martyrs, and sacrifice indicate a strong Tamil Śaiva Siddhanta heritage. For example, the concepts of *tiyākam*⁴² (“abandonment of life”) draws very clearly upon bhakti religiosity as found in the Bhagavadgītā. Here the ideal is to carry out one’s actions without positive or negative emotion, but, like Arjuna in Bhagavadgītā, to carry out one’s duty in devotion (to god), freed from earthly bonds. Furthermore, in Hindu literature (such as Cankam

and Bhakti literature), suicide is not condemned if it is performed out of devotion to Śiva, or as atonement in specific circumstances. Also, ritual suicide, for example, through starvation, is not a stigma. If it is done as a gift for a good cause, it can even count as a voluntary self-sacrifice.⁴³ This religious language of self-sacrifice spoke directly to religiously inclined LTTE cadres.

Furthermore, the symbols of flame and fire clearly belong to the Hindu ritual domain, and the constructions of *pandals* at Heroes' Day celebrations, or at LTTE cemeteries, certainly resonated among a deeply religious population. Such practices—*pandals* and the lighting of the flame—originate within the Tamil Hindu cultural universe, but are performed by Christians and Hindus alike and are often perceived as a shared “Tamil culture.”⁴⁴ Also, the fact that the cyanide capsule, called *kuppi*, worn around the neck strongly resembles the *thāli*—the necklace worn by married Tamil women (including Catholics) as a sign of marital bonding—is not lost upon Tamils, pointing to the cultural value of *kaddupādu*, or submission to a particular discipline.⁴⁵ Furthermore, in trying to understand the change in LTTE funeral practices—from cremation to burial—it has also been suggested that this was a conscious move to underline the asceticism of the LTTE cadres. They adhered to a strict discipline, including sexual abstinence and celibacy, and did not consume alcohol. Asceticism confers special power and potency in the battlefield; hence, some soldiers' remains were treated as those of *sannyāsins*, the Hindu ascetics who are buried, not cremated. But again, the shift to burial did not speak only to Hindu Tamils; it can also be seen as serving the Catholic LTTE cadres.

Scholars have differed in their views on the role of religion in the LTTE. Peter Schalk, who has written extensively about the LTTE, has argued that although Hinduism (in terms of temple rituals or notions of self-sacrifice) can be identified in commemoration practices and in Heroes' Day speeches, to portray the LTTE as a religious terrorist group would be to undermine the group's self-understanding as secular, fighting for a secularist socialist state. Furthermore, Schalk argues that the LTTE's concept of martyrdom has to be distinguished from the martyr ideology of Hamas in that a Black Tiger's sacrifice is made in a secular setting. Importantly, however, Schalk does not specify what “secular” means in this context. “Secular” can be assumed to mean that the LTTE does not identify with one particular organized religious institutions and that it therefore is nondenominational. Stephen Hopgood correctly criticizes Robert Pape's understanding of the LTTE as a Marxist-Leninist group, but concludes rather quickly that the conflict was not religious, since Prabhakaran “is said to be an atheist, for example.”⁴⁶ Hopgood's concern is to show that the Black Tigers were not motivated by a cult to Prabhakaran, that “religion is not a feature which can explain the emergence of SM [suicide missions] in the Tamil case,” and furthermore, that “neither the language nor the symbolism of reincarnation figures in LTTE or Black Tiger culture.”⁴⁷ However, although Hopgood is right in pointing out the military logic of LTTE suicide missions, it should be noted that he seems to overlook existing research on the cultural aspects of the LTTE, and therefore disregards the role played by culture in producing LTTE cadres willing to sacrifice their lives.

Michael Roberts, criticizing Shalk, argues that to ignore the role of religion is to tacitly accept the official secularist ideology of the LTTE. If we are to capture LTTE practice and modus operandi, Robert argues, understanding the role of culture and religion in the LTTE universe is crucial. By looking at Heroes' Day celebrations and the practice of burying dead soldiers, Robert makes a strong argument for regarding LTTE culture as permeated by Śaiva rituals and

sacrificial ideology. Furthermore, Roberts argues, we need to understand who was on the receiving end of LTTE ideology—namely, the middle- to lower-middle-class cadres who would be located within Tamil Hindu and Tamil Catholic “folk religion,” in which the belief in *śakti* (divine power or energy) and rituals is important. Roberts’s “maximalist reading” of religion in the LTTE also suggests that hero worship not only specifically echoed Śaiva ritual worship, but that it was identical to *pūjā* worship of Hindu deities. Roberts certainly makes a strong case for locating the LTTE within a specific cultural and religious context, but it should be noted that the lack of ethnographic research within the LTTE makes his conclusions less firm. For example, although the practice of the “stone planting” of great heroes and their veneration certainly stems from the Tamil Śaiva tradition, there is little ethnographic evidence to suggest that LTTE soldiers and sympathizers themselves made this connection, or that they worshipped their great heroes in the way of Hindu deities in a *pūjā* ritual. A similar ritual form of veneration does not necessarily imply a similar religious function, for example, that great heroes can be appropriated in order to obtain *śakti*, as in certain Hindu *pūjās*.

Along similar lines, Roberts suggests that the LTTE was engaged in a form of “war magic” involving ritual protections, such as going to temples before operations, and furthermore, that the *kuppi* had a tantric magic function as an amulet.⁴⁸ Although this certainly is a valid point in our understanding of LTTE’s martial culture, it should be noted that so-called apotropaic religion is part of the cultural logic of the Indian subcontinent, including in conventional armies such as the Sri Lankan Armed Forces. Praying or making vows to gods before battle and wearing protective amulets, images, or religious objects is in fact widespread in military cultures and organizations in general, and the LTTE does not stand out in this regard.

Building on the work of Roberts, Indian military historian Kaushik Roy similarly underscores the importance of Śaivism to LTTE culture.⁴⁹ His emphasis on the importance of Hindu notions of female power, such as *śakti*, underlines the mystical and “cultic” character of the LTTE, exactly the point that Schalk has so deliberately minimized in his attempt to rationalize the LTTE’s warfare. Roberts (and Roy with him) understands the role of religion in the LTTE through the Weberian lens of “enchantment” and the “regeneration of divine potency,” but such a culturalist interpretation ignores the strong nonreligious, leftist, and secularist legacies of Tamil nationalism, running the risk of reducing the LTTE to a cultic and irrational actor, denied political legitimacy. In trying to overcome the two contrary positions, Benjamin Schonthal, in his analysis of Prabhakaran’s 1997 Heroes’ Day Speech, has argued that the speech creates “alternate narratives of commemoration which can be read as both religious and as non-religious.”⁵⁰ The Tamil words and phrasings Prabhakaran used—as well as the official LTTE English translation—contain multiple meanings. The polyphonic character of official memorialization thus speaks to both the “religious” and the “nonreligious,” and can be said to be a genius rhetorical move by the LTTE. Dagmar Hellmann-Rajayanagam notes a similar ambiguity in her analysis of LTTE poetry. This poetry was not made by the LTTE’s official cultural producers, but it gained respect and praise within the LTTE. On the one hand, the poems address themes found in the classical Cankam literature, such as the sacralization of the soil, but as Hellmann-Rajayanagam notes, “the element of sacredness found in the modern poems is absent.”⁵¹ On the other hand, some of the poems also contain very specific religious references, such as to the sun and its rays (a reference to the Hindu Tamil warrior god Murukan) or to Yama (the Hindu god of death).

Overlapping “Fields of Religiosities”

What is remarkable is how quickly and consciously the LTTE constructed a new martial culture. Instead of slow processes of cultural hybridity, synthesis, borrowing, and exchange—which are hallmarks of Sri Lankan society—the LTTE created its own highly standardized synthesis in just a few decades. This makes it reasonable to argue that ambiguities concerning religious symbols, the politics of religion, secularism, and the “sacralization of the nation” were all masterfully designed to cater to a multicastrate and multireligious “constituency.” Both Roberts and Hellmann-Rajayanagam suggest that the LTTE martial culture is best understood as Hindu-Christian syncretism, or even synthesis, and point to the “pluralistic religious symbolism” of the LTTE.⁵²

Another way of understanding religion within the LTTE is through the notion of “fields of religiosities.” For the analytical purpose here, three distinct yet partly overlapping fields of religiosities can be identified. The first field relates to the strong secularist, nationalist, and leftist orientations of the LTTE, which were expressed both in its official ideology and through rituals and artefacts. Read along Durkheimian lines, the entire symbolic universe of the LTTE would qualify as a “society’s celebration of itself” or as a form of “civil religion.” The peculiar mix of isms in the political and cultural imaginary of the LTTE is here identified as the “civil religious field.” The second field of religiosity relates to Śaivism and Tamil cultural traditions. In creating the necessary internal social cohesion for its survival, the LTTE drew on tropes in Tamil Hindu culture that were familiar to the recipients of its ideology. To anyone familiar with South Asian religiosity, the Hindu elements of the movement are obvious: the use of the ritual flame, flower garlands, incense, the use of the lotus symbols, or, as previously discussed, Hindu notions of abandonment and self-sacrifice. Surely, the LTTE reinterpreted such traditional elements, but there can be no doubt that the movement strategically built a new cultural universe by drawing on Hindu elements. At the one end of the continuum within the “Śaiva religiosity field,” we find such practices as regarding Prabhakaran as Suriya Devi, the Sun God.⁵³ But it should be noted that this was not necessarily shared by all Hindus, or even by very active LTTE sympathizers.⁵⁴ At the other end of the continuum we find practices, for example Heroes’ Day speeches about self-sacrifice, which can be interpreted as one polysemantic field able to communicate to a variety of audiences at the same time. In such instances, it can be argued that the “civil religious” and “Śaiva religious” fields converge.

Where does all this leave the Catholics? Surprisingly little attention has been paid to the Catholics in the LTTE. In most academic writings the Catholic presence is mentioned only in passing; it is never really analyzed. Because Catholics played an important role in the LTTE, Catholic religiosity, I suggest, should be identified as a distinct field of its own in the LTTE ranks. Many Catholic LTTE activists readily accepted the importance of Hinduism to Tamil culture, and it was common to see their Catholic religiosity as additional to Tamil culture, which, it was recognized, could not be separated from Hinduism.⁵⁵ Catholic rituals or symbols were not clearly discernible in LTTE official ideology and practice, but it has been argued that in order to speak to its Catholic cadres and sympathizers, the LTTE also drew on Christian notions of reverence and praise of the Virgin Mary.⁵⁶ It should also be mentioned that one of the Tamil words for martyr is *cāṭci*, or “witness,” which is used in the Tamil translations of the Bible. This space for the Catholic imaginary and frame of understanding is evident in the interview material

in the documentary film *My Daughter the Terrorist*, in which it becomes clear that Catholic Black Tigers had not abandoned a Catholic understanding of suffering and the problem of evil. Darshika in particular shows a deep Catholic commitment and framework for understanding individual as well as collective suffering. Interestingly, a tension appears in her between the non-violence of Jesus (he was killed) and the need for armed struggle (to save the nation). Darshika identifies the LTTE's struggle for justice with Jesus' struggle for justice albeit at the same time recognizing the difference between Jesus' pacifism and LTTE militarism. This calls into question Roberts's idea that a Hindu-Christian synthesis developed within the LTTE. An alternative way of understanding religion in the LTTE, therefore, is to see religion both as a negotiated multilayered concept used for a variety of purposes by political leaders and cultural producers, but also as various "fields" within the movement. As such, we can speak of multiple belongings for individual cadres and of movement between the "civil religious," "Saiva religious," and the "Tamil Catholic religious" fields, according to context.

Epilogue: The Religious Landscape of War

The LTTE did not operate in a vacuum; its leaders and soldiers had multiple relations with other military and political actors, including religious officials located within their territory or in the war-torn "border areas." LTTE relations with religious officials ranged from cooperation and support to hostility and even to attacks on and the murder of religious officials.

On the question of why Hindu priests in Tamil society as a group have been less vocal in the Tamil nationalist struggle, one can point to several explanations. The first—and perhaps most obvious—relates to the secularist aspirations of the LTTE and that protecting strictly Hindu religious interests was not on its agenda. Another aspect concerns the religious role of the Hindu priests, who serve the divine through elaborate temple rituals but play a limited role in education or as preachers to lay people. Furthermore, compared to Catholic fathers, they did not play a vocal role in Sri Lanka's diverse civil society sector. It is important not to forget, however, that in the midst of war and "secularist" Tamil nationalism, Hindu temples did not vanish. On the contrary, Hindu temples and forms of religiosity seemed to thrive. This partly owed to religion's potential as an expressive medium for grief, anger, and frustration. Gods can be appropriated; military powers not. The war had an enormous impact upon Hindu religious life. The individual and collective suffering inflicted on civilians during the war, McGilvray points out, "seem to have generated a renewed interest in forms of popular religious practice."⁵⁷ In fact, the war years witnessed a remarkable popularity of Tamil trance mediums, particularly female ones, who offered their services to Tamil-speaking Hindus and Muslims. Such practices allowed for mourning, counseling, and healing in an extremely repressive and violent context; traditional Hindu practices, such as trance possession, pilgrimage, and vow-making to powerful deities, were given new meaning and relevance in times of extreme suffering and destruction.⁵⁸ War ethnography from Eastern Sri Lanka indicates that LTTE cadres also participated in such ecstatic forms of religiosity, but did so outside the camps.⁵⁹

In addition, Hindu temples were sites for local politics and "honor politics." The British often misapprehended temple disputes, deeming them merely "religious," and not "political," thus missing the fact that "ritual disputes" often concealed "politics." During the war, "temple politics" was a way of doing politics when it was considered too dangerous within the military

systems of political competition. Therefore, Mark Whitaker, in his analysis of the role played by so-called national temples (*tēcattukkōvil*), suggests that the continued strength of such temples during the war in Eastern Sri Lanka must be seen as the survival of a different kind of politics than the one represented by either the state or the LTTE. This form of politics concerned caste, rank, honor, and local resources. At times, Whitaker points out, this “temple politics” could represent an alternative to, or even a refuge from, the modern form of politics and warfare as represented by the LTTE, while at other times they coexisted and intermingled.⁶⁰

The Catholic Church did not take an official stance on the conflict. Since the 1970s, the church had been divided along ethnic and linguistic lines into a Sinhala-speaking Catholic Church that was loyal to the Sinhala- and Buddhist-dominated state, and a Tamil-speaking Catholic Church that served the suffering Tamil civilian population amid war, and whose members—including bishops and fathers—would be close to the LTTE. This divide became very evident in late 2008, when only five bishops agreed to sign a petition for a ceasefire, to last seven days between Christmas and New Year’s Day, for the purpose of evacuating civilians from the war zone in Vanni. Two of the five signatories were Anglican, so only three Catholic bishops—out of fourteen in the entire country—were willing to petition the government for a ceasefire at Christmas. As Bernardo Brown noted, this was interpreted by Tamil Catholics as “a profound lack of compassion and solidarity on the part of Sinhalese Catholic clergy and laity.”⁶¹

Religious leaders who served civilians living in areas of the north and east during the war faced high levels of threat and insecurity. Among the first documented cases of the maltreatment of Tamil Catholic fathers occurred in 1982, when the government used the notorious Prevention of Terrorism Act against Tamil intellectuals and clergy for their alleged support of the Tamil insurgency. The two Tamil Catholic fathers, Father P. Sinnarasa and Father A. Singaraya, were incarcerated in the much-feared Welikada Prison. In 1995, two Tamil Catholic priests were detained for bringing equipment to the LTTE. They were released after two months, but according to Rajan Hoole—a prominent Tamil intellectual and fervent critic of the LTTE—the delay in releasing them was symptomatic of the weakness of the Church.⁶²

As ethnic tensions grew in the north and east in the 1970s, Catholic priests—among them several American Jesuits—became more involved in protecting civilians and reducing tensions between different armed groups. Furthermore, Catholic fathers collected information about human rights violations in their dioceses. As pointed out by Bernardo Brown, this increasingly “position[ed] the Catholic Church as a natural advocate for the Tamil cause.”⁶³ This is not to say that Catholic priests were aligned with the LTTE; particularly in the Eastern Province, Catholic priests seem to have shown particular skill in maneuvering among numerous armed groups, including the LTTE, often at great personal risk. However, in the LTTE-controlled area in the north, Catholic priests, such as Father S. J. Emmanuel and Father Karunaratnam, became closely associated with the LTTE, and some Tamil Catholic fathers openly avowed Christian liberation theology in the context of what they saw as the genocide of the Tamil nation. In this Tamil liberation theology, Prabhakaran was seen as a savior figure. In addition, influential Tamil Catholic priests serving Tamil Catholic congregations abroad have expressed strong sympathies toward the LTTE.⁶⁴

Review of the Literature and Future Research

The LTTE suicide missions are frequently referenced in cross-cultural and comparative studies of terrorism, suicide missions, insurgency movements, and asymmetrical warfare. Such studies focus on transnational communication between various militant groups in developing suicide-mission techniques, for example, between Palestinian groups and the LTTE, or on the strategic logic of suicide missions in so-called asymmetrical warfare.

LTTE suicide missions have also been referred to in contemporary policy debates about the role of religion in suicide attacks, as a reminder that suicide missions can take place in nationalist and non-Islamic contexts. As we have seen, there is a vivid scholarly debate about the role of religion within the LTTE, between those who emphasize Śaiva influence and those who see the LTTE as a rational and secularist actor. Surprisingly little attention has been paid to the role of the Catholic Church during the war. Future research would need to systematically address the role of Catholic fathers in Tamil militancy, but also search for more primary material with regard to Catholic LTTE cadres.

Primary Sources

The books by LTTE intellectuals, such as Adele Balasingham and Anton Balasingham, are available in English. Finding primary material from the Black Tigers, however, is an almost impossible task. Reading LTTE ideology in LTTE speeches, texts, posters, or written on memorial monuments is easier, but again this only presents us with the official LTTE ideology—that is, it shows us how the LTTE leadership wanted to communicate its stance on martyrdom or religion. Apart from primary material in Tamil, the best sources on the cultural dimensions of the LTTE are the numerous works written by Peter Schalk⁶⁵ and Dagmar Hellmann-Rajayanagam⁶⁶ and their translations of official LTTE documents or poetry from Tamil to English or German.

A completely different question is how LTTE soldiers and the Black Tigers themselves understood martyrdom, suicide missions, and the potential role of religion in this process. Among the few sources we have is the documentary film *My Daughter the Terrorist* (2007)⁶⁷ which features two female Tigers trained for suicide missions. The film provides a unique insight into the otherwise closed-off world of the LTTE; moreover, it provides unique interview material with *female* Black Tiger cadres. The film was shot inside LTTE-controlled area in 2005 by the Norwegian filmmaker Beate Arnestad. There are particular methodological considerations to be made when using the film as research material—most importantly, the controlled interview situation—but it is among the very few sources available about Black Tigers beyond the official LTTE texts.

Another relevant film is the award-winning Tamil-language drama *Theeviravaathi: The Terrorist* by Santosh Sivan, from 1998.⁶⁸ Following the young girl Malli in her preparations for a suicide mission, the film is a powerful narrative about the making of a suicide bomber. However, the film cannot claim to provide full insight into this process because it has a happy ending in which Malli eventually appreciates the importance of life and aborts her mission. The film makes clear references to the killing of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991.

To get access to Tamil politics one can follow pro-LTTE sites, such as [Eelamweb](#) and [Tamilnet](#).

Further Reading

1. Alison, Miranda. "Cogs in The Wheel? Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam." *Civil Wars* 6, no. 4 (2003): 37–54.
 2. Hellman-Rayanayagam, Dagmar. "The Concept of a 'Tamil Homeland' in Sri Lanka—Its Meaning and Development." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 13, no. 2 (1990): 79–110.
 3. Hellmann-Rajanayagam, Dagmar. "Female Warriors, Martyrs, and Suicide Attackers: Women in the LTTE." *International Review of Modern Sociology* 34, no. 1 (2008): 1–25.
 4. Lawrence, Patricia. "The Changing Amman: Notes on the Injury of War in Eastern Sri Lanka." In "Conflict and Community in Contemporary Sri Lanka." Special issue. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 20(suppl. 1) (1997): 215–236.
 5. McGilvray, Dennis. "Tamils and Muslims in the Shadow of War: Schism or Continuity?" In "Conflict and Community in Contemporary Sri Lanka." Special issue. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 20(suppl.) (1997): 239–253.
 6. Pfaffenberger, Bryan. "The Cultural Dimension of Tamil Separatism in Sri Lanka." *Asian Survey* 21, no. 11 (1981): 1145–1157.
 7. Roberts, Michael. "Saivite Symbols, Sacrifice, and Tamil Tiger Rites." *Social Analysis* 49, no. 1 (2005): 67–93.
 8. Schalk, Peter. "The Revival of Martyr Cults among Īavar." *Temenos* 33 (1997): 151–190.
 9. Trawick, Margaret. *Enemy Lines: Warfare, Childhood and Play in Batticaloa*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.
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Notes

1. K. M. de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2005), 627.
 2. The situation is different among the Tamils in the east, who do not closely identify with Jaffna Tamil culture, which has a separate caste system.
 3. Bryan Pfaffenberger, "The Political Construction of Defensive Nationalism: The 1968 Temple-Entry Crisis in Northern Sri Lanka," *Journal of Asian Studies* 49, no. 1 (1990): 79.
 4. Pfaffenberger, 88.
 5. For more on the "Buddhicization" of the Sri Lankan Armed Forces, see Iselin Frydenlund, "'Operation Dharma': The Sri Lankan Army as an Instrument of Buddhist Nationalism," in *Military Chaplaincy in a Pluralist Age*, eds. Torkel Brekke and Vladimir Thikonov (Delhi: Oxford University Press), 81–103.
 6. Anton Balasingham, *War and Peace: Armed Struggle and Peace Efforts of Liberation Tigers* (Mitcham, UK: Fairmax, 2004), 18–19.
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7. Benjamin Schonthal, *Buddhism, Politics and the Limits of Law: The Pyrrhic Constitutionalism of Sri Lanka* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 117.
 8. The group was first established as the Tamil New Tigers (TNT) in 1972.
 9. Balasingham, *War and Peace*, 22–23.
 10. Mark P. Whitaker, *Learning Politics from Sivaram: The Life and Death of a Revolutionary Tamil Journalist in Sri Lanka* (London: Pluto Press, 2007).
 11. Mark P. Whitaker, “Tigers and Temples: The Politics of Nationalist and Non-modern Violence in Sri Lanka,” in *Conflict and Community in Contemporary Sri Lanka: “Pearl of the East” or the “Island of Tears”?* eds. Siri Gamage and I. B. Watson (New Delhi: SAGE), 187.
 12. Peter Schalk, “The Revival of Martyr Cults among Īlavar,” *Temenos* 33 (1997): 151–190.
 13. However, it should not be forgotten that several LTTE suicide missions also included civilian targets in the Sinhala-dominated south, most notably the attack on the Central Bank in Colombo in 1996, which left 91 civilians dead and 1,400 wounded.
 14. Steven Hopgood, “Tamil Tigers, 1987–2002,” in *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*, ed. Diego Gambetta (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 44.
 15. Peter Schalk, “Non-martial and Martial Methods to an Ultimate Political Goal of the Tiger Movement in Sri Lanka,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, May 2016.
 16. Because the Norwegian government was engaged in peace negotiations with the LTTE from the late 1990s to 2008, Norway did not proscribe the LTTE.
 17. Peter Schalk, “Resistance and Martyrdom in the Process of State Formation of Tamililam,” in *Martyrdom and Political Resistance: Essays from Asia and Europe*, ed. J. Pettigrew (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1997), 68.
 18. Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam, “And Heroes Die: Poetry of the Tamil Liberation Movement in Northern Sri Lanka,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 28, no.1 (2005): 112–153; and Schalk, “Resistance and Martyrdom.”
 19. The Black Tigers were chosen by the LTTE leader Prabhakaran after a strict selection process, and they received special training. Before the start of each suicide operation the Black Tiger would be treated to a last meal with Prabhakaran.
 20. Hellmann-Rajanayagam, “And Heroes Die,” 129.
 21. Hellmann-Rajanayagam, 129.
 22. After 2009, Heroes’ Day Celebrations were outlawed in Sri Lanka.
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23. The *māvīrar nāl* also includes the honoring of Prabhakaran, whose birthday was on November 26.
 24. Øivind Fuglerud, “Aesthetics of Martyrdom: The Celebration of Violent Death among the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam,” in *Violence Expressed: An Anthropological Approach*, eds. Maria Six Hoenbalken and Nerina Weiss (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2011), 76.
 25. These observations are based on fieldwork conducted at the Heroes’ Day celebrations in Oslo, Norway, November 27, 2016, with the permission of the organizers.
 26. Author’s field notes, Jaffna peninsula, 2005.
 27. A virtual cemetery has been constructed for this purpose, see “Heroes,” [EelamWeb](#).
 28. LTTE list of Black Tigers, 1987–2001.
 29. Personal interview with Thamilini, Oslo, Norway, 2004.
 30. The LTTE soldier-poet Vanati, quoted in Schalk, “Resistance and Martyrdom,” 73.
 31. Shamara Ransirini, “Becoming Militant: Narrative of (Dis?) embodiment in Visakesa Chandrasekaram’s *Tigers Don’t Confess*,” *Outskirts* 33 (2015): 4.
 32. Interview, in Morten Daae, prod., and Beate Arnestad, dir., *My Daughter the Terrorist: A Beate Arnestad Film* (Oslo, Norway: Oslo Dokumentarkino, 2007). English translation.
 33. Peter Schalk, “Present Concepts of Secularism among Ilavar and Lankans,” in *Zwischen Säkularismus und Hierokratie. Studien zum Verhältnis von Religion und Staat in Süd- und Ostasien*, ed. Peter Schalk (Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala University Library), 37–72.
 34. Schalk, “Resistance and Martyrdom,” 155.
 35. Schalk, “Resistance and Martyrdom,” 155.
 36. Personal interviews with LTTE activists in Norway and the United Kingdom, 2016–2017.
 37. Taraki was the chief editor of Tamilnet. He was assassinated in 2005.
 38. In Whitaker, *Conflict and Community*.
 39. Dennis B. McGilvray, *Crucible of Conflict: Tamil and Muslim Society on the East Coast of Sri Lanka* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 352–353.
 40. Separate Muslim political formation took shape in the midst of competing Sinhala and Tamil nationalisms, and the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress was formed as late as 1981.
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41. See for example, *LTTE Christian Ties* blog, <http://ltte-christian-ties.blogspot.no/>.
 42. The Sanskrit word is *tyāgi*.
 43. Hellmann-Rajanayagam, “And Heroes Die,” 114.
 44. Pandals are also part of popular Buddhist practice.
 45. Michael Roberts, “Encompassing Empowerment in Ritual, War, and Assassination: Tantric Principles in Tamil Tiger Instrumentalities,” *Social Analysis* 58, no.1 (2014): 92.
 46. Hopgood, “Tamil Tigers, 1987–2002,” 45.
 47. Hopgood, 76.
 48. Roberts, “Encompassing Empowerment,” 101.
 49. Scott Gates and Kaushik Roy, *Unconventional Warfare in South Asia: Shadow Warriors and Counterinsurgency* (London: Routledge, 2016).
 50. Benjamin Schonthal, “Translating Remembering,” in *The Sri Lanka Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. John Clifford Holt (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 545.
 51. Hellmann-Rajanayagam, “And Heroes Die,” 117.
 52. Michael Roberts, “Saivite Symbols,” 494.
 53. Fuglerud, “Aesthetics of Martyrdom,” 86.
 54. Several of my LTTE informants (of Hindu background) had not heard of the practice of worshipping Prabhakaran as Sun God and refuted its existence.
 55. Personal interviews with Catholic LTTE activists in Europe, 2016 and 2017.
 56. Hellmann-Rajanayagam, “And Heroes Die,” 117.
 57. Dennis B. McGilvray, *Crucible of Conflict: Tamil and Muslim Society on the East Coast of Sri Lanka* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 346.
 58. McGilvray, 348–349.
 59. Patricia Lawrence, “Violence, Suffering, Amman: The Work of Oracles in Sri Lanka’s Eastern War Zone,” in *Violence and Subjectivity*, ed. V. Daas (Berkeley: California University Press, 2000), 181.
 60. Whitaker, *Conflict and Community*, 190–191.
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61. Bernardo E. Brow, "Sinhalese and Tamil Catholics, different paths to reconciliation," *The Newsletter* 69 (Autumn 2014), International Institute for Asian Studies, 17–17.
62. Rajan Hoole, *Sri Lanka. The Arrogance of Power: Myths, Decadence and Murder* (Colombo, Sri Lanka: University Teachers for Human Rights, Jaffna, 2001), 387.
63. Bernardo E. Brown, "Jesuit Missionaries in Post-colonial Conflict Zones: The Disappearance of 'Father Basketball' in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 38, no. 4 (2015): 589–607.
64. This observation is based on conversations with LTTE activists in Norway and the United Kingdom since the early 2000s.
65. See for example, Peter Schalk, "The Revival of Martyr Cults among Īlavar," *Temenos* 33 (1997): 151–190, and "Resistance and Martyrdom in the Process of State Formation of Tamililam," in *Martyrdom and Political Resistance: Essays from Asia and Europe*, ed. J. Pettigrew (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1997), 61–84.
66. See, for example, Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam, "And Heroes Die: Poetry of the Tamil Liberation Movement in Northern Sri Lanka," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 28, no. 1 (2005): 112–153; and Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam, "Female Warriors, Martyrs, and Suicide Attackers: Women in the LTTE," *International Review of Modern Sociology* 34, no. 1 (2008): 1–25.
67. Morten Daae, prod., and Beate Arnestad, dir., *My Daughter the Terrorist: A Beate Arnestad Film* (Oslo, Norway: Oslo Dokumentarkino, 2007).
68. Santosh Sivan, dir., *Theeviravaathi: The Terrorist* (India, 1998).
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