

Development Through Cultural Preservation: Experiences of the Eelam Tamil Diaspora

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Author's Disclaimer: *This article aims to provide a comprehensive and concise overview of a sensitive historical conflict. Due to the complex and sensitive nature of Sri Lankan Civil War and Tamil Genocide, this author has only provided information to spread awareness but remains politically non-partisan. There may be discrepancies in the information provided due to the sensitive nature of Tamil Genocide; therefore, numerical data and statistical figures presented should be interpreted with caution.*

The story of the Eelam Tamils is not just a tale of displacement but of resilience, cultural preservation, and the fight for self-determination. The struggle of a community to show cultural resilience in the face of discrimination and assimilation is a theme echoed through many parts of history. The tale of Eelam Tamils epitomizes this struggle. The impacts of intergenerational trauma on Eelam Tamils and members of its diaspora community are deeply rooted in the struggles they have overcome as a result of the Sri Lankan Civil War. Tamils from the Northern and Eastern regions of Sri Lanka have been fighting for the self-determination of “Tamil Eelam,” their homeland (Thambinathan, 2022). To acknowledge the sacrifices of the Maaveerars, those who fought for Eelam’s self-determination, the term “Eelam Tamils” will be used to identify Sri Lanka’s Tamil

population.

In the aftermath of the Sri Lankan Civil War, political advocacy has become taboo among the diaspora community. The second-generation Eelam Tamil diaspora is being silenced by elders who themselves have fought for the self-determination of Eelam Tamils. The Tamil diaspora youth continue to propel transnational activism through subtle forms of human rights advocacy, cultural preservation, and healing intergenerational trauma to carry the legacy of their ancestors and develop their identity. They will create and utilize their networks to ensure that the Eelam Tamil community worldwide will always have a platform for their voices to be heard. To keep their culture alive, the Eelam Tamil diaspora continues to preserve and strengthen their cultural identity, continuing the legacy of Eelam Tamils' struggle for self-determination. Although their responses to intergenerational trauma vary from generation to generation, their collective efforts to prioritize identity creation and maintenance continue strengthening a unified diaspora community.

Historical Context

Sri Lanka is comprised of two ethnic groups: the Sinhala and the Tamil, among many other smaller ethnic and religious groups. Members of these groups speak different languages and practice various religions. Eelam Tamils are ethno-linguistic in Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka (Minority Rights Group, n.d.). Although they are now considered a minority,

Eelam Tamils are known to be the longest inhabitants of Sri Lanka (Minority Rights Group, n.d.).

The underlying cause of the Sri Lankan Civil War and Tamil Genocide is deeply rooted in the aftermath of the British Empire's attempts to colonize Sri Lanka. When the British colonized Ceylon, they forcefully unified the people in both the Tamil and Sinhala kingdoms as part of the British Empire (Consortium of Canadian Tamil Associations, 2009). In 1948, Sri Lanka gained independence, allowing the Sinhala majority to form government.

However, prior to its independence, the British gave a majority of civil service positions to the Tamils given that many Tamils achieved a higher level of education through missionaries (Spina, 2017). When the new Sri Lankan government assumed power, they wanted to expand job opportunities and grant more civil service positions to the Sinhala population to establish a national identity that upholds the Sinhala culture, language, and Buddhist values, slowly removing the Tamils from their assumed positions (Spina, 2017). Soon after, the second Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, Solomon West Ridgeway Dias (S. W. R. D.) Bandaranaike was elected. His government implemented the Official Languages Act of 1956 (No. 33), also known as the "Sinhala Only" Act, as part of their campaign promise (DeVotta, 2017). This Act did two things: i) it made Sinhala the official language of Sri Lanka, and ii) limited Tamils' access to government positions and educational resources, as many Tamils did not speak Sinhala (Consortium of Canadian Tamil Associations, 2009). The implementation of the Official

Languages Act was one attempt out of many anti-Tamil pogroms created to ethnically cleanse Sri Lanka of Tamils, triggering decades of political unrest.

In addition to the Official Languages Act, the Sri Lankan government passed the Policy of Standardization in 1971 that required Tamil students to score significantly higher than Sinhalese students to be able to apply for and be admitted to university (Thambinathan, 2022). In response to the implementation of these policies, students took to the streets and protested the Sri Lankan government's inequitable treatment. In this period, preceding the Civil War, the Tamils' peaceful protests against the Sri Lankan government soon turned violent due to tensions between the two ethnic communities. This violent turn led to the Sri Lankan government passing the Prevention of Terrorism Act in 1979 (Thambinathan, 2022). This policy allowed the detainment of people without a warrant, which the Sri Lankan government used to specifically target Tamils (Thambinathan, 2022). These policy implementations marked the beginning of the Sri Lankan government's Tamil Genocide and sparked anger and outrage amongst the Tamil community. In July 1983, riots broke out, causing both the internal and external displacement of more than 300,000 Eelam Tamils due to attacks on their communities (Thambinathan, 2022). This marked the beginning of the Sri Lankan Civil War as Eelam Tamils started to flee their homes and seek refuge in camps, bunkers, and the houses of relatives and strangers (Thambinathan, 2022).

Lasting for almost three decades (1983-2009), the 2009

Mullivaikal Genocide marked the end of Sri Lankan Civil War. It made international headlines, leading to a rise in Eelam Tamils seeking refuge worldwide. This event also infuriated the diaspora community, causing transnational political movements among the Tamil Eelam diaspora to strengthen their solidarity (Thambinathan, 2022). There were no agreements signed between the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan government. Shortly after this genocide, the LTTE was dismantled. Although the UNHCR, other governments, and global institutions accused the Sri Lankan government of war crimes and human rights violations, the Sri Lankan government continues to hide behind the disguise of reconciliation to this day (Thambinathan, 2022). The Sri Lankan Civil War has significantly shaped the experiences of the Tamil diaspora. Its unresolved nature makes cultural preservation essential for healing the intergenerational trauma that continues to affect the community.

The Community Today

The Impacts of Intergenerational Trauma

Their own experiences of the Sri Lankan Civil War shape the fear-driven parenting styles of Eelam Tamil diaspora parents. The impacts of intergenerational trauma are reflected in their discouragement of their children's political advocacy. In 2015, O'Neill published a study on the intergenerational trauma of Tamil diaspora parents, focused on the transfer of intergenerational trauma between the first- and second-

generation Eelam Tamil diaspora. The study evaluated the impacts of intergenerational trauma on the identity of the second-generation Eelam Tamil diaspora. O'Neill's (2015) findings indicate that the parents of the Eelam Tamil diaspora were hesitant to discuss their experiences from the Sri Lankan Civil War and refused to allow their children to engage in political advocacy. In particular, the trauma of the Sri Lankan Civil War directly influences the parenting methods of Tamil diaspora parents (O'Neill, 2015). Not only do parents face an internal dilemma to push past their previous experiences of the Sri Lankan Civil War, but they are also scared of losing their children to the movement just as they lost loved ones (Thambinathan, 2022). In one example, a student recounted his parents' support to learn about Tamil culture. However, once he entered higher education his parents opposed him learning more about the Eelam Tamils' struggle for self-determination and their human rights advocacy in the 2009 transnational protests following the Mullivaikkal Genocide, as their trauma deeply coloured their perception of the act of political advocacy (O'Neill, 2015). Similarly, other members of the Eelam Tamil diaspora youth must reassure their parents that they believe in the power of education as much as they do in political advocacy. The Tamil diaspora's need for political advocacy is deeply rooted in the burning desire to justify their parents' struggle to provide them with the life they live now. However, their parents prefer to focus their passion into socio-economic opportunities, rather than advocate for a war that physically ended years ago.

Although the traumatic experiences from the Sri Lankan Civil War heavily influence the parents of the Eelam Tamil diaspora, they have managed to provide Tamil youth with a sense of belonging through the development of their cultural identity and coming together with like-minded individuals. Not only do these efforts encourage the healing of intergenerational trauma in the community, but it also passes down resiliency and a sense of collective purpose to future generations.

Cultural Education and Identity Creation

The experiences of the Eelam Tamil community have heavily influenced their decision-making processes and actions today, especially concerning the identity creation and cultural education of the Tamil diaspora youth. Eelam Tamil diaspora parents heavily prioritize cultural education by enrolling their children in Tamil language and cultural arts classes as they believe that this will help preserve their culture and the legacy of their ancestors more effectively compared to politically advocating for the self-determination of Eelam Tamils (O'Neill, 2015). Most parents choose to uphold cultural preservation over political activism as they believe that keeping the language and culture alive is more beneficial to the development of the Tamil community, as opposed to fighting for the self-determination of Eelam Tamils. Teaching their children more about the culture also gives them a strong foundation for the child's identity creation. According to O'Neill (2015), creating a strong Eelam Tamil identity in the children of the diaspora is a way of

continuing the protest for self-determination and satisfaction in the aftermath of the war. Although diaspora communities still engage in political activism, their approach now focuses on healing and cultural resurgence through the embrace of their heritage and their community development. In another study, Jayasundara-Smits (2022) observed a similar pattern of group identity creation and maintenance among the parenting styles of Eelam Tamil diaspora parents. Jayasundara-Smits's (2022) findings explain why parents are keen on enrolling their children in extracurriculars that emphasize Tamil culture, such as mridangam, Carnatic music (also popularly known in the community as sangeetham), Bharatanatyam, and Tamil language classes (Volkan, 2009 as cited in Jayasundara-Smits, 2022). These classes help second-generation Eelam Tamils develop their identities by embracing the rich aspects of their culture. Encouraging cultural education continues to pass down cultural values and propel cultural preservation, as well as propelling a cultural resurgence (Jayasundara-Smits, 2022). As more members of the Tamil diaspora seek their culture and practice their traditions, it spreads awareness to drive the cultural resurgence of Eelam Tamils to other members of society. Therefore, cultural education and the formation of a Tamil identity among members of the second-generation Tamil diaspora creates its very own space to unite across borders, keeping the Eelam Tamil culture alive despite the Sri Lankan regime's efforts to destroy it.

“Healing in Practice: How Advocacy and Cultural Education Can Coexist”

After fleeing their home countries, Eelam Tamils have not only rebuilt their lives in new nations but have also become strong advocates for their communities. They have “mobilized diasporic identity networks” in their respective countries to preserve their culture and unite their community (Wayland, 2004). Through resource creation, Tamil-language media platforms, businesses, and not-for-profit organizations have fostered community development and spread awareness of Eelam Tamils’ struggles (Wayland, 2004). The outreach conducted through these networks has continued to unite the community and, most importantly, provides the Eelam Tamil diaspora youth with resources to connect with their roots.

These community initiatives also inspired the Eelam Tamil diaspora youth to create communities within their schools and universities by establishing Tamil Student Associations (TSAs). One student interviewed by O’Neill (2015) said that TSAs provided a space for second-generation Tamils to come together and develop a collective identity. Initially, TSAs were created to provide a space for diaspora youth to continue transnational political activism for the self-determination of Tamil Eelam. However, they now provide a space to reinforce cultural identity, as well as cultural education and political advocacy. By fostering a shared identity, TSAs have empowered Eelam Tamil diaspora youth to continue cultural preservation after the Sri Lankan Civil War and heal intergenerational trauma by addressing the issues

impacting their community through TSA-hosted events.

In addition, organizations such as the Canadian Tamil Youth Development (CanTYD), have also played a crucial role in helping Eelam Tamil diaspora youth recover from the impacts of intergenerational trauma, such as substance abuse and violence, which was prevalent in the late 1990s-2000s (Kaavia, 2014). Created to mitigate gang violence and substance abuse among newly-immigrated Tamil youth in the 1990s, CanTYD has helped heal the impacts of intergenerational trauma by providing a safe space for members of the Eelam Tamil diaspora (Kaavia, 2014). According to Kaavia (2014), CanTYD, among many other Tamil youth organizations, is focused on providing resources to Tamil youth living in Toronto to combat the impacts of intergenerational trauma by organizing sports events, assisting with homework, and encouraging Tamil youth by celebrating their achievements through their yearly Tamil Youth Gala and distributing awards of excellence (CanTYD, n.d.).

Additionally, governments worldwide recognize Tamils' economic and social contributions. For example, the Government of Canada implemented Tamil Heritage Month in 2010 to allow all Tamils to unite and celebrate their rich and diverse culture (Tamil Heritage Month, n.d.). January has been recognized as Tamil Heritage Month in multiple countries worldwide. Canada was among the first countries to recognize this month, with the province of Ontario passing the Tamil Heritage Month Act in 2014 (Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 2014). The acknowledgement of Tamil Heritage Month worldwide has not only helped the preservation of Tamil culture through the

promotion of Tamil classical fine arts, but it has also helped provide a platform to discuss the important issues impacting the Eelam Tamil population, for example through the Ottawa Tamil Association's (OTA) Tamil Heritage Month Gala. The OTA support human rights and justice efforts for Eelam Tamils through fundraising for charities that support Eelam Tamils in the homeland, contribute to genocide education projects, and support the Tamil diaspora in learning about their heritage and culture (OTA, n.d.). Organizations such as the OTA continue to help second-generation Tamil diaspora foster a collective sense of identity, heal generational trauma through providing spaces to talk about experiences and propel cultural preservation.

Education is vital to the cultural preservation of Eelam Tamils and to raise awareness of the Tamil Genocide. In 2021, the Legislative Assembly of Ontario passed Bill 104, known as the Tamil Genocide Education Week Act. This Act proclaims that the Tamil Genocide Education Week takes place seven days preceding May 18, which is Tamil Genocide Remembrance Day (Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 2021). This week helps spread genocide awareness for impacted communities, especially Eelam Tamils in Ontario schools. This education is an essential step to encouraging the Eelam Tamil diaspora to learn about the history of Tamil Eelam. Not only does this program help the diaspora understand the impacts of intergenerational trauma on their lives, but it also fosters political advocacy among youth, with the hopes that justice will be achieved for Eelam Tamils who currently suffer human rights violations in Sri Lanka.

These networks not only help to foster the development of Tamil diaspora identities but also give Eelam Tamil diaspora youth a space for healing, empower transnational activists, and promote cultural preservation through education. These networks have helped Eelam Tamils express their support for other communities that have face genocide, such as Australia's Indigenous communities (Tamil Guardian, 2022). The development of Eelam Tamil diaspora communities stands as a testament to the Eelam Tamil diaspora's resilience and dedication to safeguarding their identity and advocating for justice.

Conclusion

The resilience of the Eelam Tamil diaspora is a testament to their hard work and effort in preserving their cultural heritage while honouring the struggles of those who fought for the self-determination of Tamil Eelam. Although the war may have ended, the fight for justice, global recognition, and healing continues through each Tamil class taught, each story told, and tradition passed down to future generations. The Eelam Tamil diaspora youth continue to foster a strong sense of cultural identity, providing resources for the diaspora to connect with their roots, and heal the underlying trauma that impacts their daily lives to keep their culture alive.

For the Eelam Tamil diaspora, the survival of their language and culture is their resistance against the Tamil Genocide, making cultural resurgence their revolution. Their story reflects

that the Eelam Tamils were never defeated, they continue to defy the possibility of their history's erasure. As the seeds of Tamil culture continue to be sowed across borders, the fight for justice continues through a future of unity, strength, and enduring hope.

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