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Space and Movement in the Sri Lankan Conflict

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Introduction

Based upon fieldwork among Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka's Northern Province living in Norway and among Muslims in Sri Lanka's Eastern Province, I will in the following discuss migration and nonmigration as related to social practices and political imagery in Sri Lanka. Available data suggest that we find very different responses to the situation of war among the Tamil population in the Northern Province and the Muslim population in the Eastern Province.

The questions of when and for what particular reasons people decide to flee from conflict situations have been of interest to refugee research since its inception (Kunz 1973). In this chapter I argue that in dealing with these questions we need to take into consideration broader issues and more deep-seated traditions than the immediate trigger mechanisms that make people break up and leave. In particular we need to understand how the people concerned conceptualise space and their own communities within it. To grasp the social dynamics behind processes of displacement we need to realise that individuals and communities do not respond in an equal manner to situations of conflict and violence. This is a fact that is often bypassed in refugee research. Stein's understanding is that research should focus on 'refugees everywhere from a broad historical perspective that views them as recurring phenomena with identifiable and often identical patterns of behaviour and sets of causalities' (Stein 1981: 321). One 'set of causalities' is that the refugee, as opposed to the immigrant, '... is not pulled out; he is pushed out. Given the choice he would stay' (Stein 1981: 322).

This portrait is a simplification. It neglects the fact that the reasons why particular persons end up as refugees may be complex. When a person leaves his or her home country in a situation of war, this is often the result of a process where family and friends have contributed, expecting in return future assistance in their own migration. Involuntary migration often involves making priorities and decisions similar to those found in other forms of migration and should be seen as one aspect of larger cultural and sociopolitical processes. To the extent that our interest is in response mechanisms and social dynamics, we need to move beyond legal definitions and conduct in-depth studies of the way possibilities are perceived and acted upon in situations of violence.

Geography of War

The population of Sri Lanka is divided into a complex arrangement of social and ethnic groups, of which, according to the 1981 census, the largest are the Sinhalese (74 percent), the Sri Lanka-Tamil (11 percent), the Indian Tamil (7 percent), and the Muslim (7 percent). Since the early 1980s the country has been in a state of civil war, mainly fought between the Sinhalese army and armed representatives of the Sri Lankan-Tamil minority. While the northern part of the country is predominantly Tamil, the east has a mixed population of Tamils, Muslims and Sinhalese. The Muslim minority in Sri Lanka consists of communities living dispersed among the numerically stronger groups.

From its early days in the mid 1970s, the armed Tamil liberation movement comprised a number of separate groups. In 1986 one of these groups, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), through a number of surprise attacks on its rivals (Hoole et al. 1988), emerged as the stronger. However, as a consequence of the accord signed by the governments of India and Sri Lanka in 1987, some of these rivals gained political influence backed by Indian military forces. From the autumn of 1987 until the spring of 1990 around 90,000 Indian soldiers, assisted by these local handymen, struggled to control the forces of the LTTE without success. When they finally withdrew, this was a combined result of military failure and a mounting pressure from the Sri Lankan government, which by then was accused by their Sinhalese voters of allowing India to rule its domestic politics.

The Indian withdrawal brought death to towns and villages in the Tamil areas. In Jaffna the LTTE were after fierce fighting able to establish control and to build an administration, which remained in place until the end of 1995. In the Eastern Province the organisation took control over local police stations. After having surrendered, many policemen were taken away never to be seen again. One officer, who escaped with injuries,

later told the papers that he and 113 of his colleagues from the police station in Kalmunai had been lined up by the LTTE and shot (UTHR 1990). These kinds of actions were not limited to the LTTE however. In one of its reports Amnesty International estimated that 3,000 Tamil people had 'disappeared' or been killed by government forces in Amparai, the district south of Batticaloa, between July and October 1990 (Amnesty International 1991). In Batticaloa Town, more than 1,500 people were registered as 'disappeared' between June and December by the local Peace Committee (*ibid.*).

The Muslim population was part of this apocalypse. In the Eastern Province tensions had existed between Tamils and Muslims at least since the mid 1980s. In the LTTE's actions against police stations, Muslim officers were grouped with Sinhalese and taken away while most of the Tamils were allowed to go. On 3 August 1990 around 30 members of the LTTE, in two groups, simultaneously attacked the Meera Jumma and the Hussainiya mosques in Kattankudy during prayer, killing 128 civilians, including a number of children. One week later Eravur, a Muslim town north of Batticaloa, was hit. Entering the town from both sides in the early hours of the morning, LTTE soldiers raided houses along Main Street, and 121 sleeping men, women, and children were slaughtered. The massacre was followed by the killing of twenty-one Tamils in what is locally known as the 'border area', the overlapping area between Eravur itself and the neighbouring Tamil town of Chenkaladi, an area which at that time had an ethnically mixed population. Muslim 'home guards' from Eravur carried out these retaliatory killings. The violence led to the vacating of the border area by both parties.

Movement and Space

By this brief presentation I hope to have established that the violence that has engulfed Sri Lanka during the last twenty years has also affected the eastern part of the country. Indeed, while the armed Tamil liberation movement first originated in northern Sri Lanka, the Eastern Province has become an increasingly important area for all parties to the conflict for asserting their military capacity.

Against this backdrop the difference in the population's responses to the continuous violence in various regions of Sri Lanka is quite striking. At a press conference in Colombo in December 1995 president Kumaratunga suggested that out of a prewar population of 950,000 in the Northern Province, the one predominantly Tamil province in Sri Lanka, approximately 400,000 had at that point settled outside the country. While as a group their relationship with different national immigration authorities has by no means been smooth, these Tamil refugees have individual-

ly been able to secure legal residence in countries from Finland to South Africa and on continents from Europe to Australia. Indeed, to someone who has worked among Tamil refugees outside Sri Lanka it seems clear that Paris, London, and Toronto today are as much parts of Tamil geography as Jaffna, Trincomalee or Colombo.

Among the Muslims in the Eastern Province, on the other hand, an opposite dynamic seems to be working. There is no international refugee flow and no internal displacement to Colombo or other areas outside the war zone. Rather than people moving out, Muslim towns have themselves become destinations for Muslims displaced from rural areas. In 1990, as the Indian troops withdrew, the LTTE took control over the territory on the western side of the Batticaloa lagoon, a position they have since defended successfully. This area, a very fertile agricultural zone, was an area of mixed Tamil and Muslim landholdings and cattle farming. When the LTTE took control, the Muslim families were driven out and today most of them live in refugee settlements in Eravur and in Muslim towns along the coast south of Batticaloa. The land- and cattle owners living in Eravur and Kattankudy at the same time lost their property, being deprived of much of their traditional economic basis. Despite these difficulties, however, people clung on, and my leading questions to informants concerning planned mobility were largely met with incomprehension. 'Refugee' as a legal concept was not known to anyone I met, and the idea of being allowed to settle permanently in another country because their lives might be in danger seemed to most almost absurd. The scenario of moving to Colombo, on the other hand, was clearly not a tempting one; most people travelling beyond Polonnaruwa, 75 kilometres away, seemed to carry the connotation of going to *velinatu*, a foreign land. Even members of the small class of people having been educated outside the region, gave answers like 'I belong here', 'we have nowhere to go', 'this is my village, how can I leave?' when asked if they had any plans to move out of the war-zone.

The Importance of Marriage

The most important explanation for the relative success of Tamils in securing emigration and protection as refugees in Western countries has been the previous existence of family members outside Sri Lanka. In the postindependence period Tamils started migrating to find work when Sinhala politicians in the 1950s consciously sought ways of reducing Tamil entry into the public sector in Sri Lanka (Daniel and Thangaraj 1995). When the war started and Western countries tightened their immigration and asylum controls, these early emigrants became instrumental in assisting relatives in need of a safe haven. To Tamils, going abroad to settle often

involves the use of professional 'agents'. The cost of a full-service package to bring a Sri Lankan to Canada was in 1997 estimated to be between \$22,000 and \$26,000 (DIRB 1997). To go to Norway most Tamils pay \$10,000-\$15,000. The only people with access to this amount of money are those with relatives already in the West.

The argument that kinship ties are important to the process of migration would probably qualify as a truism. Since the 1960s analysts have been interested in the importance of social networks for processes of chain migration and the role of family and friends in settling new immigrants in receiving countries (Boyd 1989). The important point here is that Tamil kinship and social practices have attained a spatial form that today structures a perception of their own community in transnational terms. Through the practice of arranged marriages Tamils become part of transnational networks, incorporating new members into the grid of Dravidian classificatory kinship semantics. Classificatory kinship not only groups relatives together in a limited number of categories, but also defines modes of action and bonds of solidarity on the basis of such categories. The most important aspect of Dravidian kinship is that it indicates an ideal of bilateral cross-cousin marriage (Trautman 1981), an ideal still found in Jaffna. The ideal marriage is with the closest possible kin, and in theory one can imagine two male cross-cousins exchanging sisters down through generations, so that mother's brother's daughter and father's sister's daughter will be the same person.

In the Jaffna-Tamil case this centripetal dynamic is, however, counterbalanced by the practice of hypergamy through dowered marriages (Fuglerud 1999). It is within this socioeconomic context that we must explore the importance of migration to the Jaffna society. There are strong indications that under present conditions where obtaining refugee protection in Western countries is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain, dowries among Jaffna Tamils are subject to hyperinflation. To a male refugee a sizeable dowry is one way of recovering part of the cost of going abroad. To parents and brothers securing a daughter's or sister's marriage to an émigré is worth paying for, and the particular nationality of the groom's passport is an important variable in dowry negotiations. The migration situation thereby drastically alters the role and function of dowry. Instead of one dowry helping to finance another, floating as capital within the system of family networks, the cost of transport and settlement papers now siphons off this capital to greedy 'agents'. Among my informants in Norway dowries of \$50,000-\$100,000 are not unusual, a substantial part often going into arranging the very meeting of the two parties. As I have noted elsewhere (Fuglerud 1999: 152), this is one curious consequence of the increasingly strict immigration regulations in the West; because of the extremely high costs of circumventing them, migration has retained its aura of social mobility into the era of full-fledged civil

war. While this situation means bending the former ideal of marriage within the family, there is no sign that the fundamental structure of caste is breaking down. By combining cultural values rooted in the sedentary society of South Asia with the economic bargaining power obtained through migratory careers, Tamil marriages can be seen as what Olwig terms 'cultural sites'; institutions created through an interplay between dwelling and travelling, presence and absence, localising and globalising (Olwig 1997: 35). To women themselves the consequences of this changing pattern are predominantly negative. On the one hand marriage outside the family, and in particular to men settled abroad, weakens the possibility of support from relatives in daily chores and in situations of difficulty. On the other hand male migration and rising dowries create a situation where many women are not able to marry at all. According to a survey conducted by the Northern District administration, in Jaffna women in 1994 outnumbered men six to one (Associated Press 29.04.94). There is reason to speculate that the difficulties of establishing a meaningful family life help to explain the large number of women recruited into the armed liberation movement.

One way of presenting the eastern Muslim situation with respect to kinship ties is simply to say that their marriages are not, or at least to a much lesser degree, characterised by hypergamy and inflation in dowries. According to McGilvray (1989: 199), in eastern Sri Lanka kinship categories are embedded in marriage alliances between partners of equal standing. In a footnote McGilvray points out that '(f)ieldwork by Hiatt (1973) and McGilvray (1974) has found no empirical evidence of the pattern of hypergamous marriage between matrilineans ...'. While there is no need here to go into the intricacies of matrilineal kinship, we may note that McGilvray emphasises that: 'For everyone ... the matrilineal system is a significant constraint upon marriage choice ...' (McGilvray 1989: 200). In other words, the eastern population so far adheres to the ideals contained in kinship semantics. De Munck (1996) has reported the same situation from Moneragala. He found that in the Muslim village of Kutali, 61 per cent of the marriages entered into during his fieldwork were marriages between first cross-cousins; 'percentages ... significantly higher than those recorded for other South Asian and Sri Lankan communities' (ibid.: 706). While money may be of interest also to the Muslim population, marriage outside the kindred is not an important mechanism for converting economic remittances into social status.

Also among Muslims social relations have a spatial dimension. The main difference from the situation prevailing among Tamil migrants from the Northern Province seems to be that while among the latter dowry is today increasingly provided in cash, Muslims in the east still hold that the essential core of a woman's dowry is land and a house, the absolute minimum being only a house. 'Without it, or without at least a firm pledge

that it will be built, a marriage is usually impossible' (McGilvray 1989: 201). The typical pattern is that the mother's dowry house, that is the house where the couple has lived after their marriage, is given to the eldest daughters as her dowry while the parents and the rest of the family move to another house nearby. Daughters are expected to marry in strict order of age, and the process will be repeated until they are all settled in independent households. Ideally this results in a clustering of the extended family around daughters' houses.

McGilvray's observations, which were made in the town of Akkaraipattu, are confirmed by my own observations in Eravur. While there is in fact an inflow of money to the Muslim settlements in the east, stemming from short-term work migration to the Middle East, this so far seems not to have changed the conception of what a dowry should be in the way that is the case among Tamil refugees. Rather than externally earned money resulting in a monetarisation of the marriage sphere, houses are bought which enter this sphere as capital in the traditional way. Thereby money from abroad strengthens the uxorilocal practice and the localising tendency rather than the opposite.

Perspectives and Politics

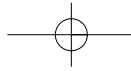
The differently structured networks discussed above are reinforced by different political imagery within the two groups. On the Tamil side a debate on contemporary politics must centre on the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). This organisation is the Sri Lankan government's military adversary in Sri Lanka. Its power, and in fact also its organisation, is diffused throughout the Tamil diaspora: its main office in London, its development branch in Australia, its Internet news server in Oslo. As one Tamil journalist complained to me who was trying to work out an agreement on news distribution with the LTTE, and had come from Colombo to Oslo for that purpose: 'now you have to travel around the world to do what you could earlier accomplish in two hours at the Jaffna *katchcheri*' (the office of the Government Agent).

Again, among the eastern Muslims we see another dynamic at work. Rather than viewing Eelam from globalised positions, the localising strategy of the Muslim population entails a particular perspective on Sri Lanka from the inside. The defensive withdrawal into their own patrolled areas must be understood as alienation not only from their Tamil surroundings but from the elite representatives of the larger Sri Lankan Muslim community.

So far not much substantial work has been done on the political identity of the Muslim minority in Sri Lanka. However, Ismail (1995) points out that in Sri Lanka the construction of a Muslim national identity could

only take place within the terms and boundaries determined by the more assertive forces of Sinhala and Tamil nationalism. For the community's elite this construction has involved a double problematic. On the one hand to represent their origin and character as distinct from those of the Tamil, on the other, in its capacity as a separate minority, to find ways of representing itself as accommodating vis-à-vis an increasingly chauvinistic Sinhala state machinery. The ways in which this challenge has been met have varied with the terms in which the Sinhala and Tamil nationalisms have been expressed. As long as these communities argued their own cases in terms of 'race', Muslim leaders grounded their own ethnicity in geographical origin and 'Arab blood'. As language replaced race in the postcolonial discourse on identity, efforts were made to ground Muslim ethnic identity in the Arabic language. The need for members of the Muslim elite to distinguish themselves from the Tamil must be seen as part of a strategic response to the growing Sinhala chauvinism surrounding them. In 1915 Muslims were the first community victimised by ethnic abuse in Sri Lanka. In Kandy, Colombo and other towns in the south, organised groups of Sinhalese men destroyed mosques and burnt Muslim property. During the colonial era the Colombo-based Muslim elite sought protection from the British against these attitudes. When independence was imminent, however, they not only accommodated themselves to the Sinhala state, but also built a public image on this accommodation. The Muslims have portrayed themselves as a community (*one* community) that, contrary to the Tamil, has been successful *because* of its cooperation with the Sinhala state.

This legacy of Muslim elite self-representation is directly relevant to the question at hand here. Historically, one consequence of the dispersal of the population has been the tendency for the elite based in and around the capital of Colombo to publicly represent the community on a part-for-whole basis. Since 1983 there exists one party claiming to represent the Eastern Muslims, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), which from 1994 has been part of the coalition government led by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, a party with a history of Sinhala chauvinism. Increasingly, however, the SLMC seems to be perceived as a new elite replacing the old one based in Colombo. Mainly drawing its support from the Amparai District within the Eastern Province where the Muslim population is the larger ethnic group, it is seen as neglecting the situation of the Muslim minority settlements located in Tamil majority areas like Batticaloa District. In particular, the SLMC's policy of promoting a separate Muslim South-Eastern Province finds little resonance outside the Muslim majority areas. In Batticaloa District there is a feeling that this objective, rather than solving their problems, may aggravate their relationship to the Tamil population in general and to the LTTE in particular. It is symptomatic that when the SLMC's fifteenth annual congress was held in May 1998,



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Muslim shops in Batticaloa District were closed and black and white flags were flown in protest.

Place and Ethnicity

This opinion on the policy of the SLMC reflects more deep-lying cultural conceptions. In Eravur, the town I am most familiar with in eastern Sri Lanka, there is no question that their language is Tamil, not Arabic, and that they share cultural traditions with their social surroundings. In their own understanding, what separates them from their Tamil neighbours are not linguistic or cultural diacritics but these neighbours' recent betrayal of the common history of the two communities.

In the different Muslim settlements in eastern Sri Lanka one finds stories explaining their separate origin. These oral histories articulate models of the relationship between a particular settlement and its surroundings. In Eravur the origin story tells that a group of Pathan warriors from today's border area between Afghanistan and Pakistan, came by boat to the eastern parts of Sri Lanka in the fifteenth century and sought shelter from storms in Batticaloa harbour. In those days men of Thimilar caste from Batticaloa every year used to come to Eravur, which was a Mukkuvar caste area, during harvest time to rob gold and women. The people in Eravur asked the Pathan warriors to come and protect the village. The Pathans came and drove the Thimilars to Vakarai, a place north of Eravur. In reward the Pathans were given a choice between land, gold or women. They chose women because, as it is said, no amount of material worth comes up against the importance of blood relations. The Mukkuvar then chose women from their seven main *kutis* and gave these to the Pathans in marriage. The Pathans settled and had Hindu service castes serving them.

Two aspects of this story seem significant. One is that, even as it is told today, the story reflects no ethnic or territorial antagonism between Tamils (or Hindus) and Muslims. The conflict that moves the story is internal to the Hindus. While the Hindus were on location first, the Muslims were invited as harbingers of peace and order. This invitation, and the events which follow, establish Eravur as a 'territorial place', opposed to the outside geographical surroundings. It is the land, and in particular the land where people live, which is significant, not any wider social, ethnic, or religious loyalties. Second, the marriages between Muslim men and Mukkuvar women from all main sections provide the descendants of these unions with a double origin. At the same time, however, they establish a subtle difference in social status between the Muslim and the Hindu. The tradition of male dominance found in the Tamil areas, including the Muslim settlements, provides wife takers a somewhat supe-

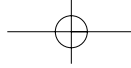
rior position to wife givers. The fact that Pathan men married women from *all* main sections of the local Mukkuvar society may be understood as a statement to the effect that in matters of rank the Muslim will always be superior.

This claim must be understood in its proper context however. Today, speaking in a 'reality mode', people deny any common occurrence of marriages between members of different communities. Where this happens, like with the present Member of Parliament from Eravur, this is noted as an exception. While people readily admit to following typical Hindu-Tamil traditions, like the tying of *Thali* and the transfer of dowry at marriage (Fuglerud 1994; 1999), and in conversations may say things like 'at heart we are all Tamil', ethnic boundaries are socially reproduced on the basis of religion. What the origin story expresses, being set in a society characterised by feudal dynamics, is that Muslims see themselves as providers and protectors of the territorial community as a whole. It is told with pride that in Hindu temples in the Tamil settlements surrounding Eravur offerings are still made in gratitude to the Muslim Pathans. Eravur farmers claim that until 1990 the Muslims owning land on the west side of the lagoon were in general more prosperous than their Tamil neighbours. They explain how they used to help Tamil farmers with seeds and fertiliser, and how they ploughed the fields of Tamil neighbours with their own tractors. 'We (Tamil) have rice, you (Muslim) have plates' is by Muslim landowners quoted as a Tamil saying, expressing the close interconnection between the two communities. It does not mean that Muslims do not grow rice but that while the local Tamil population worked and lived on the land, Muslims were regarded as land-owning town people with access to markets, money, and products of the 'modern' world.

Concluding Remarks

In approaching the different responses to the engulfing violence above I avoided framing this question in terms of 'migration choice'. From an anthropologist's point of view the application of choice models in migration research has provided limited insights. We should, I believe, in analyses of displacement and migration put less emphasis on causal connections and more on the understandings and discourses that organise actors' understanding of their own actions. As demonstrated by studies of the relationship between internal migration and suicide (Kearney and Miller 1987; Daniel 1989), in Sri Lanka the issues of migration and displacement cannot be separated from the larger theme of discursively constructed identities.

In this chapter I have outlined two responses to a situation of prevailing violence in Sri Lanka; the Tamil migration as refugees to Western



countries and a Muslim community's withdrawal into its own defended territory. In my understanding this difference illustrates the point made by Hägerstrand (1969) thirty years ago, that migration – except for the most extreme cases of forced migration – is one out of several 'time-space strategies' available to social actors, the others including staying, commuting, circulating etc. Instead of considering staying as the expected outcome of time-embedded processes, and moving the phenomenon always to be explained, one point of entry into the study of migration, 'forced' or not, is to identify determinants of the different time-space strategies which people choose. This process of identification should include not only economic goals and constraints but the perceptions and meanings through which actors understand the various elements in their life world and related to which they strive to secure a livelihood.

