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‘Homeland’ & ‘hostland’ identifications in the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora

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Abstract

Emphasising the need to go beyond purely spatial conceptualisations, this paper investigates the ways in which patterns of mobility among Sri Lankan Tamils (SLTs) interact with diasporic identifications with the ‘homeland’ and ‘host-land’. SLT migration has been driven by war for over twenty-six years, leading to the formation of a substantial diaspora of around one million people (Orjuela 2012; Venugopal 2006; David, 2012:377). Issues of resettlement, relocation and dislocation – i.e. questions of space – feature powerfully in the lives of SLTs and many have experienced formidable challenges in their countries of re-settlement, involving relocation to multiple new homes and the redefinition of their identities in new host-lands. To probe what ‘homeland’ and ‘host-land’ mean in this experience, the paper draws both on theoretical models of diasporic identity and ethnographic data.

1. Introduction

I’m going to talk today about the notions of ‘homeland’ and ‘host-land’ in the context of Sri Lankan Tamil (SLT) diasporic identity construction. I’ll be arguing that these notions need to be conceptualised in ways that go beyond purely spatial interpretations. Spatial images have traditionally defined many early works on identity and migration but recently scholars have emphasised how “the very notion of space needs to be at the centre of a theoretical rethinking” given the current transnational nature of our existence (De Fina 2016: 165).

First, I draw on a model proposed by Burgio 2016 that defines SLT diasporic identity. His model is limited in its scope, but it is useful in providing a framework to discuss diasporic identity.
By drawing on ethnographic data from a Leverhulme funded research project,[1] I demonstrate that notions of ‘homeland’ and ‘host-land’ are far more complex than that proposed by Burgio.

2. Burgio’s model

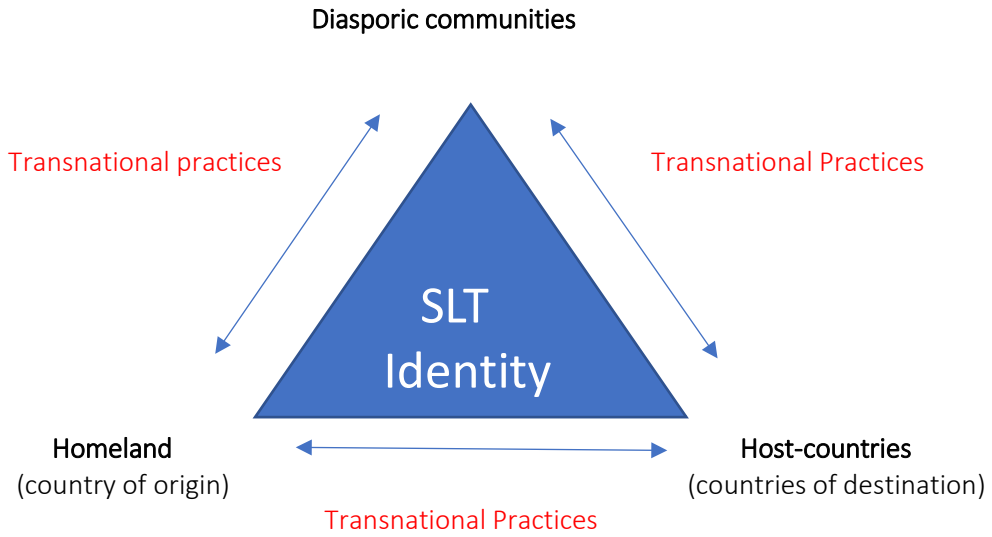
Burgio’s model has been conceived within an intercultural theoretical framework. He argues that the categories within intercultural theory need revision. Traditionally conceived, intercultural theory focuses on a *two-pole* contact between *national* cultures; where a representative of a supposed homogeneous Tunisian identity, for instance, comes into contact with a representative of a supposed homogeneous Italian identity. (Burgio, 2016: 119) This model of interculturality privileges nationally-defined concepts of society and culture, forgetting both the cultural and social divisions within each nation-state (Glick Schiller, 2010: 110). It is also an approach that is increasingly criticized for being essentialist (Holliday, Hyde & Kullman 2004) (Hall 1996: 4).

Burgio seeks to redress this conception of intercultural theory showing that the SLT identity is “complex, multifaceted and transnational” (p. 119). He argues that Tamil diasporic identity should instead be made up of a relationship based on *three poles;* the ‘homeland’**,** the ‘host countries’ and the ‘communities of the diaspora’ (p. 113). In this way, Burgio attempts to take intercultural theory forward by suggesting that instead of a two-pole connection, a new theoretic model is needed - “a post-national intercultural model” (p.120) that is conscious of the cultural flows that cross national

[1] ‘Adult Language Socialisation in the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora in London’ 2015-2018 (Leverhulme Trust RPG-2015-279)

boundaries (Zoletto 2011). He suggests that transnational practices – political, economic and cultural – provide the link that connect the three poles, so that these practices interact with identity. Figure 1 below is my own conception of his theorising.

Figure 1: Burgio's (2016) three-pole model



Burgio's three pole model is configured as a distillation of the three core elements needed to describe SLT diasporic identities, namely 'homeland', 'host-land' and 'diasporic communities'. Although he isn't arguing for the poles to represent nationally-defined cultures, it's not quite clear as to what *exactly* he proposes they represent. *This lack of detail potentially misses some important empirical issues that are crucial to the understanding of SLT identities.*

For the rest of this paper, I'll be exploring other ways in which 'homeland' and 'host-land' can be conceptualised – whether they are understood in territorial or symbolic ways.

3. Unpacking the category 'homeland'/ 'country of origin'

a) *Homeland – Tamil Eelam*

For many diasporic SLTs, 'home' is *'Tamil Ealam'*; areas in the north and east of Sri Lanka that represent the imaginary and utopian Tamil homeland, the independent Tamil state that was the object of Tamil insurgency. Eelam was originally used to refer to a prehistoric Dravidian homeland, which is thought to date to the sixth century B.C.E., prior to Sinhalese- Buddhist migration from North India (Arudpragasam 1996).

Tamil nationalists proclaim that Eelam was reincarnated as the medieval Hindu Kingdom of Jaffna and construct a chronotope[2] that challenges scientific conceptions of time and space, linking the people and languages of prehistoric Eelam with medieval Jaffna, contemporary Jaffna and the future sovereign territory of Eelam (Das, 2016:179, 180).

Due to the defeat of the LTTE in 2009, Tamil Eelam was never realized in geo-spatial terms, but wartime Sri Lanka had instead validated the existence of a sovereign Eelam state by arguing for the

[2] Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) uses the concept "chronotope" to describe how narrative devices of character voicing and emplotment entail envelopes of space and time that can transform perceptions of the very nature of reality (Das, 2016:176).

territory's antiquity and its inhabitants' linguistic and racial purity (Das, 2016: 46). Many 2nd generation Tamils growing up in the west, who have never visited Sri Lanka, hold on to this concept of 'home' (O'Neill, 2015: 128). Cohen (2008) refers to this 'home' as an "imagined homeland", a powerful conceptualization which has the potential to unite transnational Tamil diaspora living in other parts of the world.

Extract 1

Girija: I always tell my mum like I would always g- (xxx) I would only go back when Tamil Eelam has been established. I'm not going back".

b) *Homeland – 'conta ür' (ancestral village)*

Many Tamil migrants also hold on to a concept of 'home' that is their '*conta ür*' or ancestral village, a place that is primordial and which was home to their ancestors. Daniel (1987) expands on this theme, writing that "one of the most important relationships to a Tamil is that which exists between a person and the soil of his ür" (Daniel & Thangaraj, 1995:63), where the *ür's* character is determined by the soil's composition and local caste hierarchies (Mines 2005) (Das, 2016: 147-148).

But, another scholar, Thirangama (2011) cautions against relying on too abstract notions of the *ür* (Das, 2016: 148) and recommends paying attention to ideas of "hometown" in the context of practical life as an everyday language of love, affection, sentiment and memory" (2011: 19). She proposes that to the SLT diaspora, their '*conta ür'* represents a social and spatial identification that was their original 'home' where they grew up and enjoyed social relationships (Thiranagama, 2011: 8).

Extract 2:

Sinthu: But I miss that community relationship which we had... was very extremely nice environment. Say like if you having a function.. two weeks, three weeks before everyone started to come to our house… around 2 o'clock to 3 o'clock.. the house started to get.. very.. you know loud sounds and everything because everyone comes and talk and they help each other, they start to make er snacks and that sort of things. So that kind of environment you are not going to have it here. So.. I miss that relationship. You know, you are having money here… I'm not denying that. Yes, you are getting whatever you want to get but you are not getting the love.

This conception of '*ür'* conjures up a feeling of nostalgia for a time when home was experienced through occasions of familial conviviality.

One could argue, however, that it is possible to expand the notion of *ür* if we consider SLT migrants who, through leaving their '*conta ür'* build imitations of them in their western host-lands. Burgio describes this as the creation of 'Tamil districts' where the 'Tamilization' of the western urban environment produces a 'little Eelam' - an intersection between Sri Lanka and host-lands, where some of the social characteristics of the motherland are played out'.

SLTs migrating to the host-land "*ür*" have always drawn on familial, caste and other social networks to check the compatibility between them and their final destination (Das 2016: 149). Daniel explains that 'this attempt to locate one's own people in a new *ü*r is not motivated by any desire to establish ties of friendship or even acquaintance with [their] people. Rather, it is based on the assumption that if the new *ü*r is compatible with one of one's own, there is a good chance that it will also be compatible with oneself' (Daniel 1984: 82).

Extract 3

Ravi: I'm talking about the parents and grand-parents and great-grandparents. They've brought their mentality, their ways of life, their habits along with them. And they will never change. It is known- the famous word in Tamil is "*mann vaasanai*". "*Mann vaasanai*" means.. I can't literally- I can't translate properly.. this is er.. this is er.. "*ways of the land*". For centuries they have been like this.. they have grown up like that. They will never change.

In this quote, the participant describes the transposition of the *conta ür* to host-land cities, positing that people's way of life will remain the same in the host-land. But landscapes and demographics are ever-changing, whether in the homeland or host-land.

c) *Homeland – Ever-changing landscapes*

In the homeland, people's *conta ür* have been under siege by the Sri Lankan army for decades, and their churches, temples, shrines and memorials are still being destroyed (Das, 2016: 175). Thus, diasporic Tamils who visit "home" can observe the borders of their villages/towns being encroached by the Sinhalese armed forces and witness the gradual Sinhalization of their village/town landscapes. They take back a very different image of "home" when they return to their host-countries so you could argue that the home that they 'imagine' is more susceptible to change and is a less stable concept than their diasporic counter-parts who cannot visit[3] Sri Lanka or have not been back in a long time.

Extract 4

G: I rem- when my mum went back she- she said how.. all the Tamil area have now- now've got- it goes Sinhalese, English, Tamil now
LS: Oh, in that order?
G: In that order.
LS: Interesting..ok…signs..
G: And these area are predominantly Tamils

Here is an example of how Tamil areas are becoming Sinhalisized through changes in sign-posting. It illustrates how the *ür* can be understood as a living sign where, through written signage, the *ür* can 'speak' to proclaim its greater or lesser compatibility with particular social groups (Das 2016:148-149) (Daniel 1984:190).

d) *Homeland – Tamil Nadu*

Tamil Nadu, South India has always been connected to Sri Lanka through sharing a common literary heritage and even common territory. *Tamilagam* – the Land of Tamils, was a territory that was inherited by the Pandyan, Chola and Chera empires ruling South India and Sri Lanka from the third Tamil Sangam period (ca. 100 B.C.E. – C.E. 300) – a very important period in Dravidian culture. Historically, Sri Lankans have emphasized the privileged position of the Jaffna province within the realm of *Tamilagam*. (Das, 2016: 179)

[3] This could be for a number of reasons. Some do not return because there is a very real danger of them being arrested for LTTE related activity or suspicion of it. Others do not because there is no one there for them anymore in Sri Lanka or because it brings back too many painful memories related to the war (supported by the data from my fieldwork).

Burgio asserts that Tamil cultural elements i.e. literature, cinema, dance, music and the Tamil language, have reference to the classical *Sangam period*. He claims that the cultural elements born in Tamil Nadu, South India, characterise a global Tamil identity, which the SLT diaspora orient to at different levels of identification (pp 108-110). But Burgio has not considered that Sri Lanka may be being gradually being *replaced* by Tamil Nadu as 'home', especially by SLTs who cannot or do not return to their original birthplace.

Excerpt 5

Raj: I love my language and heritage and culture. I don't know why. Maybe it's one of the oldest languages in the world. There's so much..thousands and thousands of years. So I travel in Tamil Nadu extensively.. I prefer travelling in Tamil Nadu to Sri Lanka because of the language. Wherever you go in Tamil Nadu they speak my language. And you feel happy. And I feel that I belong to.. that part.

Excerpt 6

Sinthu: But I think now we are more connected to South India, we are getting more connection with South India..we are more tend to follow the South Indian culture than.. Sri Lankan culture because.. that is our main hold… that is – that is Tamil. That– that– that is our mainland anyway.. main hold. So we tend to go to India a lot rather than Sri Lanka a lot…

In summary, the data shows that 'home' does not necessarily refer to a territorial place and that the desire for 'home' does not necessarily imply return. Next, I'll be discussing the complexities of the concept 'host-land'.

4. Unpacking the category 'host-land'

Like the 'homeland' category, the category 'host-land' in Burgio's model, needs expansion. In Burgio's paper, 'host-land' is often used interchangeably with terms such as 'countries of destination' or 'countries of settlement'. This can be problematic as each of these terms raises different empirical issues. The term 'country of destination', for instance, needs to take into account the fact that many SLTs escaping from Sri Lanka had to take long and convoluted migratory routes to reach a place where they were finally granted asylum. Some had to sojourn in different countries along the way (e.g. Saudi Arabia, East Germany, West Germany, France etc.) and took years before arriving finally at their 'country of destination'. In the event that they would have had to live in a particular country for a period of time before continuing on their way, that country would have become their 'country of settlement', for that particular period. In other words, the term 'country of destination' has connotations of a '*goal to reach*' whereas 'country of settlement' seems to refer to either a temporary or permanent residence. Interestingly, nearly half of the participants in my study (20/42) lived in a country between a few months to several years before migrating to the UK. Some of them say that they may not even settle permanently in the UK either, but may return to the country that that they had previously been living in.

Excerpt 7

Ayappa: I loved it. I loved living in Germany. One of my dreams, when I did move down was always to go back to Germany once I finished my studies. The dream's still there. I do travel there every

year. I go once or twice a year. I got family members, I got friends there. I got quite a lot of people that I know come from Berlin basically.. half my family live in Berlin though."

In this example, the participant relates to Germany as a place which he feels strong attachment to. His dream to return to live in Germany one day supports the description of the diasporic condition of wanting to return 'home' when conditions are appropriate (Safran 1991:83-84). Whether Germany is the 'homeland' or 'host-land' in this participant's case, is hard to identify.

In addition, the narrative also highlights how living in a place, does not necessarily imply stativity. The reality for many SLT migrants living in the diaspora is one of constant mobility. In the course of my fieldwork, I've come across anecdotes of SLTs who cannot even claim association with a particular 'host' country as such because they are living between countries to gain benefit money from different sources.

Excerpt 8

Thevarasa: So that's what they do. They go country to country, register themself, hang around there for a little while to collect pensions…benefits and the same thing with my… brother-in-law's people, they were taking benefits in Germany plus take benefits here.

If SLTs are indeed transnational and 'living in mobility' as Burgio states (2016:118-120) and my data suggests, then surely the 'homeland'/ 'host-land' distinction becomes difficult to delineate? And what about when there is a blurring of boundaries between the 'homeland' and 'host-land', for migrants who have lived so long in their host-countries, that it ceases to be a 'foreign' region (Safran 1991:83-84)?

Excerpt 9

Omila: No, I think their [my parents'] understanding of home is very different. It's like.. it's just really um.. I think they're very nostalgic about like Jaffna and all that kind of stuff but like it's not- that's not where home is. My mum would be like- oh she'll never move back, she prefers here.. she's like her life's here.

This example shows how one's relationship with the original 'home' can undergo a change and that the concept of 'home' does not necessarily refer to a territorial 'home'. It can refer to a sense of total identification with and belongingness to a place or a community in the host-land, or sometimes even to both.

There are also those diasporic identities that develop mainly as responses to displacement, exile and exclusion. These identities focus on movement rather than territoriality and return (Alinia 2004:98) and relate to the feeling of not belonging anywhere. There are some members of the diaspora, for instance, who, when they return to visit their hometown, feel it's unrecognisable as the 'home' they used to know. Neither do they feel that they belong in the country in which they have now settled. They feel in limbo and for these diasporic members, the definition of diasporic identity as relating to a particular territory, which is what was proposed in Burgio's three pole model, does not apply at all.

Excerpt 10

Suganthi: I sometimes think.. where like- where am I belong to? Because, in here when I live I always have this.. er how do you say.. er.. inside you.. deep down inside your heart you know that you're not British *'enda oru' (that kind of)* feeling *'onnum*

> *irukkum enakku'* (*I have that*). You know like er.. I don't belong here… *'enga irukkaikk'a* (*when I'm here)* I never feel this is my own country. House I feel is my house, but I never feel I'm in my own country, I'm like somewhere else. I had to go back one day, that kind of feeling. But when I went back to Sri Lanka.. I went few times now.. *'Sri Lanka-le poonaalum athu enda country maari enakku ippo illai' (Even when I go to Sri Lanka, I don't feel like it's my country anymore)*. Yeah because my parents are not there. My house somebody else living and somebody else's things because all in my memory.. *house 'eppadi viittittu vanthutho antha memory-le irrkkum'* (*the way my house was when Ieft is the memory I have)*- my room, my mum's kitchen but it's all changed now with somebody else. And *'anga poyttu paarthen'* (*when I went there)* "oh this is not my place as well". Then I thinking, "so where am I belong to?

Thus, we observe that the problematics of home and belonging are embedded within the diasporic condition, but how it's articulated is specific to the history of each particular individual in the diaspora (Brah 1996: 179, 183, 192).

5. Conclusion

To conclude, in order to define diasporic identities, it is first crucial to understand how diasporas relate to the concepts 'homeland' and 'host-land' as the very definition of a diaspora is dependent on these concepts (Thurairajah 2010). Theoretical models such as Burgio's are limited in their explanatory power as they tend to generalise and lack empirical support. For instance, diasporic identities are not always formed positively through identification with the homelands and negatively through differentiation towards the host-countries, as Burgio seems to suggest they do. From the data drawn from my project, we see that land is, in fact, no longer central to the reproduction of identity. The notions of 'homeland' and 'host-land' are more appropriately associated with multi-faceted symbolic references, which go beyond purely territorial understandings. In a world that is becoming more and more diasporic, it is thus imperative that any analysis of diasporic identities should move away from essentialised definitions of space towards theorizations that focus more on common experiences, memories and movement.

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