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Tsunami and Civil War in Sri Lanka: An Anthropologist Confronts the Real World

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Recent calls for a new "public anthropology" to promote greater visibility for ethnographic research in the eyes of the press and the general public, and to bolster the courage of anthropologists to address urgent issues of the day, are laudable although probably also too hopeful. Yet, while public anthropology could certainly be more salient in American life, it *already exists* in parts of the world such as Sri Lanka where social change, ethnic conflict, and natural catastrophe have unavoidably altered the local context of ethnographic fieldwork. Much of the anthropology of Sri Lanka in the last three decades would have to count as "public" scholarship, because it has been forced to address the contemporary realities of labor migration, religious politics, the global economy, and the rise of violent ethno-nationalist movements. As a long-term observer of the Tamil-speaking Hindu and Muslim communities in Sri Lanka's eastern coastal region, I have always been attracted to the classic anthropological issues of caste, popular religion, and matrilineal kinship. However, in the wake of the civil wars for Tamil Eelam and the 2004 tsunami disaster, I have been forced to confront (somewhat uneasily) a fundamentally altered fieldwork situation. This gives my current work a stronger flavor of public anthropology, while providing an opportunity for me to trace older matrilocal family patterns and Hindu-Muslim religious traditions under radically changed conditions.

A Secluded Coast

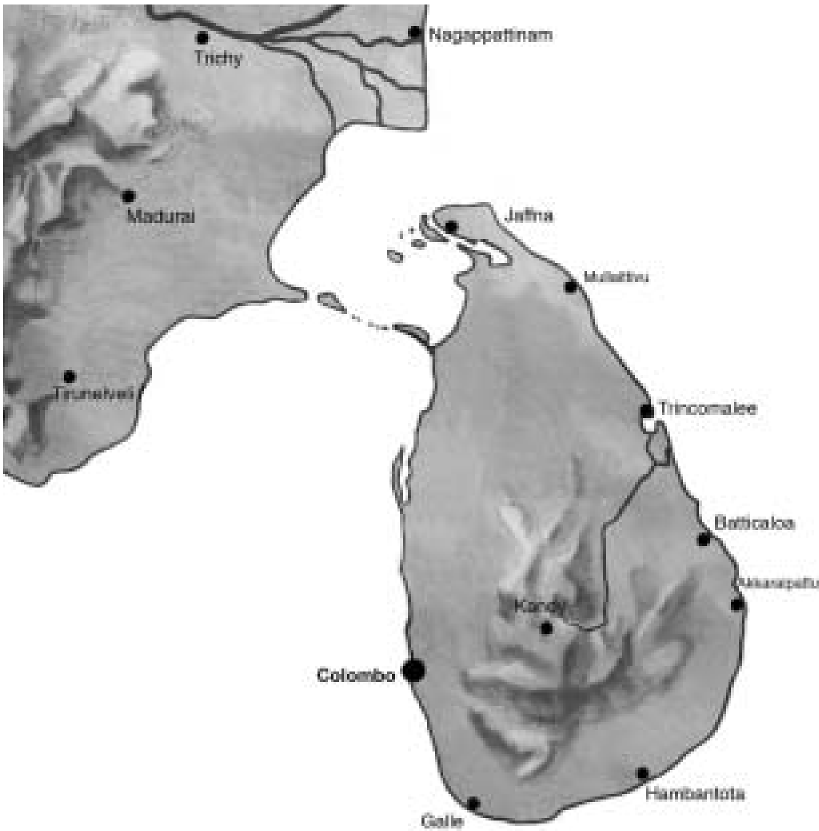
My anthropological training, my intellectual interests, and the fieldwork opportunities available to me in the Tamil-speaking region of eastern Sri Lanka since my first visit there in 1969–71 have all lent my research agenda a rather Malinowskian tone. I had what many graduate students today would consider the luxury of two full years of continuous fieldwork support, and I spent my time taking notes on a wide and eclectic range

of Hindu and Muslim kinship, caste, and religious practices, as well as consuming endless cups of over-sweetened milk-tea in roadside shops while developing my conversational Tamil fluency. I had the time, and I found it intriguing, to explore the local puzzles of matrilineal kinship and ritual symbolism, topics that my local Tamil and Muslim friends also found worthy of documentation and preservation. As a result, my scholarly publications have focused primarily on such subjects as non-Brahmanical Hindu caste hierarchies, ethnomedical ideas about gender and health, life-crisis rituals, matrilocal marriage and dowry, and regional temple and mosque festivals.[1] From the beginning, Tamil and Muslim (or "Moorish") ethnic identity-formation was also an important topic for me, one of the reasons that I chose to make the bi-ethnic agricultural town of Akkaraipattu, in Ampara District, the center of my fieldwork network. My historically inflected monograph on Tamil and Muslim kinship and caste structure will finally appear, after a long period of scholarly gestation.[2]

Back in the 1970s, the east coast of Sri Lanka—the region south of Trincomalee encompassing Batticaloa and Ampara Districts—felt to me like the end of the road (Figure 1). Although the eastern side of the island had been the route by which the earliest European expeditions made direct contact with the landlocked Kandyan Kingdom in the sixteenth century, it was superseded by the development of the more densely populated western coast of the island under Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonial regimes. Remote from the expansion of colonial tea and rubber plantations in the Kandyan highlands, and devoid of other products of value to the global export economy, the east coast largely remained what it had always been, a rice-growing and fishing region with an anthropologically distinctive matrilineal social structure among its Tamil and Muslim inhabitants. An American Jesuit priest based in Batticaloa compiled an unpublished history of the Catholic missions in this region entitled *The Secluded Coast*,[3] a descriptive phrase that resonated comfortably with my own impressions, until historical events harshly intervened.

To be sure, the region had undergone new developments in the period since independence in 1948, principally the Gal Oya irrigation project that brought in a wave of landless Sinhalese colonists to cultivate newly watered paddy fields in the western parts of the Batticaloa and Ampara districts. This, of course, was the beginning of the nationally directed and internationally funded program of irrigation resettlement

FIGURE 1
SOUTH INDIA AND SRI LANKA



that has radically changed the ethnic balance of populations in many parts of northeastern Sri Lanka, contributing ultimately to the current Tamil insurgency and the ethnic polarization of the country.[4] When I arrived in Akkaraipattu in late 1969, however, there were still Sinhalese dry goods shops open for business on the main street and a small Sinhala Buddhist vihara in town as well. The escalating series of anti-Tamil riots that began to occur in the decades following the Sinhala nationalist victory in the 1956 elections apparently had little impact in Akkaraipattu, and when the short-lived insurrection of the Janata Vimukti Peramuna (JVP), a neo-Marxist Sinhala youth movement, was unfolding in 1971 in the southwestern provinces, most people in Akkaraipattu—myself included—listened to the radio reports with

detached amazement. It certainly never occurred to me that a militant Tamil separatist movement would gain popular support in such an out of the way part of the island. I assumed this special ethnographic laboratory would always be, well, secluded.

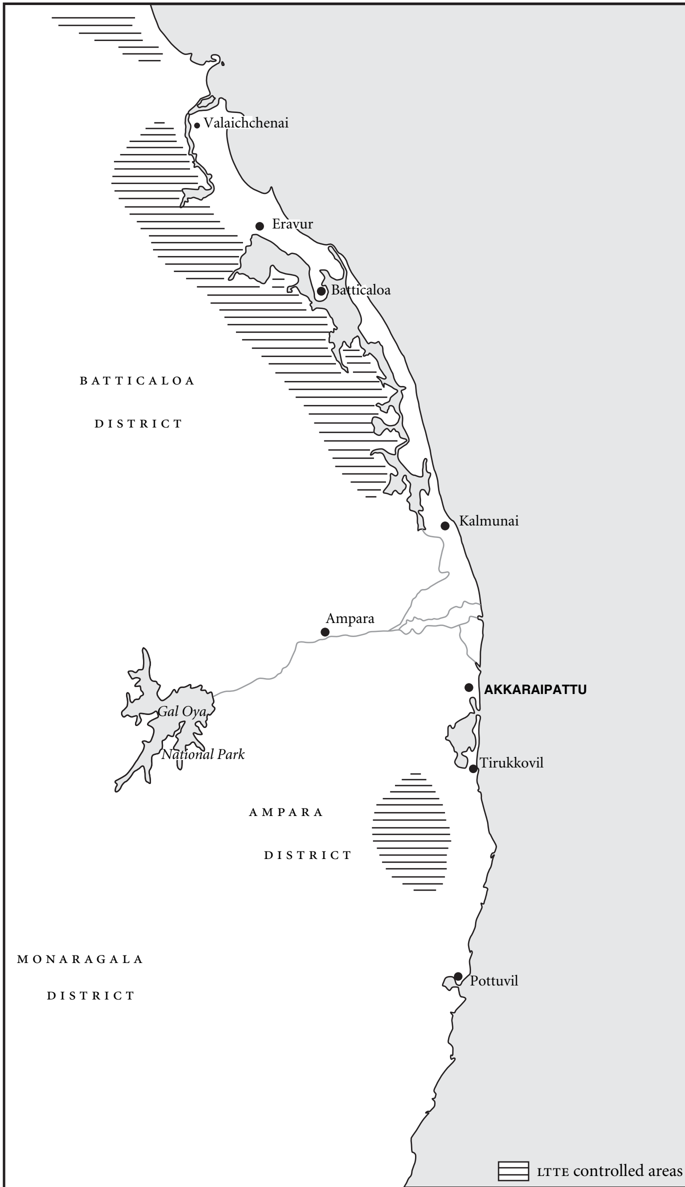
Eelam Wars Erupt

Although it had roots in the British colonial period, the conflict between Sinhala versus Tamil ethno-nationalism in Sri Lanka rapidly intensified in the decades after independence in 1948. The three key issues were policies to establish Sinhala as the national language, to "rectify" Tamil over-representation in the universities and the civil service, and to resettle landless Sinhala peasants on newly irrigated lands in the east and north of the island, where Tamils and Muslims had predominated for centuries. Parliamentary efforts to create a federal system that would have given the Tamils a significant degree of provincial autonomy failed repeatedly between the 1950s and the 1970s, and so a number of armed Tamil separatist organizations—including the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, or LTTE[5]—came into being that attracted a much younger, and more impatient, Tamil nationalist following.

When LTTE guerrillas ambushed and killed 13 Sinhalese soldiers in Jaffna in 1983, resulting in massive carnage against Tamils living in Colombo and other major cities, it become clear that I had misjudged the situation. But it still seemed unlikely to me that such an educated, middle-class, hierarchical, kinship-based community as the Tamils would ever permit a militant youth-based gun culture to take root. Yet in fact "the boys" (*podiyans*, as the male LTTE cadres are called informally in Tamil) have utterly defied and outraged their elders, rendered impotent the established Tamil parliamentary elites, and radically altered the social and political landscape of Tamil-speaking Sri Lanka.

This represented the first drastic alteration of my comfortable and familiar fieldwork situation. Most of the military campaigns that have convulsed Sri Lanka since 1983 have had some impact in the region where I conduct anthropological research. While many of the set-piece battles have taken place to the north, in Jaffna and the Vanni, where the LTTE now occupies a fortified nation-like swath of Dry Zone territory it has renamed Tamil Eelam, LTTE cadres in the eastern region of the island also control much of the inland forest and paddy lands on the western shore of the Batticaloa Lagoon (Figure 2). Tamil Tiger cadres

FIGURE 2
LTTE CONTROLLED AREAS OF THE BATTICALOA REGION



move easily throughout the densely populated coastal towns, including Akkaraipattu, and government security forces vainly attempt to monitor their presence. Despite a formal ceasefire signed in 2002, the LTTE and the Sri Lankan armed forces have kept up a bloody exchange of assassinations and bombings, and a regional schism in the LTTE led by a Tamil commander from the east, Colonel Karuna, has led to desperate internecine bloodshed between his followers and those of the implacable LTTE leader in the north, V. Prabhakaran.

Not wishing to become a martyr for ethnography, I waited a decade in hopes that the Eelam conflict would be resolved. Finally, in 1993 I cautiously returned to eastern Sri Lanka for new fieldwork, negotiating 13 government security checkpoints on the bus ride from Colombo to Batticaloa. Since then, I have visited the east coast five more times, most recently in 2005. The atmosphere for fieldwork in this region fluctuates, depending on Sri Lankan politics and the extent of local violence, but it never feels the same as it did back in the 1970s. The Hindu temple to the goddess Bhadrakali that I documented in great detail in 1970 and again in 1975 and 1978 now lies in ruins, demolished in 1990 by Muslim vandals operating with the tacit permission of the Sri Lankan security forces. One of my original Tamil research assistants from my dissertation days recounted a horrific tale of being tortured in the mid-1980s by two different branches of the Sri Lankan security forces on two different occasions. Along with 92 other young Tamils, he was taken to a Sri Lankan Army camp where he was strung up by his feet, beaten, and forced to inhale the smoke of burning chilies and kerosene, a story I had to hear twice before I could fully grasp it.[6] On two separate occasions, in 1995 and 2000, I myself was detained (and quickly released) by Sri Lankan Army patrols while I was visiting Tamil friends in Akkaraipattu. The first came at 5am when the barking dogs alerted neighbors that a house-to-house "round-up" of suspected Tamil militants was underway, and the second happened at a neighborhood Hindu temple that I was photographing in the rays of the setting sun. At times the Tamil and Muslim neighborhoods of Akkaraipattu feel as if they are hermetically sealed off from each other, and nocturnal travel across this urban ethnic boundary can be dangerous. Religious shrines are attacked and bombed for communal, not theological, reasons, and it is never certain who has carried out these vendettas. A recent example was a hand grenade attack on the Akkaraipattu Grand Mosque that killed six Muslim men

and injured 20 at early morning prayer.[7] At times of heightened violence, there is palpable terror and reticence to talk openly about the security situation. People discuss the army or the LTTE only in whispers, fearing their words might be overheard. Roadside shrines to Tiger martyrs signal the LTTE presence in the region (Figure 3).

In a sense, the Eelam Wars have redefined my anthropological subjects, redirecting attention away from the central topics of my earlier research—kinship, caste, ritual—to issues of violence, suffering, displacement, and diaspora. These are important questions in today's conflict-ridden and globalizing world, as shown in Patricia Lawrence's extraordinary work on cathartic Tamil spirit-mediums in Sri Lanka's war zone.[8] In some ways the Sri Lankan civil war has also separated me from the sites of contemporary cultural agency. Whereas previously I could analyze Muslim dowry payments simply by sitting in on marriage negotiations, or study Tamil caste hierarchies by attending annual temple rituals, an altogether different multi-sited and media-suffused methodology would now be required if I wished to understand the impact of diasporic resources from Toronto or Zurich on village-level Sri Lankan ethnic politics or the global mobility of Tamil and Muslim families from Akkaraipattu. The veteran Sri Lankan Tamil journalist D. Sivaram (who wrote under the pen name "Taraki")—a good friend murdered in cold blood on April 28, 2005, for his political sympathies—once boasted to me that back in the late 1970s youthful members of his own nascent guerrilla group in Batticaloa had been secretly meeting and laying revolutionary plans while I, a naïve graduate student, was blithely questioning Tamil village elders about their matrilineal clans and temple myths. (Fieldwork is definitely not the same thing as espionage, despite what some cynics may think.)

The visibility and intractability of the island's ethnic conflict has torn the veil away from Sri Lanka's "secluded coast." I am contacted now by journalists seeking insights into the causes of Tamil, Muslim, and Sinhalese ethnic violence, and I am invited to participate in conferences addressing the future of "state-building" in unstable regions of Asia. To an anthropologist steeped in such ethnographic topics as Tamil female puberty rituals, Sufi tomb-shrine myths, and the logic of Dravidian cross-cousin marriage, this is something new. At the same time, I can professionally attest that there is still "a culture" on the east coast of Sri Lanka, a regionally distinctive Tamil and Muslim way of life that is responding to the long-term stresses and traumas of the

FIGURE 3
TAMIL TIGER ROADSIDE MARTYRS' MEMORIAL, KALLADI, BATTICALOA. AUGUST 2005

Eelam conflict. For example, in the immediate aftermath of massacres in the 1990s, there was a burst of renovation and reconsecration of temples and mosques in the Batticaloa region, and in some cases a reinvigoration of the traditional form of temple and mosque management by matrilineal clan (*kudi*) trustee committees. At the same time, popular forms of Hindu trance-mediumship and ecstatic vows of firewalking and *mullukkavadi* (dancing with hooks in one's back) have visibly increased under conditions of terror and suffering. At the household level, the practice of matrilocal marriage continues among both Tamils and Moors, along with the customary pre-mortem transfer of family wealth to daughters in the form of very large dowries (including cash, wedding houses, and paddy lands). However, the matrilocal dowry system is nowadays disrupted by a shortage of available grooms, by the sequestration of paddy lands in LTTE hands, and by some grooms' fear of exposure to local violence at "exposed" dowry house sites. In Akkaraipattu, low caste Tamil groups such as Barbers and Drummers have also leveraged the political instability of the Eelam conflict to abruptly discontinue their stigmatizing hereditary *kudimai* service at high caste funerals.

As I have argued in greater detail elsewhere, the evolving society in the multi-ethnic eastern region will be key to any long-term solution of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict, because it is the only region of the island where all three ethnic communities—Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim—are found in roughly equal proportions on the ground, albeit in geographically Balkanized sectors.[9] While Jaffna and the Vanni will always be monocultural bastions of Tamil population, and the central and southern provinces will remain overwhelmingly Sinhala Buddhist, the eastern region stretching from Trincomalee and Batticaloa south to Pottuvil will provide Sri Lanka's ultimate test of ethnic cooperation or ethnic schism. In these circumstances, even the ethnographic details of east coast Tamil caste hierarchies and Moorish matrilineal clan organization can provide a valuable form of "public anthropology."

Tsunami Strikes Sri Lanka

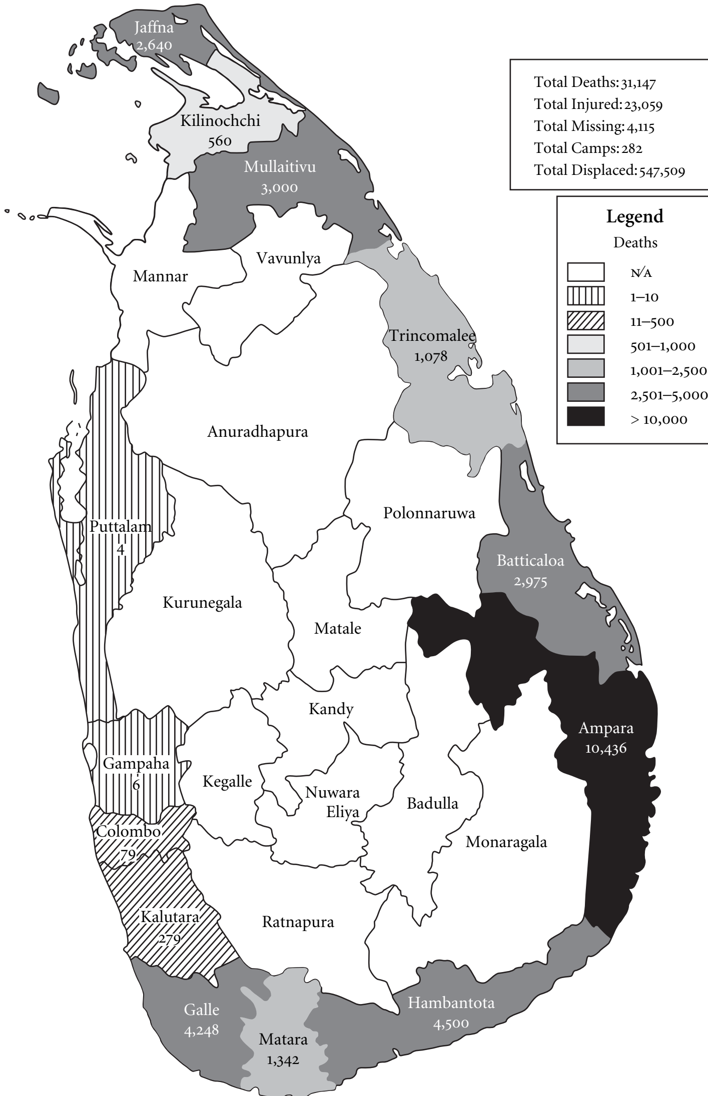
Starting in the early 1980s and continuing for more than two decades, the Eelam conflict exerted a deadly numbing effect on the daily lives of east coast Tamils, Muslims, and Sinhalese, and a whole generation of children came of age living under the stress of ethnic tensions and brutal violence. Then a second catastrophe struck the region: the tsunami

of December 26, 2004, which transformed my fieldwork site yet again—in a different but equally tragic way. Since the 1980s, local residents had learned how to gauge and anticipate some of the local ethnic flare-ups and island-wide political crises, but no one could possibly have anticipated the deadly tsunami waves traveling at 500 miles per hour in a straight line from Sumatra. East coast settlements and villages within half a kilometer of the sea were reduced to rubble within a period of 20 minutes, and more than 13,000 Tamils and Muslims died at once. Approximately 43 percent of Sri Lanka's 31,147 tsunami deaths occurred in Batticaloa and Ampara Districts alone (Figure 4).

This is the kind of natural catastrophe we have read about in earthquake and flood-prone zones of the world, but in Sri Lanka it was an experience no one was remotely prepared for. Most Sri Lankans had never conceived of a tsunami; there was no term for it in Tamil or Sinhala (although the Japanese word has quickly entered both languages). Yet, it was also a highly unusual disaster affecting only those households immediately adjacent to the sea. Along the beachfront in places like Kalmunai and Tirukkovil, the destruction was complete, leaving intact only deeply embedded concrete well-casings and hardy coconut trees (Figure 5). If you were unlucky enough to experience the direct impact of the wave, you probably died, especially if you were a woman who could not swim and were scrambling to save your children. If you were only half a kilometer inland from the shore, you probably survived, and your neighborhood was largely unaffected. The extreme localization of the tsunami had a deadly effect, but it also permitted immediate access to hospitals and to relief services provided by the "golden tsunami" of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and aid agencies that have flooded into Sri Lanka to provide assistance. The large number of international NGOs working on tsunami relief in Sri Lanka is now reflected in their trademark logos and acronymic signage—from ACF to ZOA—posted along main roads everywhere throughout tsunami-land.

On a visit to Akkaraipattu in August 2005, eight months after the tidal waves struck, I found the town colonized by a number of NGOs whose freshly painted headquarters buildings and air-conditioned Japanese twin-cab pickup trucks were highly visible on the main roads of the town. While some of the NGOs in the tsunami zone are Sri Lankan, many are foreign, including those from each of Sri Lanka's former imperial rulers: Portugal, The Netherlands, Britain. The region

FIGURE 4
TSUNAMI DEATHS IN SRI LANKA BY DISTRICT



Source: http://203.94.76.60/tsunami/links/deaths.html
(Sri Lanka Ministry of Health)

FIGURE 5
BEACHFRONT HOME DESTROYED BY TSUNAMI, MARUTHAMUNAI.
AUGUST 2005

is now crawling with foreign relief workers, both volunteer and professional, and my identity as a scholar is the last thing most people would ever suspect. A profession—or perhaps we should call it a global industry—dedicated to disaster relief work has set up shop in the affected coastal communities of Sri Lanka. These are the experts to whom everyone turns, not least because they have also become a prominent source of employment and resource distribution in the local economy. Initially, my grassroots ethnographic authority seemed irrelevant to a tragically altered situation, challenged by exogenous factors that were dictated by political decisions in Colombo, or by NGO funding priorities in Oslo or Paris. Upon consideration, however, it seems that my ethnographic experience and cultural knowledge of the region are skills that circulating government bureaucrats and transitory NGO personnel will never be able to match.

Public Anthropology in Sri Lanka

This brief sketch of how my anthropological research site has been transformed from a "secluded coast" in the 1970s to a region convulsed by the dual traumas of civil war and tsunami today illustrates some of the dilemmas and opportunities that "public anthropology" poses for an ethnographer like me, whose academic career has previously focused on the long-term study of historically embedded social institutions and cultural practices. To be honest, until Sri Lanka's civil war and (especially) the tsunami hit me in the face, I had not paid much attention to what others had been saying about "public anthropology" within my own discipline. To some degree, this reflected my longstanding indifference to the polarizing dichotomies of "academic" vs. "applied" anthropology. To me, applied or policy-relevant work has always been a legitimate possibility, perhaps even a professional duty under certain conditions. However, to count as anthropology it definitely needs to make use of knowledge acquired in the course of ethnographic research, and it should be both anthropologically *significant* and *interesting*. Several recent initiatives in the profession have re-framed these old issues around a broader concept of "public anthropology" or "public interest anthropology," distinguishable from the activities of the independent Society for Applied Anthropology (SfAA) and the National Association for the Practice of Anthropology (NAPA, a section of the American Anthropological Association), whose members engage in consulting work and pursue non-academic careers

under the respective designations of "applied anthropology" or "practicing anthropology."

The newest label, "public anthropology," serves to recognize a more socially relevant kind of scholarship located *within* the academy. The briefest and yet most uplifting definition is found on the website managed by Professor Robert Borofsky,[10] where the goal of public anthropology is a discursive or dialogical one, "to effectively address problems beyond the discipline—illuminating the larger social issues of our times as well as encouraging broad, public conversations about them with the explicit goal of fostering social change." Borofsky's associated book series looks excellent, including a prize-winning title by a colleague in my own department.[11] A rather more earnest and pensive discussion is posted on the website of the University of Pennsylvania Center for Public Interest Anthropology (CPIA),[12] where detailed effort is devoted to defining key terms and to articulating the progressive political values of "public interest anthropology." These include such undebatable goals as improving the "health, well being, social welfare, and quality of life in multi-cultural societies," and dispelling oppressive regimes of knowledge wherever they have gained hegemony. My own Boasian tastes were gratified when I spotted a clause "emphasizing individual agency, the aesthetics of daily life, and the uniqueness of cultural forms."

However, when the UPenn CPIA manifesto endorsed the unproblematized expansion of "democracy," I immediately winced, sensing an ethnographic blind spot. Sri Lanka is the textbook case of a multi-ethnic country where a high literacy rate, free elections, a constitutional legislature, a competitive political party system, and independent judicial institutions have nonetheless resulted in an abjectly dysfunctional democracy, an opportunistic majoritarian political system based upon "ethnic out-bidding" that is incapable of resolving a civil conflict that has killed over 60,000 citizens and which threatens to permanently divide the island into two hostile, culturally segregated nation-states.[13] Working toward popular humanitarian goals such as improved healthcare or village-level educational access poses few ethical problems for a public anthropologist, but how should we deal with the "public interests" of passionate ethno-nationalists, of religious zealots, or of corrupt politicians? These are the recalcitrant kinds of cosmologies we are likely to keep encountering in the twenty-first century.

Yet, as I pondered these dilemmas, I began to realize how many academic anthropologists working in Sri Lanka have already adapted their

research in various ways to the altered circumstances of this lovely but afflicted island. Most of these scholars have not raised the banner of public anthropology per se, but have simply responded, directly or indirectly, to the ethnographic reality of social change and chronic civil strife. As members of Sri Lankan society themselves, some senior scholars such as Gananath Obeyesekere[14] and Stanley Tambiah[15] have inserted themselves directly into the debates over ethnic chauvinism and xenophobic readings of history. Anthropologists working in Sinhala Buddhist communities have critically examined mytho-historic templates for contemporary identities,[16] exposed the worldly entanglements of the Theravada Buddhist monkhood,[17] and traced the grassroots symbolic and economic ramifications of the Tamil–Sinhala conflict.[18] Other ethnographers have zeroed in on the social problems arising from widespread labor migration of Sri Lankan women to the Middle East as indentured housemaids,[19] the harrowing experiences of female workers in Sri Lanka's rapidly expanding export garment industry,[20] and the steady growth of the advertising industry.[21] In direct response to the impact of the Eelam conflict in the Tamil areas of the island, we now have cultural studies of terror and suffering,[22] fieldwork profiles of women LTTE cadres and children in the war zone,[23] ethnographic accounts of militarized Sri Lankan society,[24] and soon the anthropological biography of an assassinated Tamil journalist.[25] In the last decade, some of my own papers have also addressed problems of Tamil and Muslim ethnic hostility and the impact of chronic civil war on matrilocal households and marriage patterns.[26] While sociology, economics, psychology, and political science are the regnant discourses of public policy in the US and Europe, in Sri Lanka it is anthropology and history that have significantly shaped public debates over nationhood and ethnic identity. One recent "postcolonial and postempirical" critic finds this oddly pernicious,[27] but to me it looks like a prime example of public anthropology.

So, my working concept of public anthropology is one that applies local ethnographic knowledge to address—or at least to illuminate—broader issues and problems. For some scholars this might become a Weberian calling, or a consultancy contract. For me it simply means seizing those sporadic and unexpected circumstances when one's long-term ethnographic experience, language fluency, and familiarity with local cultural knowledge can actually shed light on an issue of deeper social significance, or contribute in some way to the relief of human

suffering. My own "public anthropology" represents an unforeseen opportunity to leverage extra social value from ongoing academic research. On the annual Faculty Report of Professional Activities I submitted to my university this year, I finally added three new keyword descriptors: terrorism, disasters, and diaspora.

The New Tsunami Project

In fact, my private definition of public anthropology is no longer hypothetical, because I am now the Principal Investigator on a five-person multi-disciplinary study of post-tsunami recovery in two culturally contrasting coastal regions of Sri Lanka (National Science Foundation [NSF] grant #SES-0525260). This is *not* the sort of solo fieldwork project that cultural anthropologists have typically undertaken. Indeed, until December 26, 2004, I had never dreamed of doing anything remotely like this in my entire career, so it called for some quick thinking. Anthropologists know that one of the fundamental principles of successful grantsmanship is to acknowledge the subculture of the funding agency, in this case NSF, so I promptly refreshed my acquaintance with the experimental paradigm and resuscitated my dormant hypothetico-deductive vocabulary. The deadline for NSF anthropology proposals had already passed before the tsunami project was fully conceived, so it became necessary to seek alternative programmatic resources, in other words, to poach beyond the normal foraging range of our tribe. One of the conspicuously unfenced pastures was the interdisciplinary NSF Human and Social Dynamics (HSD) program, which explicitly invites hybrid proposals combining social science and high-technology methodologies to discover "Agents of Change" and "Dynamics of Human Behavior." The thought that we might find ourselves competing against other Sri Lankan tsunami proposals employing methodologically creative but ethnographically clueless methods—say, tracing the patronage networks of local Buddhist temple committees using infrared satellite imaging, perhaps?—gave us further motivation to win the grant.

The guidelines for the NSF-HSD grant called for a multi-disciplinary team, so we assembled three anthropologists, one sociological demographer, and one political scientist, all of whom had prior Sri Lankan, or at least South Asian, research experience. In our race to meet the grant proposal deadline barely a month after the tsunami struck, we described the methods of each researcher in familiar disciplinary jargon: anthropological "fieldwork," sociological "surveys," political

"interviewing." However, as anthropologists unsocialized in the research traditions of natural disaster studies, we made Sri Lankan *cultural factors* central to the overall heuristic of the project. From a humanitarian point of view, the scores of NGOs and foreign government agencies that had come to Sri Lanka's aid immediately after the tsunami had already supplied the most essential relief services: temporary or transitional housing, health, and nutrition. Numerous surveys and task forces had already been devoted to improving the immediate, short-term coordination and delivery of tsunami relief. What our project offered was a broader, longer-term perspective on Sri Lanka's post-tsunami recovery process, one that sought to compare the underlying cultural factors that could promote or hinder the social resilience of local communities in ethnically distinct regions of the island in the long run. Taking inspiration from an anthropological tradition that has successfully utilized Sri Lanka as an ethnographic laboratory for studying social structural variation and systematic inter-cultural comparison,[28] we formulated the project as a natural experiment that compares the post-tsunami resilience of patrilineal Sinhala-speaking Buddhist and Catholic communities on the southwest coast with matrilineal Tamil-speaking Hindu and Muslim communities on the eastern coast of the island. In formal terms, a two-way pattern of cultural variation within Sri Lanka is treated as the independent variable, while the physical effects of the natural disaster and the subsequent relief policies of the nation-state are treated as constants.

Of course, as area specialists ourselves, we know this "scientific" design will have to reckon with extraneous or uneven factors such as the ecological and topographic differences between the two coastlines, the flow of foreign remittances from Sri Lankans working in the Gulf, the regional patronage and corruption of Sri Lankan Members of Parliament, the competition and rivalries between foreign and domestic NGOs, the ethnic tensions between Tamils and Muslims and Sinhalese, the religious competition between Buddhist monks and Roman Catholic clergy, as well as the most unpredictable factor of all: the political and military agenda the LTTE, the Tamil secessionist guerilla movement that controls a large stretch of the tsunami-affected northeastern coastline near Mullaittivu. This is where our anthropological experience as local-level ethnographers and regional specialists should prove invaluable. The southwestern tourist, industrial, and expatriate "housemaid" belt of Sinhala Buddhist and Catholic communities in

Kalutara and Galle districts will be studied by Michele Gamburd, an anthropologist with fieldwork experience there since her childhood days. Patricia Lawrence, an anthropologist who has studied Tamil village women caught in the eastern war zone, will collaborate with me on fieldwork among the east coast Hindus and Muslims. Alan Keenan, a political scientist specializing in the Sri Lankan peace process, will assess the political ecology of the NGOs serving the tsunami-affected areas, and Randall Kuhn, a demographer with survey experience in Bangladesh, will keep all of the project anthropologists "honest" by conducting statistical surveys of pre- and post-tsunami social indicators such as health records and school attendance.

The logical clarity of this cross-regional, intra-national research design provided a useful starting point, a way to package and leverage our expertise as Sri Lankanists in a way that would not have been as credible if we had proposed to study other tsunami-affected regions in the Indian Ocean, including Tamilnadu, southern Thailand, or northern Sumatra. Since it was the anthropological thing to do, we polished the proposal and submitted it electronically 12 minutes before the deadline. NSF-HSD is not a common funding source for anthropologists, and we had no idea whether our ethnographic proposal stood any chance against the more industrial grades of quantitative social science. Thus, we were pleasantly surprised when the NSF reviewers ranked our proposal in the top 15 percent, despite its glaring neglect of the natural hazards literature. We subsequently learned that this type of fine-grained cultural comparison is virtually unheard of in the field of global disaster studies.

The first phase of the project was a reconnaissance visit to all of Sri Lanka's tsunami-affected coastline in August 2005, nine months after the disaster had struck. We began in the Sinhala areas near Ahungalla and Galle, where the damage was often severe but locally uneven, and traveled eastward to Hambantota, Arugam Bay, Tirukkovil, Akkaraipattu, the Kalmunai area, and Batticaloa. In the latter sites, the damage was much more uniform and devastating, since the tsunami waves struck the eastern shore squarely, unimpeded by coastal topography. Survivors were living in a wide variety of "transitional" shelter colonies, each built by a different NGO using different materials and designs. In Akkaraipattu a "tsunami market" had sprung up where surplus or undesired relief goods—including brand new bicycles, student backpacks, and various toiletries—were regularly sold to the public at

large. Whereas the immediate post-tsunami relief work had been quite effective in ministering to the injured, providing safe drinking water, and burying the dead, the outlook nine months later was discouraging. The special government agencies set up to coordinate the reconstruction process had elaborate websites and organizational charts, but the moratorium on rebuilding houses in the beachfront tsunami "exclusion zone" had prevented families from capitalizing on their most valuable asset: real estate. Families living away from the beach could use governmental reconstruction grants to rebuild or repair their homes, while those whose homes on the seashore had been totally washed away were left to squander their grant money on motorbikes or consumer goods. One of the critical questions to be explored as our NSF project gets underway is whether the residential dowry property of Tamil and Muslim women, a major form of female capital and domestic authority in the Batticaloa region, is being eroded by bureaucratic ignorance of, or indifference to, the traditional matrilocal household system. Another issue to be explored is the role played in tsunami recovery by local religious institutions (temples, mosques, and churches) versus internationally based religious organizations with global funding resources.

Confronting the Real World

Public anthropology can contribute to understanding and addressing larger issues of the day, but the key is to focus existing anthropological expertise where it will be most productive and useful, tailoring the research methods to a specific location and historical context. The fact that I have been coming back again and again for three decades to conduct fieldwork in the same Sri Lankan community does give me a kind of credibility in local eyes, and an awareness of linguistic idioms and local cultural values that no transitory NGO worker or "rapid assessment" survey analyst will ever be likely to acquire. It also makes me an actual stakeholder in the local society, someone who has made close friends there. As the tsunami relief organizations gradually start to pull out of the coastal zones of Sri Lanka, their mission frustrated by political paralysis and bureaucratic stalemate, their attention directed to new disasters in other lands, I predict a fairly high degree of local resentment against the foreign and domestic NGOs which will be regarded as bodies that did not make a long-term commitment. Could "public anthropologists" fill such a void? In terms of tangible

assistance, certainly not, but in terms of a committed and genuinely engaged program of research, yes. Anthropology is the discipline that takes fieldwork seriously.

As part of our August 2005 field reconnaissance, I had also managed to visit tsunami sites in Mullaittivu in the northern Tiger-controlled Vanni ("Tamil Eelam") region, where NGO work is tightly but efficiently monitored by the LTTE. I was hoping to include this rebel-held region in our overall comparison of tsunami reconstruction efforts, since Sri Lankan government policies—and political influence—are likely to have a significant effect on tsunami recovery in both of our main fieldwork project sites in the south and the east. However, as this paper goes to press in the summer of 2006, the ethnic conflict is moving toward the outbreak of renewed warfare between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE, and the prospect of conducting field research anywhere on the east coast is increasingly in doubt. Just dreaming about how I am going to manage this alien and uncertain fieldwork situation makes me a bit nervous and ill at ease.

Anthropologists usually say that culture shock the *first* time is good, but I find it disconcerting to feel another twinge coming on 35 years later, as a consequence of tsunami and civil war in Sri Lanka. Perhaps, however, these anxieties augur well for our research. Unlike most multi-disciplinary social science projects these days, *this* one is focused around anthropology, with all of its first-person ethnographic experiences and direct cultural encounters. I expect it to produce some public anthropology, but I also hope it leads to new insights about Sri Lankan society and culture more generally.

NOTES

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