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Gerharz, Eva

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Working Papers in Development Sociology and Social Anthropology

Bielefeld University
Faculty of Sociology
P.O. Box: 10 01 31
33501 Bielefeld
Germany
Tel.: +49-521-106-6944
Fax: +49-521-106-2980
http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/tdrc

Eva Gerharz

Ambivalent Positioning. Reflections on Ethnographic Research in Sri Lanka during the Ceasefire of 2002

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Ambivalent Positioning. Reflections on Ethnographic Research in Sri Lanka during the Ceasefire of 2002[1]

Eva Gerharz

When the Sri Lankan Government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) signed the Ceasefire Agreement of 2002, not only the Sri Lanka, but the entire world breathed a sign of relief. This historical chance for a sustainable post-conflict situation and enduring peace was accompanied with massive international involvement e.g. mediation efforts and aid for reconstruction and development. Everyone hoped that the enormous involvement and pressure exerted by the donor community instigated that the conflict parties would work out a serious and sustainable peace treaty. These promising preconditions Sri Lanka coincided with a growing consciousness of the importance of peace-building and conflict prevention expressed in intensified academic work and attention on intra-state conflicts and their interrelation with development failures since the late 1990s. The need to conduct research on peace processes as well as advising and supporting development practice, encouraged researchers from all over the world to discover Sri Lanka. Being one of these researchers I investigated the reconstruction and development activities in the war-ridden northern part of the island and with great interest, I observed the new arena opening up for all kinds of transnational connections instigating changes in many ways. At the same time, I witnessed the enduring polarisation between the different groups sometimes erupting in very forceful ways, the many difficulties accompanying the LTTE's attempts to become a legitimate political actor and to overcome previous terrorist images. I also observed the problems associated with the daunting impact of foreignness and manifestations of cultural difference which hit the war-affected and previously isolated places in the northern and eastern war-zones.

Understanding my position as a part of this encompassing social process of change, I started to reflect on the researcher's positionality in the field, in relation to the sensitive (post-)conflict context of Sri Lanka. The considerations and reflections presented in this paper are based on the experiences I gathered while conducting ethnographic fieldwork for my dissertation on development and reconstruction in northern Sri Lanka between 2002 and 2004 (Gerharz, 2007). The subjective perspectives highlighted here are embedded into the very specific time frame of the peace process which could not be termed as post-conflict, but rather as a no war/no peace situation (Brun 2008: 401). This implies the assumption that post-conflict can also mean pre-conflict[2], as the case of Sri Lanka has proven as well. From 2005 onwards, the situation deteriorated and gradually turned into a full-scale war again. In the beginning of 2009, the Sri Lankan Army had massively advanced into LTTE territory, and accepting a terrible humanitarian catastrophe, it managed to defeat the military wing of the LTTE in May 2009. The human costs were immense and in during the final onslaught, almost the entire LTTE leadership has been eliminated. In how far the "defeat" of the LTTE will bring about enduring peace in Sri Lanka is still questionable. During the second half of 2009 there are still 250.000 Tamils imprisoned in internment camps with just little hope for appropriate rehabilitation.

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[1] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Workshop "Field Research and Ethnics in Post.Conflict Environments", organised by the Program on States and Security, Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies, City University of New York, Dec. 4-5, 2008.

[2] This is why I have put the "post-" in brackets most of the time.

With the exception of the Tamil researcher Jamuna Sangarasivam (2001) only a few scholars have reported about their experiences in the Sri Lankan context. Although there is a body of literature on research findings concentrating on (post-)conflict settings, there seems to be a lack of explicitly targeting the doing of research under these conditions. Compared to "war ethnography" (Nordstrom 1997) conducted in emergency situations, fieldwork in post-conflict situations has been treated as taking place under conditions of "normalcy". The time-frame labelled as post-conflict, however, entails a range of specifics, which are sometimes similar to the challenges of research under conditions of war, sometimes not. Although I did not experience a notable escalation of violence, I can see a number of parallels to the reports formulated in a number of studies which have been produced on conducting research in conflict and war zones (Kovats-Bernat, 2002; Pettigrew, 2004; Hoffman, 2003; Nordstrom, 1997). Other aspects articulated in this paper, in contrast, have been discussed elsewhere as general methodological questions.

In Sri Lanka, large numbers of researchers took up the opportunity offered by the peace process and competed in developing challenging research questions and establishing contact with development organisations, turning Sri Lanka almost into an over-researched terrain. Many organisations and development projects had already been working with by social scientists investigating the dynamics of development cooperation in the peace process. One foreign expert in the Sri Lanka's capital of Colombo even claimed that his organisation was overwhelmed by having to give interviews to so many researchers. This enthusiasm was also focused on the war zones in the North and East where numerous young scholars conducted interviews and participant observation. Nevertheless, many members of Colombo's general public reacted in a terrified way when I told them about my frequent travels to the northern peninsula of Jaffna. One woman said: "Aren't you afraid? The Tigers are there!" On this occasion I realised that my research was taking place in a setting, which was full of fear, but also of misconceptions. This woman obviously did not know that the Tigers, the LTTE, had already been expelled from Jaffna six years before. For her, the Northern parts of Sri Lanka were the dangerous war zone, locked up by the Sri Lankan army. But she was also right in a way: In the course of the peace process the LTTE had emerged as a highly visible and, in the end, a well researched organisation. This was partly due to the high-level peace negotiations which enabled LTTE representatives to enter the public space, but also because of the international donors' strong commitment to reconstruction in the war zones of the North and East. This donor commitment required large numbers of personnel, mainly from Western countries, working and living in the war zones, including aid workers, observers, demining experts, short-term consultants and journalists.

This paper is concentrated on four different aspects of my ethnographic experience. First, to what extent are the perspectives, deeply embedded in the polarisation between two ethnically defined groups and the war protagonists who claim to represent them, relevant for the researcher's situatedness in the field? The second part deals with the question of neutrality and the difficulty of repositioning, when confronted with discursive situations conditioned by ethnic polarisation and conflict. The third aspect relates to my research experiences with the LTTE. I show how the organisation opened up to researchers, resulting in new avenues for representation. This is very much linked with the approach to development adopted by the LTTE, but also to the popular images of the Tigers as entrepreneurs in the "markets of violence" (Elwert, 1999). Fourthly, I will reflect upon relationship between the researcher and other foreigners. This was a highly ambivalent process centred on different modes of

complicity or non-complicity (Marcus, 1998), especially as this was embedded into a sometimes conflictive relationship between locals and foreigners. The conclusion shortly touches upon the question of neutrality.

Being torn between the Singalese and Tamils

The deeply entrenched ethnic polarisation which characterises Sri Lanka's conflict shapes and determines the everyday-life of most Sri Lankans and its visitors. The North-East and the Southern parts are clearly divided. Most people are aware that the war-zones in the North-East are populated by members of both groups, as well as by a considerable Muslim population[3], but some areas are more Tamil than others in real numbers, but also in other respects such as a collective consciousness about Tamil culture, heritage and identity. The areas in the east, for example, are regarded by some as less disputed territory than the north because the share of Sinhalese population is in some parts very high[4]. The northern peninsula of Jaffna, with its almost hundred per cent Tamil population, can be regarded as the centre of the Sri Lankan Tamils. The brief encounter with the woman in Colombo described above shows that Jaffna is frequently constructed as the heart of LTTE rule, although it was "liberated" by the Sri Lankan army as early as 1997.

In Sri Lanka's capitol Colombo, where a significant number of Tamils have always lived[5], we find this kind of spatial segregation and place-making as well. The areas of Welawatte, Bambalapitiya, Dehiwela and some others are known as Tamil enclaves. The suburb Wellawatte is known as "Little Jaffna" (Siddhartan, 2003: 311) and the visibility of "Tamilness" in form of ethnic businesses, Tamil signboards etc. belongs to this place-making. Places related to ethnic categories were not always districts, towns, suburbs, or neighbourhoods but could also be institutions or restaurants. The boundaries between Tamilness and LTTE were sometimes blurred. For example, the Greenland's Restaurant in the Colombo suburb of Bambalapitiya was labelled as "Tiger Restaurant", because at times it was suspected of hosting LTTE members. Interestingly, quite a number of Singhalese tended to equate Sri Lankan Tamilness with Indian Tamilness and sometimes with India in general. The Greenland's Restaurant in fact was a South Indian restaurant, resembling the Woodlands restaurant-chain in the Tamil Nadu capitol of Madras. When I told my Sinhala friend's daughter about Mira Nair's movie "Monsoon Wedding" which had been shown at the International Centre for International Studies (ICES) in Colombo and which I described as Indian, she repeatedly draw the conclusion: "aha, Tamil movie", although I insisted that there was a difference.

It made a difference, however, when I told my Sinhalese friends in Colombo that I would go to an area known as Tamil or meet Tamils. The Sinhalese woman I lived with used to stare at me but rushed to assure that she had nothing against Tamils. Then she claimed that one of her best childhood friends was a Tamil and that she even went to a Tamil doctor. Sometimes she

[3] According to the 1981 census Sri Lanka has approximately 19 Million inhabitants of which 74 per cent are Sinhalese, 18.1 per cent are Tamils and 7.1 per cent are Muslim. Sinhalese believe in Buddhism, Tamils are Hindus. But both groups, Sinhalese and Tamils also include a considerable number of Christians who constitute around 7.6 per cent.

[4] In many areas this number game is a highly problematic issue because settlement programmes in the name of development projects have resulted in a demographic shift (see for example Peebles (1990)).

[5] For the historical construction of the different forms of Tamil identity in Sri Lanka see Wilson (1994).

continued with lengthy narratives about her experiences with the nice Tamils she had met in her life or told me about the riots of 1983. In July 1983, Colombo was subject to a severe outbreak of violence against its Tamil population which spread to other parts of the islands and lasted for several days. Gangs and mobs attacked Tamils on the street, entered their businesses and houses, burned down many of them, harassed and killed Tamils. According to estimates 4.000 people were killed. The damage to trade and business was enormous (Bastian, 1990: 302). More then 100.000 Colombo Tamils lost their homes and had to rely on the so-called welfare centres which had been established in and around Colombo (Schrijvers, 1997)[6].

In my landlady's personal account of the pogrom, however, there was a Tamil woman living in her compound who needed protection when the riots broke out. She reported that the neighbours had finally called the police to rescue her because they were afraid of being attacked. Her story was unrelated to the potential danger the Tamil woman was subject to under police custody (although it is well known that the security forces partly supported the riots), but to the danger the woman's presence meant for the neighbours. On another day the shoemaker, a poor Tamil man, who used to arrange his tools and work in front of our house damaged the decorative plant in the front garden. The landlady felt hurt, since she connected some personal memories with this plant and started shouting: "This beggar has destroyed my plant, this dirty Tamil". The cases show the dynamics of ethnicisation in a very particular way: Although ethnic difference is denied and rejected in everyday life, it erupts all of a sudden, triggered by a single event. This means that the process of drawing ethnic boundaries between the members of different groups is embedded into specific situations in which the ascription of ethnicity helps to rationalise certain behaviour and may even justify individual or collective violent outbreaks. It was difficult to take position but could I have claimed to be neutral if real violence had erupted? What would be my responsibilities, as a researcher, and as a person of political sensitivity in this highly ethnically polarized set-up? These questions remained principal ones throughout fieldwork and will be raised again in the following section.

Being a Tiger Sympathiser?

To understand the general dynamics of ethnicisation in the south it is important to consider that Sri Lankan society has been heavily traumatised by the years of war. In the northern and eastern areas, the stress resulting from war has had a severe psychological impact on the Sri Lankan Tamil population (Somasundaram, 1998). In the south however, the situation has been less marked by a state of continuous emergency and trauma. This trauma is related to severe crises such as displacement, and the stress which occurs when people live in a war zone amidst outbreaks of fighting. Although most parts of the south remained relatively unaffected by direct fighting, the war also left its marks on peoples' lives, especially of the Colombo population. For years, the danger of being subject to bombing or suicide attacks was inscribed onto the everyday-lives of many Sri Lankans. It is difficult to find precise figures or chronologies of the bombings which were carried out since the beginning of the conflict and in many cases we still do not know who the perpetrators were. There are cases of suicide attacks and bombings for which the LTTE has claimed responsibility, but there are also a number of cases which have been attributed to the organisation too quickly. Several

[6] See Tambiah (1986) for a detailed account on the 1983 pogrom and its significance for Sri Lanka's democratisation process.

politicians, including Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi (1991), Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa (1993), were killed in bombings and suicide attacks. With them, large numbers of others perished. At one morning in January 1996, a truck filled with high explosives was blown up at the front gate of the Central Bank in Colombo. Almost a hundred people died and about 1,400 were injured (Harris, 2001). I experienced the psychological impact of such incidents when I returned to Sri Lanka for a conference in August 2006. A bomb targeting the Pakistani ambassador exploded in the heart of Colombo, killing eight people. I had had plans to go to this area that day but changed them in the morning. After this incident I did not feel safe in the city any longer. Especially in public places I always had a feeling of being exposed to some unforeseeable danger and for the first time, I could really understand what people were talking about.

The danger of becoming the victim of an attack, which could potentially happen everywhere at any time, had the effect that the Sri Lankans living in the South developed a kind of paranoid attitude. This fear has chronically penetrated the social memory. Any Tamil could be a terrorist. This largely acknowledged suspicion towards Tamils in general, in turn, affected Colombo Tamils, who refrained from wearing the markers of Tamil identity, such as the pottu[7]. This was a highly problematic moral dilemma for many devoted Hindu women but considered a necessity for security reasons at times in public space. Sangarasivam describes how she, as a Tamil who had come from Canada to do her fieldwork, herself became subject to this marginalization as a "violent other": During a six-months stay in Colombo, she was detained and interrogated by the Sri Lankan military police some twenty-five times (2001: 97).

For the Singhalese Sri Lankans, this psychological aspect was also crucial after the Ceasefire Agreement. People enthusiastically celebrated the new freedom during Christmas and New Year 2001 without the usual fear of gathering in public places. Everywhere, signs advocating "Peace" had been placed in shop windows. Events such as "Peace concerts" were performed during the holidays and the British band UB 40 even visited Sri Lanka to honour the successful peace-making efforts.

Most Sri Lankans followed and discussed the peace negotiations which took place in 2002. In these discussions, different scenarios were developed, and possibilities for a long-term agreement were suggested. I also sat together with Sinhalese friends to discuss the ongoing political developments. At a certain point in the discussion, the question of how to find a solution always came up. The fear that the country could be divided as a result of federalist reforms was articulated in very strong ways, but at the same time, nobody has had a better idea than a military solution. Considering myself as a citizen of a country where federalism works relatively well, I suggested being realistic and admitting that federalism was indeed a more peaceful way to bring a sustainable solution to the conflict. I tended to argue that the most important precondition was to treat the representatives of the LTTE as equal partners and negotiate a solution with them by compromising on both standpoints. The resistance against my claim was very emotional: "But you can not trust the Tigers! We know that!" Under these circumstances, I replied, negotiations made no sense then and that fighting had to go on forever. Nobody denied this. The discussion went on together with exchanging the latest news about the decision-making going on during the negotiations. One participant in the

[7] The pottu is the red dot Hindu Tamil women wear on their forehead to indicate their married status. See also Schrijvers (1999) and Siddhartan (2003) for a more detailed description of the dilemma Tamil women face.

discussion reported that the LTTE representative could not even speak by himself but had to call his boss all the time. Recognizing this deep mistrust and misrecognition, I was silenced.

Having experienced this kind of disappointment resulting from not finding a way to discuss from what I considered to be neutral point of view, I tried to avoid such situations especially when I realised that people tended to accuse me of being more sympathetic to the "terrorists". This happened quite often even when I pointed out the humanitarian situation of the people living in the North. At times, people looked at me in disbelief. I realised that people in the South had not gained much insight into the humanitarian situation in the North-East, instead narratives about and images of Jaffna before the war were prevalent. Many of my conversation partners still say Jaffna as a well developed centre, where agricultural production was booming and where the best schools were located. Based on images from colonial times, Jaffna Tamils were quite often depicted as successful businesspeople, traders and civil servants instead of as victims of war whose territory had literally been bombed back into the stone-age.

During my stay in the northern provinces, I was deeply impressed by the courage with which these people bore the hardships of living under continuous emergency situations. Many people reported that they had been displaced several times, that they had been forced to leave everything behind, and that they had taken shelter under trees for days or weeks. In Jaffna, many houses still were in ruins, others were deserted and falling apart and large numbers of people were living in camps. The army was omnipresent. Large areas continued to be occupied as High Security Zones and people could not go back to their lands and houses located in these zones. People were traumatised, many where depressed. I heard endless numbers of heart-breaking personal stories. Imagining the hardships of everyday-life the people in Jaffna had had to face for many years, being exposed to the continuous state of emergency and embargo which was enforced upon them and to the violent outbreaks erupting and forcing people to live in trenches and bunkers for days and weeks, was sometimes hard to bear. Most people said that their greatest wish was the restoration of normalcy and a life in peace.

Does the compassion I felt (and still feel) for the fate of those living in the war zone, mean that I was a LTTE supporter? I don't think so. Most of my friends in Jaffna did not fully back the LTTE either. One aid worker who had been in Jaffna for some time claimed that there was a kind of "love-hate-relationship" between the local population and the LTTE. On the one hand, the population of Jaffna had suffered terribly under the ruthless regime and the LTTE control until 1995. On the other hand, many of the cadres were their sisters, brothers, children, cousins, friends and neighbours. According to the LTTE perspective, the "movement", as it is called, represented the Tamil people. Most people that I talked to in the North-East did not support this claim. But what were their choices? Who was the culprit in this conflict? These are the questions a researcher is confronted with whenever she or he gets involved in such a polarised (post-)conflict-setting and which can, taking the complexity of divergent rationalities and loyalties into account, not really be answered. The question arises, what the responsibility of a foreign researcher, who can, in contrast of the people trapped in conflict zones, come and go according to his/her own choice, is. This brings up the very important question of research and activism which will be discussed later in this paper.

Researching the Movement

The Tigers were among the major attractions the North East has to offer. Among the few tourists who were adventurous enough to travel to the North East of Sri Lanka, there was a certain excitement about and fascination with the guerrillas, whose movement was said to be among the best and most powerful in the world. I witnessed similar excitement among the international staff working for the various development agencies in Sri Lanka. At the social events organised by members of the Colombo-based expatriate community which I infrequently attended, people used to report about their encounters and contact with LTTE cadres. One employee reported with pride about his first encounter with a "Tigress", a female cadre and emphasised how impressed he was by her strength when he shook her hand[8].

The myths about the LTTE have always been an issue among the different parties. The LTTE represents itself as a highly hierarchical and closed organisation which does not allow much insight into its structure, way of functioning and organisation. A few more or less exclusive and journalistic accounts have been published during the last years providing a glimpse of how the LTTE could become so successful (Pratap, 2001; Swamy, 1994; 2003; Balasingham, 2001). Several of these books were placed on the premium shelves in Colombo's bookshops and bestsellers and also in Indian bookshops. This myth-making through literature was accompanied by the talk and gossip about the LTTE cadres, especially the leader V. Prabhakaran, whom only a few people have had a chance to meet. During the war, LTTE's success in warfare depended to a large extent on this invisibility in public spaces and the construction of invisibility for protection which has made myth-making so attractive.

Due to the peace-process, the LTTE became increasingly visible to the public. This happened in different ways. Thanks to the Ceasefire Agreement, the areas controlled by the LTTE were recognised as such and opened for transport. Both sides established checkpoints at the border where the movement of civilians and goods was controlled. Everybody could travel there without much difficulty and many people took the chance, including representatives of international organisations who were interested in supporting the peace and development process, journalists, tourists and researchers who were interested in investigating the formerly isolated areas. Likewise, the LTTE cadres travelled to the southern parts of Sri Lanka without much difficulty. I met the first prominent Tiger in a five-star-hotel in Colombo. While I was sitting in the lobby together with another researcher, a middle-aged man dressed in a Western style suit and wearing sunglasses came towards us and hailed us. This nice and friendly man turned out to be one of the highest-ranking cadres in the LTTE hierarchy. It turned out that this man was one of the key figures in the newly established relationship between the LTTE and the world of donors and development agencies. Those expatriates who knew him, affectionately called him by his nick-name and demonstrated an intimate relationship with this well-known and mystifying man.

Although the LTTE cadres were not allowed to enter government-controlled areas in uniform but only in civilian dress, the Ceasefire Agreement provided them with the opportunity to establish political offices in the government-controlled areas. Researchers were thus able to contact the local LTTE office directly for an interview. From Jaffna we could also travel to the LTTE headquarters, the town of Kilinochchi located further south, within a few hours. In 2003, only insiders knew that the media-spokesperson should be contacted in advance to

[8] LTTE cadres are known for their discipline and the hard physical exercises they have to perform. The women especially are exceptionally strong and physically impressive.

make an appointment. He directed everybody to interview partners in the various wings and established contact with other LTTE-related organisations. Researchers and journalists who did not speak Tamil had to bring a research assistant for translation purposes. We got used to spend a couple of days at the LTTE-guesthouse which provided minimal facilities. By 2004 in contrast, this system had been changed. The offices in Kilinochchi had well established telephone lines and we could call the different wings and departments directly. The LTTE had appointed someone to translate from Tamil into English and back. Selected cadres received English-language training and were able to communicate in English within a relatively short period of time. Outside funding enabled the LTTE to establish new office buildings representing their work in the civilian realm. A Planning and Development Secretariat (PDS) was established to coordinate development activities and relationships with donors and other funding actors. This office included all facilities such as meeting rooms.

For the LTTE, the Ceasefire Agreement entailed the opportunity to intensify linkages to the "outside world". These were regarded as important resources in different ways. Donor and development agencies represented not only financial resources, but recognition (Stokke, 2006). Being recognised as a competent development actor successfully running a state-like formation which is able to manage and implement development activities and measures enhanced LTTE's bargaining power in the internationalised terrain of the peace negotiations and beyond. Similarly, researchers and journalists became a resource, because they listened and wrote about the ideas and plans that the LTTE intended to promote. Another significant aspect was the idea to justify and refute accusations against the LTTE and stereotypical representations which reflect images of a ruthless, terrorist organisation (see Sangarasivam, 2000). Two journalists I met at the LTTE-run guesthouse in Kilinochchi in 2003 were on a study tour organised by the LTTE, which included a visit to an orphanage. The LTTE representative accompanying them emphasised strongly, that the orphanage had nothing to do with child recruitment for their armed forces, of which the LTTE is accused quite frequently and that the Karate-training was necessary for the physical strength of the neglected children. This example shows that journalists were introduced to selected areas of the LTTE realm in order to present a certain image. All of us were targeted as potential promoters and sometimes even advocates by the LTTE.

When I conducted the interviews in Kilinochchi, I focused on the civilian and administrative divisions rather than on the military wing[9]. However, the boundaries were often blurred because all cadres initially underwent military training. The cadres acquired higher positions on the basis of their merits in military affairs and their suitability assessed by the leadership. Nevertheless, what I could see and gain access to was represented in a civilian outfit. What the cadres told me was very much concerned with the state-making project in the sense of the establishment of necessary structures and institutions as well as policies and partnerships. Even in the LTTE-controlled areas I rarely saw cadres in camouflage uniforms. The LTTE was most visible through its police forces and personnel in civilian dress. The image I was presented was that of a harmless, yet effective and competent state apparatus which did not have much to do with the images of the militarised, ruthless, uncompromising war-machinery, as they were usually depicted in most of the literature and the reports about the LTTE.

[9] The administrative structure is comprised of seven different wings: finance, law and justice, police, military, education, politics and women's affairs (Hellmann-Rajanayagam, 2007: 127).

Bearing "the other side" in mind as well, I wish to highlight here the specific representations which are situated in time and in the particular political environment. During the Ceasefire Agreement, the LTTE strategically divulged and staged images of its civilian outfit to enhance their legitimacy and bargaining position. Regarding donors and development agencies this strategy was partly successful. The LTTE managed to draw a picture of itself as a competent and confident partner able to deliver social services (through its partner organisations) as well as maintaining law and order (through the Tamil Eelam Police and the judiciary). But it is also the researcher who selects and depicts certain images which appear and which are presented to her in the complex and divided field. Especially in such a divided, yet polarised field work situation like Sri Lanka, I think it is important to think and rethink my own position as a researcher over again and again. I will concentrate on two different dimensions of representation which are particularly meaningful in (post-)conflict settings. First, there is the construction of images of the self or the other, e.g. "the enemy". This kind of representation is strongly tied to the construction of identity, or in this particular context, ethnicity, which connotes political representation (Cheater, 1997). It is the LTTE who creates negative images of the other (Brun, 2008: 411), and it is the Sri Lankan state (and a number of interest groups) that create images of the terrorist LTTE (Sangarasivam 2000). The researchers' task and responsibility is to look at social phenomena from the various perspectives and unravel the different representations depicted by the actors in a particular field. At the same time, there is always the danger of being looked upon as more sympathetic to this or to that side. One of my German friends, a social anthropologist working for a development project in Jaffna, once came to me, embarrassed, because the project staff in Colombo had placed the prefix "Tiger" in front of her name. She never hid her sympathy for the people living in Jaffna, but she did not want to be considered as a LTTE- sympathiser. This leads us to the second level, the question of ethnographic representation, which has been intensely discussed especially during the late 1980s. The basic assumption has been that representations of anthropology's objects are the products of asymmetrical power relations and that anthropology itself is always situated in particular historical and political contexts. In the Sri Lanka case, it is not so much the question of whose representations we are adopting as researchers. Because representations are divided and polarised the crucial question is how we relate to them. What kind of image do we represent, and why? We are dealing with politics of representation and we need to consider the social and political consequences of our research and writings. This reasons to expose the process through which ethnographies are made and to be aware of "our own humanity as meaning-makers" (James, 1997: 12), because keeping a safe reflexive distance is not always totally possible, there is always a danger of appropriation or misrepresentation[10]. After all, we need to ask ourselves whether we want to become advocates for certain groups or not, because there is certainly a chance that the representations resulting from research are instrumentalized.

Do I really want to be one of them?

Living in Jaffna as a foreigner can be challenging, especially for those who are used to a certain level of personal freedom in public. There are not many opportunities for recreation in

[10] Okely (1997) differentiates between six different possibilities in considering the influence of ideas and intellectuals. Activism is one, but there is also the category "named but unintended influence" which might be appropriate here.

the devastated provincial town. Moreover, some local concepts of morality regarding the behaviour of women in public space diminish the freedom of movement, while strong notions of (Tamil) women's purity exist. During my visits, several cases of attacks and sexual harassment targeted mainly foreign (western) women, which were controversially discussed. According to many local opinions this kind of disrespect for women in general aggravated under the control of the Sri Lankan Army. At times, this was interpreted as result from the enduring war situation, or as endemic to society but the emphasis on foreign women could also have been the result of new interpretations and images of "free western societies". However, the resulting restrictions concerned foreigners who were living in Jaffna for a longer period of time. A considerable number of expatriates were permanently employed by international organisations engaged in development and reconstruction programmes. Due to Jaffna's status as a high security area, the foreign staff was not allowed to reside there with their partners or families which explained why most of them were either single or unaccompanied by their partner.

As an ethnographer researching development and reconstruction, it was important for me to get into contact with the expatriate community to learn more about their different opinions, activities, projects and policies. A German friend who was working for a German organisation had introduced me to some of the foreigners living in Jaffna and I decided to join the volleyball training which was organised on the compound of the International Red Cross Committee (ICRC) twice a week. This took place shortly before sunset and helped me to escape loneliness and also gave me an opportunity to get some exercise. Moreover, I got to know some of the expatriates and learned a lot about their everyday-life at work and their leisure time. At the same time, I was keen on getting to know more about local Tamils' perspectives and opinions about these foreigners and I learned that their constructions, particularly of the Westerners, were not always positive.

Negative impressions of the western way of life were fuelled by the ways, the expatriate-community tended to organise its leisure time. The expatriates organised parties on various occasions. As a result, loud music was played late at night and people drank beer. Male and female expatriates move around together freely. Some of them, especially women, were sometimes inappropriately dressed. The fact that men and women go to parties and dance together wais a strange kind of behaviour according to the rather rigid understanding of gender-relations in Tamil culture. Over the weekend some expatriates used the project cars to go to the nearby beach where they sun themselves in bikinis which again alienated some local Tamils.

A visible example for expats' withdrawal from the local social realm was the club started by the UN staff. This "Bar" was the only after-work recreation opportunity for the Westerners in Jaffna, apart from less than a handful of guesthouses which serve drinks. Those who wished to relax or who felt bored in the evening attended the "Bar" for a beer and a chat. Modelled as a small version of the many national and international clubs frequented by expatriates which can be found in the capital of almost each developing country and which allows them to escape from the foreign place they live in, the "Bar" was the meeting point of Jaffna's international community. Drinks were reasonably priced and Western music was played until late hours. Since it was not possible to catch a glimpse of the location because of its surrounding walls typical of Jaffna houses, people just heard the music and people talking and laughing loudly. I was told that the neighbours frequently complained and threw stones over the wall. The fact that even single women stayed at the "Bar" until late at night, offered a

reason to assume that Westerners are wicked, which entailed the danger of spilling over to local Tamils as well.

Many people interpreted the expatriates' behaviour as immoral and against Tamil culture. A strong emphasis was put on the aspect of gender relations which were interpreted as being different than in the Tamils' "own culture". It was assumed that "something must go wrong there", as one anthropologist explained. For many locals this indicated a kind of immorality which was interpreted as a typical feature of Western behaviour. Some observers referred to western media, and assumed that gender-relations in the Western world consisted of total liberty and spontaneity in choosing a partner. There were also fears that these "bad habits" might spoil the local culture by transporting Western culture into the local context. In this vein, they were accused of bringing pornography to Jaffna. As one interviewee told me, the "whites" were accused of having imported HIV. Real or imagined cases of love affairs between INGOs' male staff and Tamil girls were occasions of gossip. At this point many local people stopped tolerating the Westerners' different behaviour and started claiming that a threat to Tamil culture exists.

This process of constructing culture, identity and belonging was embedded into the historically significant period of re-opening resulting from the peace process. Under the conditions of war, Jaffna was in most parts cut off from the mainland, and the more from the rest of the world. The abrupt re-opening reinforced connection with the world and an intensification of social interactions, relations and networks. This, however, can be regarded as a constitutive feature of globalisation, which, due to the war, leaped into existence. Globalization processes, however, reinforce the multiplication and fragmentation of identities. Identities are constructed resulting from social relations and comparative interaction across cultures. Asserting difference in the context of globalization and translocalisation is a result of the mechanisms of "flow and closure" (Meyer & Geschiere, 1999). Globalisation allows flows of goods, images and people to move around but at the same time, this leads to processes of closure. As soon as the actors concerned recognize difference, boundaries are erected and identities constructed.

The conflict arising from this dialectical process put me, as a female researcher, into a certain ethnical dilemma: On the one hand, I depended on good relations with the expatriate community whom I regarded as development experts and potential interview partners. I also considered the relationship between Jaffna Tamils and expatriates as an important dimension of analysis. This was important for maintaining objectivity concerning the negotiation of development between local and external partners. On the other hand, my work depended on a good and trustful relationship with my local informants and friends. This also implied avoiding a negative image my personality[11]. But as time passed by, I increasingly realised that I had to compromise on the moral standards and the level of involvement in the different arenas. I was certainly keen to differentiate myself from the disreputable expatriates, but at the same time, I realised this was not entirely possible. Apart from research-related considerations, there were also others such as the fact that I wanted to play volleyball because I appreciated the physical exercise and the occasional company of other westerners. I was uncomfortable with being locked up after dark and wanted to exchange views, ideas, problems and troubles with others. These occasions also meant to be a break or time-out from research. After all, people would recognise me as a foreigner anyway. I could try to live with

[11] Lachenmann (1997: 111) sumarises the discussion about the specific situation of female researchers. Discussing this dimension would unfortunately exceed the scope of this paper.

certain moral integrity but at the same time, I could not avoid being lumped together with other Western foreigners.

Concluding Remarks

This paper has touched a variety of issues and field research situations entangled in the complexity of a (post-)conflict environment which was characterised by ethnic boundaries, and antagonistic politics carried out by the two war protagonists, the LTTE and the Sri Lankan state. The emphasis was put on reflecting on some of the research situations and dilemmas arising in this special field marked by new opportunities but also new challenges typical of post-conflict situations. I have pointed out a number of different issues which I consider as challenging for researchers who attempt to position themselves somewhere between the two sides. As Theidon has noted, there is no neutrality because as soon as we are there, we are caught. This is not a question of ethnical imperative (Theidon, 2001: 28), but positioning oneself is an unavoidable necessity. The division between the Sinhalese and Tamil spaces was harsh and marked by ignorance and resentment, and heavily loaded with ethnic markers and cleavages. Therefore, I first raised the question of how to deal with the ethnic polarisation which is so deeply imprinted onto people's minds and ways of thought in everyday-life and talk.

The phenomenon of ethnic polarisation at the broader societal level is interrelated with the psychological effects of war. I have shown for Southern Sri Lanka how the unpredictability of attacks and bombings have contributed to boundary-drawing and demarcation. This deeply entrenched fear is connected with mistrust, which in fact has eroded the basis for finding a long-term solution to the armed conflict. Discussing this issue with my Sinhalese friends and getting to know the sufferings of the "other side" I realised how impossible it is to claim neutrality. Siding with one party or the other on the basis of supposedly rational argumentation entailed the danger of being pushed into the trap of being partial.

This leads to the third aspect, that is researching the LTTE, a highly disputed organisation well known for human rights violations and labelled as a terrorist organisation. This interesting field work setting brought up the question of representation as a central issue in ethnography. Representation, in this context is two-fold. On the one hand, there are the representations of actors that ethnographers observe. The LTTE has adopted particular strategies to represent itself as an effective and well-organised development actor. It is the researcher's task to unravel these representations and understand the rationalities and intentions behind them. On the other hand, researchers are also facing the challenge of being those who represent. Doing ethnography always entails taking a stand, deliberately or accidentally. This opens the question of how we deal with the interpretations of our representations.

Fourthly, I touched upon the realm of cultural difference and local resistance against alienation from the "West". I have asked how we can deal with this issue, being from and representing the "West" ourselves. This remains an open question as well and can, according to my insights, only be handled according to personal preferences and experience.

The question remains, what we should do with these challenges against the background that there is a highly sensitive and politicised field of action in the field itself as well as in our own countries. What responsibilities do we bear in the academic public and with our writings? Whenever we present a piece of my work we need to think carefully about the context in which this takes place not to be mistaken for someone we do not want to impersonate. The

global image of the LTTE's terrorist nature is still prevalent in the policies and the media nowadays and gives rise to the assumption that the Tamil struggle is unjustifiable. But there were and still are humanitarian catastrophes caused by the Sri Lankan army's continuous advances on LTTE territory, which have resulted in large numbers of deaths and displaced persons. In how far does scholarly activity and ones own personal position should or should not be related to each other? Witnessing the consequences of conflict, is it really desirable to claim a neutral standpoint?

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