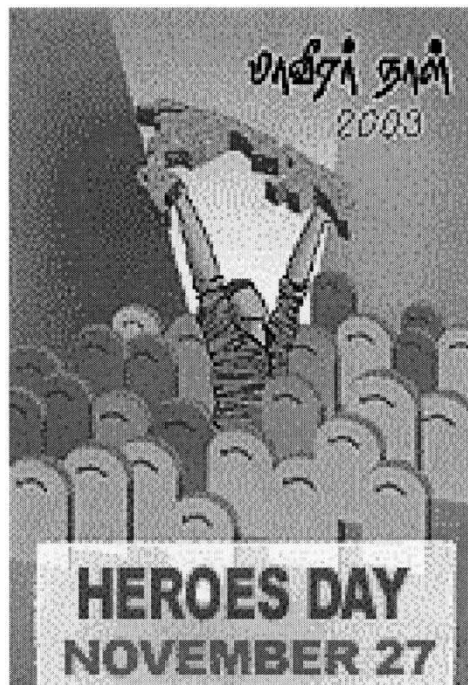


## **And Heroes Die: Poetry of the Tamil Liberation Movement in Northern Sri Lanka**

**Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam**

**Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg**



**Figure 1**  
***A Picture Accompanying the Reports on Heroes' Day<sup>1</sup>***

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<sup>1</sup> [www.tamilnet.com](http://www.tamilnet.com), a website sympathetic to the cause of the LTTE.

## Introduction

Since 9/11, suicide attacks are primarily associated with Al Qaida and Islamic fundamentalism. But they are not a monopoly of Islam. The suicide attacks by Japanese kamikaze pilots during the latter stages of World War II are notorious. Similarly in the 1980s into the 1990s suicide attacks by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) claimed the attention of the international media.

Nevertheless the LTTE actions and the concepts and convictions underlying them appear quite different from those in the case of Islamic suicides. Particularly significant is the quite different perception of suicide for the LTTE, which in part derives from Hinduism. Michael Roberts sought a few years ago to explain the Tamil Tiger ideology of suicide and martyrdom, which he traced back to a very ancient Tamil tradition visible in Cankam (the classical Tamil literature) and Bhakti literature.<sup>2</sup> He also discussed political suicides of Tamils in India within the framework of the Dravidian movement and pointed to the intense sorrow and the self-mutilation of followers of M.G. Ramachandran, once Chief Minister of Tamilnadu, on the latter's demise in 1987. He could also have mentioned the self-immolations of Tamils in protest against the introduction of Hindi in 1965. Roberts' findings remain speculative, however, because he does not speak Tamil and relied on translations. And he did not examine any literature or poetry of the Tamil Tigers.

Viewed dispassionately, martyrdom is just another form of death or dying. We should therefore start with examining the meaning of death and dying in Tamil culture more generally, before taking up the issue of the Tiger suicides.

Nearly simultaneously with Roberts, Dennis Hudson described the phenomenon of violent devotion in Bhakti literature, especially the *periyapuranam*, that may end in self-mutilation, suicide and even the killing of close relations. The devotion of the Nayanars, for example, often unleashes violence not only against the self, but comprehends the death of others who are perceived as an extension of the self.<sup>3</sup> In his work on *bow songs*, Blackburn discusses the meaning and significance of bloody and violent death and the deification of the victims for Tamil popular

<sup>2</sup> Michael Roberts, 'Filial Devotion and the Tiger Cult Of Suicide', in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol.30 (1996), pp.245–72.

<sup>3</sup> Hudson points out that the Nayanars are often portrayed in a female role *vis-à-vis* Siva: the self-immolation would then correspond to the self-immolation (sati) of a widow on the death of her husband. See Dennis Hudson, 'Violent and Fanatical Devotion among the Nayanars. A Study in the Periya Puranam Of Cekkilar', in Alf Hildebeitel (ed.), *Criminal Gods and Demon Devotees: Essays on the Guardians Of Popular Hinduism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p.397.

religiosity.<sup>4</sup> He interprets both as the cry of people treated cruelly and unjustly—as the only means of protest and retribution open to them. Much earlier Jonathan Parry described the Hindu, mostly Brahmanic, perception of death and rebirth. Normally in Hinduism suicide is considered a ‘bad death’, but a death coming at the right time and serenely accepted is thought of as ‘good’ (with the connotation of a voluntary surrendering of life).<sup>5</sup> To be sure, the line between suicide and ‘voluntarily experienced death’ is a very fine one. Yet in the Cankam and Bhakti literature, suicide is not reprehensible if performed either because of individual failure or out of devotion to Siva, or as atonement for an offence that cannot otherwise be avenged.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, as Axel Michaels emphasises, in Hinduism (and in Buddhism and Jainism) ritual suicide (for example by starvation) is not a stigma, as it is in Christianity and Islam.<sup>7</sup> As long as death is suffered or consciously reckoned with for a cause, it can even count as—voluntary—(self)sacrifice. Only out of death, out of blood, out of *Pralaya*<sup>8</sup> can new life emerge: the battlefield is the fertile soil.<sup>9</sup>

In his discussion of hero stones in South India, Rajam mentioned precisely this element of a voluntary gift of life.<sup>10</sup> Hero stones were erected for local people who had fallen in the battle for cattle or soil, or out of loyalty for a leader. The tradition has been consciously revived by the LTTE which erects memorial stones (*natukal* or *ninaivukal*) for fallen warriors.

### The Concept of the Martyr

What is the Tamil perception of the fallen warrior who, in the terminology of the LTTE, is called a martyr? This martyr only very occasionally corresponds to the image connected with the Greek *martyrs*—the ‘(blood) witnesses’. A few years ago, Weiner and Weiner investigated the martyr sociologically and as a social

<sup>4</sup> Stuart Blackburn, *Singing Of Birth and Death. Texts in Performance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), pp.218–9; see also Stuart Blackburn, ‘Death and Deification: Folk Cults in Hinduism’, in Alf Hiltebeitel (ed.), *Criminal Gods and Demon Devotees: Essays on the Guardians Of Popular Hinduism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp.255–74, here p.271f.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Parry, ‘Introduction’, in Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (eds), *Death and the Regeneration Of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp.1–44, here pp.37–9; and Jonathan Parry, ‘Sacrificial Death and the Necrophagous Ascetic’, in Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (eds), *Death and the Regeneration Of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp.74–110, here p.76. See also Axel Michaels, *Der Hinduismus. Geschichte und Gegenwart* (München: 1998), p.165f.

<sup>6</sup> Hudson, ‘Violent and Fanatical Devotion among the Nayanars’, p.402.

<sup>7</sup> Michaels, *Der Hinduismus*, passim.

<sup>8</sup> *Pralaya* in Hindu mythology is the end of world, when it is destroyed in a battle between the forces of good and evil. After this catastrophe, a new world is born, i.e. the battlefield becomes a fertile field out of which the new world is born.

<sup>9</sup> Parry, ‘Sacrificial Death and the Necrophagous Ascetic’, p.76.

<sup>10</sup> K. Rajam, *South Indian Memorial Stones* (Thanjavur: Manoo Pathippakam, 2000), pp.62f, 113.

type, consciously disregarding etymology. They found prototypes already in Jewish tradition. A martyr would thus be somebody prepared to suffer and/or die in a struggle against repressive authorities or rival groups for his—religious—convictions or for ‘the cause’.<sup>11</sup> By dying, the martyr reaffirms the cohesion of the group, legitimises its convictions and strengthens its self-respect. As Bloch explained, many societies consider ancestors and their graves as a condition of the preservation of the group and its territory;<sup>12</sup> martyrs, in contrast, create or maintain community under pressure or in the face of threat and danger. In a secular context the martyr sacralises the purpose for which he dies. Martyrs not only gain moral superiority by their deaths, they are also considered pure and without guilt—that is they indemnify debt accrued, and expiate guilt.

In a Christian context we usually nowadays associate martyrs and martyrdom with suffering (such as torture); that is, they suffer violence but do not exert it. This is not always the case, however: Islamic movements call suicide attackers *mujahedin* which translates as warriors of God. And even in Christian ideology we know about hero-martyrs, who are by no means non-violent; think for example of Jeanne d’Arc. At this point the difference between hero and martyr becomes vague even for Weiner und Weiner.<sup>13</sup> It is, however, important to be aware of the distinction to understand the concept of the martyr in LTTE understanding: the hero is, according to Bowra, active; he does not primarily seek death.<sup>14</sup> But the fight—and the exertion of violence—is as decisive as the suffering and the toleration of it. Yet the hero, like the martyr, is destined for death; living heroes and living martyrs are oxymorons. Greek heroes should, in an idealistic view, die young and in the prime of their strength in order to be useful for the community; similar ideals are found in Cankam literature.<sup>15</sup> These two distinctive approaches seem to be conflated in the understanding of the LTTE, which conventionally terms its fallen warriors martyrs. For the latter, however—the Black Tigers—this appellation is particularly apt. Although ‘Mavirar’ is often rendered in English as ‘martyr’, etymologically we should translate it as ‘great hero’. Alternatively we find the term martyr identified with the Tamil *tiyaki*, which originally meant renouncer (see below). Yet the LTTE, though familiar with the latter term, does not use it. The LTTE prefers its own idiom. When the Tigers say: ‘s/he was martyred’, they mean simply ‘s/he was killed’.

<sup>11</sup> Eugene Weiner and Anita Weiner, *The Martyr’s Conviction. A Sociological Analysis* (Atlanta, Ga.: 1990), p.7f.

<sup>12</sup> Bloch and Parry, *Death and the Regeneration Of Life*, p.219.

<sup>13</sup> Weiner and Weiner, *The Martyr’s Conviction*, p.8.

<sup>14</sup> Cecil Maurice Bowra, *Heldendichtung (Heroic Poetry) Eine Vergleichende Phänomenologie der Heroischen Poesie aller Völker u. Zeiten*, (London: 1964)

<sup>15</sup> Bloch and Parry, *Death and the Regeneration Of Life*, pp.228–9.

Other cultural traditions also hold that heroes may sacrifice themselves for the group if the act is considered crucial to the group's survival. This is what Samson did for the Jews.<sup>16</sup> It is important to note, however, that *planned death* rarely features in classical heroic ideology.

### *Martyrs in the LTTE*

Some time ago, Peter Schalk discussed the problem of heroes and martyrs in the understanding of the LTTE.<sup>17</sup> He referred to a process he called the sacralisation of politics and nationalism. Under what circumstances, though, does this sacralisation of politics and nationalism normally occur? The LTTE here refers consciously to models in the *Purananuru*<sup>18</sup> and—to a lesser extent—in the Bhakti; but why are these corpora of literature considered models and are they the only ones?<sup>19</sup> Simultaneously we have to ask why these ancient concepts, going back to a heroic age and the period of Tamil empires and dynasties, even today create fascination in Northern Sri Lanka to an extent that sacrifice and self-sacrifice are invariably explained and justified by the LTTE with respect to them? This fascination is expressed most clearly in the poetry of the LTTE.

On the Sinhala side, Kapferer, in his study of sorcery, explains this fascination of the barbaric as a selective perception of episodes against the foil of an identical dynamics of power.<sup>20</sup> Although this explanation sounds plausible, it cannot clarify the issue of the selection of particular episodes and models when many others are at the community's disposal. Alternatively Roberts mentions, correctly, that the loyalty of the Cankam heroes very rarely applied to a country or a dynasty, and that the decisive point was usually personal loyalty to a leader. Besides, the territorial units concerned were always quite small. Therefore, he claims, these attitudes could not be transferred to the LTTE.<sup>21</sup> Exactly this point, however, is probably a factor in

<sup>16</sup> *Book of Judges*, 16:18–31.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Schalk, 'The Revival Of Martyr Cults among Ilavar', in *Temenos*, Vol.33 (1997), pp.151–90.

<sup>18</sup> The *Purananuru* is a work of classical Tamil literature, divided into verses written by different authors, and translates as 'The Four Hundred Poems about Puram'. It deals with the outer (*puram*) world, i.e. with the world of war. The *Akananuru* is the mirror image, 'The Four Hundred Poems about Akam', i.e. the inner (*akam*) world mainly of love. The *Purananuru* belongs to the heroic literature of the Tamils and contains much historical information. It is nowadays greatly appreciated by both Tamil scholars and what is known as the 'Dravidian movement'. For *Purananuru*, the abbreviation *Puram* is used synonymously in this text.

<sup>19</sup> Schalk emphasises that to a large extent, (role)models are also found in the ideology of the Indian National Army of Subhas Chandra Bose and the Bengali terrorists from the beginning of the twentieth century. In the LTTE poems, however, the recurrence of images from Cankam and Bhakti literature is overwhelmingly visible.

<sup>20</sup> Bruce Kapferer, *The Feast Of the Sorcerer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp.288–9; and Bruce Kapferer, *Legends Of People, Myths Of State: Violence, Intolerance and Political Culture in Sri Lanka and Australia* (London: 1988).

<sup>21</sup> Roberts, 'Filial Devotion and the Tiger Cult Of Suicide', p.268.

the strong impact of LTTE ideology: the loyalty to a single leader and a limited territory, where leader and territory (*Tamilttay*) may, as in this case, be conflated. Similarities like these facilitate the conscious return to ancient and often atavistic models. Also, the LTTE pursues, as Schalk notes, an explicit policy of secularism—it stands for the separation of religion and state.<sup>22</sup> And it claims that this ideology was also constituent for the society of the *Purananuru*.

As we shall see, however, our poems return to quite different literary works, forms and myths that on first glance seem at odds with the explicitly secular ideology of the LTTE. For instance the term used for earth, soil and so on in the poems is *man*, not, as some might expect, *ur*. Indeed, it seems that the LTTE wants to avoid the term *ur* in the culturally determined sense as described by Daniel.<sup>23</sup> *Man*, moreover, is often combined with mother or *Tamilttay* in a way that sacralises this very soil. Now, is this religious devotion or nationalism or something else? Also, though the poems do show similarities to *Purananuru* images and ideas, they also go beyond, and deviate from it, for while in the classical poems territory is certainly important and fought over, the element of sacredness found in the modern poems is absent.

Some years ago, Romila Thapar mentioned, in a slightly different context, that much significant historical information is contained in ‘non-historical’ and non-normative texts<sup>24</sup> and I find likewise that crucial information about the LTTE’s political and ideological programme—about its sacralisation of the national—is embedded in its poetry and that of its sympathisers. These are the lament songs, composed in the memory of fallen warriors.<sup>25</sup> On the surface they express sentiments of mourning and remembrance of the fallen. However in valourising the ideas they help to construct and maintain community. This is a form of nation-building. But the concept of the martyr in LTTE ideology also feeds on Christian ideas. This constellation becomes intelligible if we remind ourselves that the Karaiyar, who comprise a major faction of LTTE members, are largely Catholic.<sup>26</sup> The perception of the innocent victim appears to feed on this tradition. LTTE reverence and praise of the ‘mother’ (whether *Tamilttay* or the mothers whose sons have fallen in battle) combines elements of the worship of the Virgin with much more ancient female images in the *Purananuru*.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Schalk, ‘The Revival Of Martyr Cults among Ilavar’.

<sup>23</sup> E. Valentine Daniel, *Fluid Signs. Being a Person the Tamil Way* (Berkeley, Cal.: 1987).

<sup>24</sup> Romila Thapar, ‘Epic and History: Tradition, Dissent, and Politics in India’, in *Past and Present*, Vol.125 (1989), pp.3–26.

<sup>25</sup> This is according to Bowra, *Heldendichtung*, p.10f.

<sup>26</sup> Fifteen percent of Sri Lankan Tamils are Christian; of these 75 percent are Catholic.

<sup>27</sup> *Purananuru*, verses 277, 278, 295, 86. The origins of the *Purananuru* are nowadays located around the beginning of the Common Era.

Moreover Christians are perceived as strong supporters of the national programme. From the first, Christians stood in the forefront of the struggle for equal civil rights for Tamils,<sup>28</sup> and Christian clergy were the first to point out human rights violations and discrimination against Tamils. The churches also continued to bring aid to Jaffna and the Vanni after other NGOs decided they could not do this any longer. Thus the LTTE feels it owes something of a debt of honour to the Church and to its individual Christian supporters.<sup>29</sup> Significantly in the *Mavirar Nal* rituals, a Saivite and a Catholic priest nowadays light the *kuttu vilakku* (oil lamp) together. Likewise the Saivite LTTE cadres who in 1995 brought a Catholic priest across the Kilali lagoon under heavy fire, asked him for a cross and a rosary.<sup>30</sup> All this would have been impossible before the LTTE took control of the Tamil areas.

So, rather than proclaiming a secular state where Church and state are strictly separated, the LTTE follows the Indian model where all religions are at least in theory equally respected.<sup>31</sup> Any other course would indeed be unfeasible in a society that considers it a mortal sin to hurt or violate priests or clergy of *any* religion.

In the face of war and all social and societal upheavals, Tamil society has remained fiercely and proudly religious and pious, and this applies to Saivites and Christians equally. But the important role which the Christians have played in the national struggle and particularly in social work is now accepted by the Saivites, though the LTTE does resent and resist attempts by the Pentecostals to use relief funds to initiate efforts at conversion.<sup>32</sup> Religion, it has been put to me, is not part of the LTTE structure, but nobody is prevented from practising his or her religion. Fallen heroes are therefore honoured not in a secular manner, but with syncretistic religious symbols and terms. It is not yet clear, though, whether this is done consciously—to take into account the strong religious bent of the Tamil population—or unconsciously because religion is strongly inscribed into Jaffna Tamil culture. It may be a mixture of both. At any rate, the practice goes beyond the ‘sacralisation of the nation’ described by Schalk.

<sup>28</sup> Chelvanayagam, the founder of the Federal Party, was an Anglican.

<sup>29</sup> The Karaiyars were on the one hand the fiercest antagonists of the Portuguese, but on the other were also the first to accept the new religion. A Catholic priest explained it to me thus: the Karaiyar were fishers and sailors like the Portuguese. They perceived certain affinities despite the antagonisms. The Biblical image of Jesus and St Peter as fishers of men might have influenced perceptions as well. Personal communication. See also Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam, ‘Religious Ideology Among the Tamils’, in Barrie Morrison *et al.* (eds), *Struggling to Create a New Society: Sri Lanka in the Era Of Globalization* (New Delhi: Sage Publications India, 2004).

<sup>30</sup> I thank Fr. S.J. Emmanuel for relating this episode.

<sup>31</sup> See Peter Schalk, ‘Present Concepts Of Secularism among Ilavar and Lankans’, in Peter Schalk *et al.* (eds), *Zwischen Säkularismus und Hierokratie. Studien zum Verhältnis von Religion und Staat in Süd- und Ostasien* (Uppsala: 2001), pp.37–72, here pp.48, 50.

<sup>32</sup> Personal information.

### Great Heroes' Day 2001

Every year, on or just after 26 November (Prabhakaran's birthday), the Tamil diaspora celebrates what has become known as *Mavirar Nal* or 'Great Heroes' Day'. It is characterised by cultural shows, speeches and dances. *Mavirar Nal* celebrates particularly the first 'martyr', Sivakumaran, who died from cyanide poisoning in 1978, but also remembers Captain Miller who on 5 July 1987 drove a lorry packed with explosives into a Sinhala Army camp in Nelliady, and Lieutenant Kittu who on 5 January 1983 torched the boat in which he was travelling to India after it was detained by Indian navy ships in international waters. Important, too, is the memory of Tilipan, who starved himself to death in September 1987 in protest against the actions of the Indian Peace-Keeping Force. But the day is not just about honouring heroes. It is an occasion for propaganda and recruitment. Booklets, CDs and videotapes, all glorifying the Tamil struggle, can be viewed or purchased. These often include collections of poems written by the poet laureate of the LTTE, Kasi Amman, or fighters from the battlefield themselves. And sometimes cultural specialists of the diaspora also contribute.

Let me put the poems I am going to discuss in their context—namely that of the *Mavirar Nal* celebration. As an illustration, I furnish a short description of the annual Heroes' Day as celebrated in Dortmund, Germany, in late 2001. On a stylised sand-covered cemetery dotted with flowerpots are arranged three triangular sarcophagi with headstones bearing the title '*Mavirar*'. In reality the name of the departed would be engraved together with dates of birth and death and his or her rank. Visually the headstones resemble a lotus, but they should not be identified with a specific religion. The walls around the graveyard are plastered with the photos of the dead heroes and their date of death. If no photos are available, the picture of a red rose is substituted. The participants (some weeping) file past the photos and offer flower buds. In the sand the map of Tamil Eelam is picked out with donated tomb lamps (left over, one suspects, from All Souls). In the middle the *kuttu vilakku* or 'eternal light' (the interpretation is left to the beholder) burns steadily. What strikes one is the strongly Christian flavour. It is all about celebrating martyrs (witnesses) who died for the faith.

Later I had the opportunity to visit some heroes' cemeteries in northern Sri Lanka. They are constructed on the same lines as the one just described. Soon after I arrived dusk fell. An employee lighted little kerosene lamps ('the dead must not be left in the dark'). At the entrance several austere, sombre tables commemorated the fighters whose bodies had never been found. Further inside were proper graves, but again with very stark headboards, for concrete for tombstones became scarce at the time of construction (2000). There were *no* religious symbols and no memorial lines on the tombstones contributed by the families: just the names, dates, and rank of the





**Figure 2**

***Visvamadu Cemetery, Killinocchi District. The Caption Reads: ‘You Shed Your Blood for Us! Shedding Tears We Congratulate and Salute You’<sup>33</sup>***

dead soldier-sons, though sometimes one could see the term *tiyakacilam* (model of sacrifice) designating an unknown soldier. Many tables bore faded flower garlands put there by family members.

This kind of worship strongly resembles that described by Rajam for hero stones when he says that once a year the *natukal* are honoured with flowers, lamps, feathers and alcohol to call the spirits inhabiting them (cf. *Purananuru* 232).<sup>34</sup> In classical times, fallen warriors were buried, not cremated. The custom was revived by the LTTE in the 1990s, possibly in imitation of Christian traditions. The basic difference is that, according to Rajam, in the classical tradition *natukal* could not be erected for warriors whose bodies were not found; they had to be physically present.<sup>35</sup> Memorial stones for bodies not found are therefore called *ninaivukal* in LTTE terminology.

<sup>33</sup> International Secretariat, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, *Anaittulakac Ceyalagam Tamilila Vitutalaip Pulikal, Curiyap Putalvar. Mavirar Nal Navempar 27, 2001 (Children of the Sun, Heroes’ Day 27 November 2001)*, hereafter cited as *Curiyap Putalvar*, p.17.

<sup>34</sup> See *Purananuru* verse 232.

<sup>35</sup> Rajam, *South Indian Memorial Stones*, p.8ff.



**Figure 3**  
**Women Mourn over the Natukal of a Fallen Relative.<sup>36</sup>**

### *Violent Devotion*

Now let me return to the question of violence—or more precisely that of violent devotion—because it plays an important part in LTTE ideology. It applies to violence that is exerted as well as to that which is suffered.<sup>36</sup>

In interviews with female LTTE warriors Margaret Trawick dealt explicitly with the issues of killing and death. She states that the warriors believe killing is a job that must be done without involving the emotions, whether negative or positive.<sup>37</sup> Such an attitude would correspond to the actions of Arjuna in the Mahabharata: he kills in war because it is his duty—without being engaged emotionally. It is the classic attitude of a *tiyaki*. Ascetics (and celibacy) confer, according to tradition,

<sup>36</sup> www.tamilnet.com

<sup>37</sup> Margaret Trawick, 'Reasons for Violence: A Preliminary Ethnographic Account Of the LTTE', in Siri Gamage and I.B. Watson (eds), *Conflict and Community in Contemporary Sri Lanka. 'Pearl of the East' or the 'Island Of Tears'?* (New Delhi: 1999), pp.139–63, here pp.158–9.

superhuman and magical powers which are useful in battle.<sup>38</sup> But death in battle is an even more powerful talisman because only this kind of death can generate new life. Heroes in LTTE culture are honoured not for killing the Tigers' enemies<sup>39</sup> but for their own deaths.<sup>40</sup> The prose texts accompanying the poems confirm this view: the highest praise, the highest honour is reserved for those who literally sacrifice themselves for the cause.<sup>41</sup>

Yet this form of dying is not nihilist; it is seen to have potent consequences. In actively seeking one's own death, one harms the enemy. Through the death of self, the 'debt' to the mother soil (*man*) is paid and one is redeemed, one becomes holy. This is a secular interpretation of Hudson's statement that only violent devotion can expiate a guilt (debt). Following Shulman, we might also suggest that, for final liberation, symbolic sacrifice will not suffice; it always has to be the real thing.<sup>42</sup>

The martyr may live on after death in some form of afterlife, but that is not the important point: the important point is that he survives in the memory of the group. That is the key to symbolic immortality. Moreover, according to both *Purananuru* and Christian tradition, he remains 'present' (resides) in the *natukal*—although remarkably perhaps, we find no references to the *karma* doctrine and metempsychosis in LTTE ideology.<sup>43</sup> Instead we find convictions—also known from Hinduism—about the *Viramarga* (way of the hero), whose salvation is won through death in battle. But in our texts the martyr does not ascend into the *Viraswarga* Heroes' heaven; rather his salvation is to be found in the liberation of the motherland.

### *Heroes and Martyrs: Some Basic Terms*

I want at this point, following Schalk, to introduce several basic terms, that appear again and again in LTTE poems and the prose texts. They will clarify the above discussion. They are:

*Natukal* = hero stone;

*Tuyil[um] illam* = resting place, cemetery;

<sup>38</sup> For women the corresponding virtue would be *karpu*, often translated as chastity. Schalk considers this an inadmissible limitation of the meaning of the term. See Schalk, *Birds of Freedom*. The strict separation of both virtues becomes questionable in any case when we remember that for several years women have let themselves be recruited as Black Tigers for suicide attacks.

<sup>39</sup> Trawick notes that the LTTE does not mutilate fallen enemies. See Trawick, 'Reasons for Violence', p. 141.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p.158.

<sup>41</sup> See 'Valit Tatam', pp.8–9, and 'Itaiyum Paraniyay Patunkalen', pp.24–7, in *Curiyap Putalvar*.

<sup>42</sup> David Shulman, *The Hungry God. Hindu Tales Of Filicide and Devotion* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp.16–17, 43. The other aspect of violent devotion Shulman mentions, especially for the Telugu texts, is that the god becomes open to coercion and blackmail (pp. 42, 66). This does not (and cannot) apply in an ostensibly secular context.

<sup>43</sup> See Blackburn, *Singing Of Birth and Death*, p.237fn; Blackburn, 'Death and Deification', p.265; and Schalk, 'Present Concepts Of Secularism among Ilavar and Lankans', pp.46–7.

*Kallarai* = stone house, stone chamber, sepulchre, also sarcophagus;

*Inra* = participle of *i* = to bring forth, to bear;

*Innuyir* = sweet life; and

*Unarvu* = emotion, consciousness.

Apart from the first term, which Schalk discusses in detail<sup>44</sup> and which is frequently implied rather than expressed, all other terms can be found in the poems presented here. Most occur widely in classical Tamil literature, especially the *Purananuru*. *Natukal* literally means ‘planted stone’ or ‘erected stone’; in present Sri Lankan usage it is also the foundation stone of a house. ‘To plant’ may here be understood precisely in the biological sense of creating new life. According to Rajam, the spirit of the dead enters into the stone.<sup>45</sup> (*Ninaivukal*, by contrast, means merely ‘memorial stone’.) *Natukal* and *innuyir* often appear together in the *Purananuru*, mostly with the implication of the surrender of something very precious. In our poems, on the other hand, we see more frequently *tuyilum illam* (cemetery, resting place)—which seems to be a new formation—or *kallarai* (stone house, sepulchre). The latter can be found in classical literature as well as in the Catholic translation of the Bible where it denotes the rock tomb of Jesus. *Inra* is the participle of to bear, bring forth. The last term, *unarvu*, may be understood as ‘consciousness’; *unarcci* from the same root is mostly translated as ‘emotion’. The term is important because it corresponds to the conscious and voluntary surrender of life—the ‘best death’ according to Parry and Hudson.<sup>46</sup>

For the fallen heroes and their deeds we have again several basic terms which all have to do with devotion, sacrifice, and donation:

*Tiyakam* = renunciation, specifically the sacrifice or devotion of somebody who has freed himself from all earthly bonds;<sup>47</sup>

*Ikam* = gift;

(*Ma*)*virar* = (great) hero;

*Vittutal* = seed body;

*Ikam* = originally a Tamil term which also means gift, devotion, donation and sacrifice;

*Arppanam/arppani* = similar to *ikam*, but which nowadays has the additional meaning of dedication and inauguration; and

<sup>44</sup> Schalk, ‘The Revival Of Martyr Cults among Ilavar’, pp.183–5.

<sup>45</sup> Rajam, *South Indian Memorial Stones*, p.8ff.

<sup>46</sup> Parry, ‘Introduction’, pp.37–9

<sup>47</sup> Peter Schalk compares it with the *devotio*, the devotion of Roman soldiers to their country and military leader. See Schalk, ‘The Revival Of Martyr Cults Among Ilavar’, p.171.

*Velvi* = the ritual (Vedic) sacrifice conducted by kings and landowners to further the fertility of the soil; in the poems it is frequently used for self-sacrifice.

The first five terms are rendered in English in the sense of, and as synonyms for, martyr and/or martyrdom; normally there is no differentiation. In Tamil, however, we can detect finite differences. At the beginning I said that the hero (*mavirar*) is a martyr by definition. But his devotion can be denoted by very different terms.

Again we find here subtle differences compared with the list given by Peter Schalk. He also lists *catci*, a Christian neologism which should be understood quite literally in the Greek sense of (blood) witness.<sup>48</sup> But he does not list the classical terms *Velvi* and *Ikam, ikai, i(nta)*. The first term appears in our poems in several places, sometimes in combination with *tiyakam*.<sup>49</sup> Schalk reports that in the LTTE itself there exists a controversy about the understanding of *tiyaki/tiyakam*: one group wants to understand it in the Christian sense of non-violent devotion and the suffering of violence, another in the sense of the ‘renunciation of bonds’ according to the Bhagavad Gita doctrine of the active application of violence. The latter perception was adapted by the LTTE from the model of Subash Chandra Bose and the Indian National Army during the Second World War.<sup>50</sup>

The idea that new life grows from the battlefield, denoted by the expression *vittu[tal]* = seed body, can be found in the *Purananuru* as well as in our poems. However the latter must be understood symbolically as well as literally—that the dead body, buried in the earth, brings forth actual as well as literal new life. And both ideas are closely connected: the sacrificial victim surrenders himself peacefully in order for life to emerge or to be maintained. Here, too, is the motif of the blood-soaked soil out of which new life grows. Though in the *Purananuru* it is the blood of the enemies, in our poems it is the blood of the hero that reddens the soil, germinating new life.<sup>51</sup> To Schalk, these images suggest an attempt to establish and strengthen territorial claims: where tombs exist, Tamil Eelam exists. It would have been for this reason that the first action of the Sri Lankan Army after its

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.168–9.

<sup>49</sup> If, as Schalk mentions, it is true that a bureau exists for the development of a new and/or heroic vocabulary, some new developments seem to have occurred here.

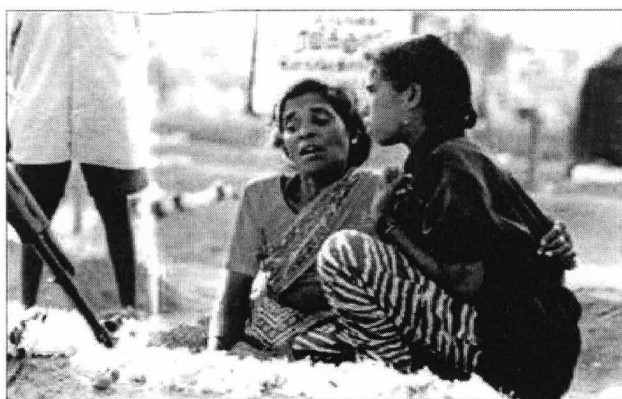
<sup>50</sup> See in detail Peter Schalk, ‘Historisation Of the Martial Ideology Of the Liberation Tigers Of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)’, in *South Asia*, Vol.XX, no.2 (1997), pp.35–72, here pp.46–50; and Peter Ward Fay, *The Forgotten Army. India’s Armed Struggle for Independence 1942–1945* (Noida: Rupa & Co., 1994, and University of Michigan, 1994)

<sup>51</sup> Hermann Kulke considers this an unconscious reference to former human victims for whom *natukal* were erected later. Kulke, personal communication.

march into Jaffna was to destroy the heroes' cemeteries.<sup>52</sup> In the *Paranis* (battle descriptions) the battlefield is often synonymous with the *Pralaya*, a motive that we find in the poems as well. The martyrs are *punitam*, which denotes pure as well as (in Catholic interpretation) holy or sacred; they go to their death without guilt or their guilt is erased by death.

In both LTTE poems and prose texts, the expressions often resemble exactly—even to the choice of words—those verses known from the *Purananuru*,<sup>53</sup> for example: 'Greater joy than on the day I bore him I have today from my son'.

சுன்ற சொழுந்தென்ன என மகவுகளால்  
இன்றைய சொழுந்தெ பெரிதுவாய்!



1998 மார்ச்சு மாதம் கொழும்பு கிளினொச்சி மாவீரர் துயிலிடத்தில், மாவீரர் கி.பி.பி.என். தன் மகனை  
யிழைத்துக்கொடுக்கிறார். தனது மகனை விட சந்தித்த தனது கொள்கை மகனை மீது  
உணர்வுகள் பதிந்ததென்பதும் தாய்.

**Figure 4**  
***A Mother and Daughter at the Grave of her Son in the Heroes' Cemetery Killinocchi, Great Heroes' Day 1998***

According to *Curiyap Putalvar*, this photo is of 'a mother sharing her feelings with her warrior daughter, having met her after many days, at the tomb of her son who has become a great hero, in the heroes' cemetery Killinocchi during Great Heroes' Day 1998'.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Schalk, 'The Revival Of Martyr Cults among Ilavar'. This might correspond to the English perception during the Great War that there is 'a little bit of England' wherever English graves are found. The similarity between the heroes' cemeteries in northern Sri Lanka and some of the Commonwealth cemeteries I had the opportunity to visit in South-east Asia, is striking. "

<sup>53</sup> See *Purananuru* verses 277, 278.

<sup>54</sup> *Curiyap Putalvar*, p.5. But note that there seems sorrow rather than joy on the face of the mother.

But even where new expressions are used, the example of the *Purananuru* is discernible: the comparison with natural phenomena like the sun or the call to animals or nature to bear witness to events; the question to animals whether they have seen the lost hero; and so on.<sup>55</sup> On the other hand, this poetry distances itself from classical literature. In the *Purananuru* the heroes who go to their death are no martyrs—they merely follow their destiny. Neither are they innocent victims. We find differences, as well, in the effects their (sacrificial) deeds are supposed to have: verses 221–223 of *Purananuru* sing to the *natukal* of a king who fasted to death because he was unable to secure his kingdom and thus did not reach his aims. We also find fasting to death among LTTE members, for example the *Mavirar* Tilipan. However, he did not fast because of his own admitted inability to reach a goal, but rather in protest against the Indian Peace-Keeping Force occupying Jaffna.<sup>56</sup>

In contrast to the *Purananuru*, in contemporary poetry hero and martyr are conflated: the death that is accepted as a possibility (during battle and adventure) and where survival is always at least a theoretical option, is combined with the voluntary death as (self)-devotion, sacrifice. Survival is, in suicide attacks, not an option. Heroes die.

But what distinguishes these poems most decisively from the *Puram* laments is not the fact that death is inevitable, for that is also often the case in *Puram*, but that relations between the dead hero and the living are completely different. While we do find the mother rejoicing over her son's death, far more frequent are the sisters, comrades, brothers, friends or even *Tamilttay* who mourn the death of the hero. There are no wives, no children, no lovers. On the surface this is, of course, due to the fact that the LTTE operates a strict regime regarding marriage and premarital relations. But there seems to be a deeper reason which will become clear in 'poems by the graveside': the mourners are often also warriors or warriors-to-be who anticipate their own death by describing the valour of the departed.<sup>57</sup> They promise to follow the *mavirar* and to keep him company.<sup>58</sup> In other words, the poems are sung by the future heroes, '*morituri te salutant*'.

In the following, I translate and interpret some poems selected from a brochure titled *Curiyap Putalvar (Children Of the Sun)*, published on the occasion of Great Heroes'

<sup>55</sup> *Purananuru* verse 265.

<sup>56</sup> See Schalk, 'The Revival Of Martyr Cults among Ilavar', p.186; and 'Vayarril ti Valartta Valiyan', *Curiyap Putalvar*, p.20.

<sup>57</sup> See the poem 'A Few Tears For the Darling Resting in the Sepulchre' in this article.

<sup>58</sup> Whether this is also, as has been suggested, a claiming of territory would have to be investigated. See fn.44.

Day 2001 by the LTTE International Secretariat. Besides the poems, the pamphlet also contains a number of prose texts describing or explaining the significance of the day or narrating instances of heroic death on the battlefield. The brochure is prefaced by praise of the '17,000 Heroes' who have died for the cause. An excerpt from the Great Heroes' Day programmatic speech given by Prabhakaran in 2000 follows. Interspersed amongst the poems and texts are photos with short captions, or quotes from other speeches. One prose text written in nearly lyrical speech describes the home guard and its members who died heroically. Apart from that, two longer prose pieces provide battle descriptions and accounts of the heroic deeds (and deaths) during the last battles of 2001, of regular soldiers, border guards and Black Tiger suicide squads. Another half-lyrical prose piece describes the last days of the hunger striker Tilipan.

The texts and poems are of varied literary quality: the poems are distinctly better, on average, than the prose texts which are, at best, of mediocre quality in content and style. The sole exceptions are the excerpts from Prabhakaran's speeches, which are powerful and gripping.

Our first poem is entitled 'We Children of the Sun'.<sup>59</sup> We find certain key terms here already, which we will encounter again, though it has to be said at the beginning that *tiyaki*, *ikam* and *arppanittu* occur in the prose texts around these poems, but rarely in the lyrics. The theme of sacrifice is handled in a different, oblique way, through the metaphor of the sun and its rays. This is a reference, firstly, to the LTTE flag of a tiger's head on a sunburst, as well as to the god *Murukan*, the radiant one—the sun to his worshippers.<sup>60</sup> The theme of death and sacrifice is indicated by the sunset that is an illusion (*maya*); likewise, death for the warrior is an illusion because he will be reincarnated—out of the matter of his dead body new life will sprout. The author is a female warrior, Amuta, and her title '*Mavirar*' indicates that she has indeed sacrificed her life on the battlefield. The poem is a defiant raging against the finality of death which is understood as an illusion, and is thus a statement quite contrary to the *Purananuru* to which it refers, in which death is considered final.<sup>61</sup>

We should note the strong images of this poem: not merely of the sun and its rays, its rising and setting, but the description of the warriors. Here we have, one could say, blood-soaked pictures of war. The motifs of fire and burning will accompany us throughout these poems.

<sup>59</sup> *Curiyap Putalvar*, p.4.

<sup>60</sup> *Murukan* is the Tamil god of love and war, sometimes also understood as the radiant one.

<sup>61</sup> See *Purananuru* verses 263, 264, 265, 266, 213.



### 1) We Children of the Sun

<p>Oh Sun, Your rays are we, Therefore only us to singe Nobody is capable. You Father of heat We Children of heat—therefore only All adversaries Can we torch. You Even if you hide, again and again You continue to rise Therefore only we also,</p>	<p>Even if we fall, we become the seed And sprout a new shoot. As heroes having painted Grand pictures For paintings in red, In your name We continue to shine, Sun Your rays You never singe Similarly, The sun to burn No Sun Will ever rise.</p>
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*Hero Major Amuta: Malty Battalion*

But before we look at the second poem, consider the following paragraph from a short story in the same pamphlet. On one level it illustrates the Tigers' willingness to sacrifice. On another, it refers to religious models, namely the faithful throwing themselves under the car of Jagannathan. This exemplifies the sacralisation of the national mentioned by Schalk, perhaps even the identification of the national with the sacred.

With two hand-grenades in his possession he alighted from the destroyed position. The tank advancing towards his position was now quite near. The first grenade, which Arivu ignited, exploded in front of the tank. The tank rumbled to a stop. But in a short while, its wheels began to turn again.

Finally, one single hand-grenade was left to him. His last alternative was to ignite the hand-grenade when the tank was quite near, or to retreat at the last moment from the vicinity of the shot-up and destroyed position to the rear.

A last effort is according to our tradition, that is common knowledge. At the last moment, when the tank was about to overrun his sentry post, he exploded his hand-grenade.

It was clear to him that it was a deadly decision. Yet, he did not want to become a coward (he did not want to go as a coward). On his beloved

soil, his body lay crushed by the wheels of the tank. The courage which arose in him to the end will continue to elevate him today in history.<sup>62</sup>

*Anpu*

It is interesting that no information is provided whether this heroic death achieves the aim formulated earlier, the delaying or stopping of the Sinhala Army. What is important to the author is the glory and honour accruing to the hero through his bravery.

## 2) They Go On to Live as History

They go, the great heroes, they go—  
Having  
Won the war with the enemy they go to  
their death.

The big army of the ruler arranged to  
march in rows  
In the sounds of music they dissolve—  
In a vehicle  
Decorated with flowers, wrapped in the  
red flag  
Go the ones who command respect.  
Having paid the great debt to the soil of  
the good Tamil Mother  
Crowned with the golden band they  
go—Their  
Mothers to wail and our country's  
people  
In sobbing rows they go.

Consciously having given their own  
body for the land  
The life for Tamil, they go—  
Courageous with the

Pride of youth in their body  
Flower bedecked they go—In the  
house's  
Doorway a lamp, the filled jar of  
perfection, the black flag  
A string of coconut leaves to hang over  
the threshold, so they go—Having  
Created an epic like to the deep sea  
Go the heroic guardians.

Before the heroic war tigers sink into  
the ground  
A thousand tigers sprout  
Having beaten their chest, having lived  
in honour, these  
Unbowed they go—Great heroes  
Unsullied, having given their lives for  
the life of our village  
To seek the final resting place they  
go—their  
Names mentioned they go on to live as  
history  
In the hearts of the Tamils tomorrow.

*Ko. Tirunamam*

The second poem is entitled 'They Go On to Live as History'.<sup>63</sup> The setting is a traditional funeral procession, and we can compare the poem in this respect to the

<sup>62</sup> *Curiyap Putalvar*, p.8.

<sup>63</sup> *Curiyap Putalvar*, p.10.

*oppari pattu*, or lament songs for the departed, which are popular in Jaffna to this day. Even in death the warriors march to their graves like an army, on hearses, their bodies wrapped in the Tiger flag. The strong motif here is the redemption of debt towards country and soil; they give their bodies (*tanutal*) and their lives (*innuyir*) for Tamil Eelam. Again, the emphasis is different from that of the *Purananuru*, in which the dying hero not only fulfils his destiny, but also redeems a debt. Interestingly, only in the last stanza is the theme of the body as the seed of new life addressed. But the message is powerfully sold. Note the stanza about the warriors going to defeat death, which indicates that this can only be achieved by their own dying.<sup>64</sup>

In this poem the motif of the martyr is relegated to the background, and that of the hero, *mavirar*, foregrounded. The sacrifice is mentioned—it is necessary—but it suits the warrior as the only way to liberation. The Christian perception of the martyr is not implied here.

Our third poem bears the title ‘Distant Stars’<sup>65</sup> and could again be compared to an *oppari pattu*, though the singer in this case is intended to be a comrade of the dead warrior, not a woman/mother. It catalogues the virtues of a warrior who died at sea and whose body was never recovered.<sup>66</sup> The plaintive questions asked of the sea and the wild geese as to whether they have seen the body of the comrade make the poem particularly poignant. Again we find the simile of the body becoming the seed; but what is more conspicuous is the incorporation of very modern technical and military terms (international communication centre, artillery fire, mortar division) into an otherwise very traditional art form. This, however, is entirely consonant with *Puram* conventions, where the weapons of the hero and his skilled use of them constitute major tropes.

The next, relatively long, text reads like rhythmic prose rather than poetry. It is an epic narrative of the struggle of the Tamils. It emphasises the deeds of the members of the people’s army who have followed Prabhakaran’s call to arms. For this text we cannot find a model in the *Purananuru*, but there are echoes of the *Parani*, a text also discussed by Shulman,<sup>67</sup> which equates the battle with *Pralaya* and depicts the battlefield as fertile farmland.

<sup>64</sup> Parry, ‘Introduction’, p. 39.

<sup>65</sup> *Curiyap Putalvar*, p.11.

<sup>66</sup> The poem could be a eulogy for Lt. Kittu, who was the international spokesman of the LTTE (see p.119). The assumption is strengthened by the mentioning of the LTTE’s international communication centre.

<sup>67</sup> David Shulman, ‘Tamil Folk and Classical Traditions’, in Alf Hildebeitel (ed.), *Criminal Gods and Demon Devotees: Essays on the Guardians Of Popular Hinduism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p.123f.

### 3) Distant Star

Unblemished striped Tiger!  
 Carrying the fire of freedom deep in  
 your heart,  
 You the just one!  
 Near Kacchativu, in the womb of the sea,  
 In a continuous battle with the cruel  
 adversary  
 Have you become the seed, oh hero!  
 You are one of the precious possessions  
 Of the International Communication  
 Centre.  
 You stood before us  
 As soldier and as the bearer of  
 responsibility.  
 In poverty you lived  
 Without pretensions your inner self  
 On the battlefield your courage surged  
 On your lips a smile came hesitatingly  
 Everything suited you.  
 In social customs you were cultured  
 In speech an orator  
 An actor in a play  
 In all fields  
 You had a part  
 All places where your foot left its  
 imprint  
 Tell your name.  
 The weapons that you bore  
 Searching for you they weep.  
 Your own body even  
 Our eyes cannot see  
 To carry you on our shoulders even  
 Was not granted to us  
 Until yesterday you were with us—the

Enemy that crossed our borders  
 You answered with artillery fire.  
 In our mortar division  
 Was the place of your heroic death.

Kacchativu ocean waves!  
 Did you find the body of my comrade?  
 Wind that comes caressing the ocean  
 waves!  
 Did you see the body of my comrade?  
 Siberian goose that crossed the Gulf of  
 Bengal!  
 On the way you followed, mighty leader  
 On the battlefield that became the sea  
 Did you see the hero fall and die?  
 Leaf garlands are strung across all  
 roads  
 Near your portrait  
 The weeping of the oil lamps  
 In the eyes of those who knew you  
 Tears well up like a river  
 Red are the eyes of  
 The comrades who carry  
 Your dream, your memory  
 Oh hero!  
 The hearts where remains  
 Your own consciousness of liberty  
 On the way of the leader  
 They will march having destroyed  
 future obstacles  
 Tomorrow in our sky  
 The tiger flag will fly.  
 Because of your sacrifice  
 Can our country hold its head high.

*Warrior Icaiyalakan*

#### 4) Time Collects in our Hand (The Opportunity is in our Hands)<sup>68</sup>

A life with a righteous heart  
Spreads before us  
Like tinder the burning of the hostile  
houses  
Remaining on our soil,  
The earth marvels  
Seeing the war fought by Prabhakaran.  
Everywhere in the sky floats  
The tale of Unceasing Waves Three  
The hands of the old man who gripped  
a walking stick  
(now) support an AK (Supporting an  
AK, the hands  
of the old man with the walking stick).  
The eyes of the mother carrying a child  
Guard the frontier.  
Even the one carrying a child in her  
womb  
Sends her husband to the liberation  
war.  
The last war indeed  
Hence we shall not yield  
With these words the people's army  
Marches to the battlefield.  
A life spent on the road  
Returns to the house  
To the child in the front yard  
To show the light  
The occasion comes to our hand.  
Where to identify us  
We are forced to carry multicoloured  
cards  
Never we lived through such a time.  
Fields, forests, houses, everywhere

They put landmines  
Lives are torn apart.  
Honouring the word of the contract  
In name only,  
The hostile armies marched out  
Will turn into corpses.  
Sinhala loses its importance  
To be responsible even for that.  
Having seen the real obstacle  
The spirit of the Ilam Tamils  
Does not yield.  
The hawk risen into the air  
Devours our bodies  
As leftovers only.  
No power can contain the power inside  
us.  
Revealed is on our soil  
The walk with arms swinging (upright  
walk).  
Yesterday, the whole species of  
songbirds crying  
Now sings the song of freedom.  
Publicly  
The Sinhala, flying the lion flag  
jubilantly  
Today,  
Remains breathless, eyes bulging.  
The murderers hunting our nation  
Mighty kings may come to give support  
at our border to the Sinhala.  
At our head a mighty leader  
Only will live  
Mighty kings will turn to dust before  
us.

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<sup>68</sup>*Curiyap Putalvar*, p.12.

With sentry posts thrown on our roads  
 You may control us, all those  
 harassments  
 Will come to an end.  
 On the side of the liberation war  
 The return of the Tamils in strength  
 behold  
 Behold the death  
 Of the might of the enemy  
 Who has penetrated our own land.  
 The eyes of the world  
 May remain transfixed  
 By the tricks of the Mother  
 [Chandrika].<sup>69</sup>  
 In front of the Tamil warrior  
 They are smashed.  
 Wearing a disguise,  
 Going to foreign countries  
 Many guns may be bought.  
 Much training  
 In a mighty country  
 They may receive.  
 All this will go on the path  
 Shown by Karikalan  
 Before the Tigers it will be crippled.  
 The times of slave service  
 Bent and reduced disappear.  
 Perished as children  
 So our descendants may live  
 Embracing death

A history will be born.  
 All fallow fields fertilised  
 Bear fruit.  
 All devastated places  
 Stand erect in splendour,  
 Having supported revolutions  
 (turnings)  
 All pebbles are trampled down in the  
 breath of Ilam.  
 All deadlines set by Uncle Ratwatte  
 Are overshot (have passed).  
 Through the plan worked out by  
 Karikalan  
 The lame uncle  
 Has become part of a story.  
 Now tremble (fear) for their lives.  
 Lives that desecrate (plunder) the  
 sepulchre  
 Where our great heroes lives are  
 destroyed.  
 Shortly  
 The day will come when our comrades  
 Lighting the oil lamp on the sepulchre  
 will salute.  
 Under the leadership of Prabhakaran  
 the time comes  
 To behold Tamil Ilam.

*M. Icaialakan*

The next poem spotlights warriors who die for the redemption of people who, arguably, do not deserve this sacrifice—people who yearn for liberation but lack the courage to act on their beliefs. The poem's theme is what can be achieved if the will is strong. This, too, is a familiar trope in LTTE rhetoric, as we shall see. Nevertheless full redemption can only be purchased by the warrior's death. He surrenders himself to save others. We see here clearly the typical LTTE syncretistic combination of Christian and Saivite symbolism: on the one hand, the victim who

<sup>69</sup> The reference is also to former Sri Lankan prime minister Chandrika Kumaratunga.

### 5) We Were Mouth, You Came as Deed!<sup>70</sup>

In the golden jewelled  
Country of Tamil Eelam  
Head held high  
Our enemy made to dust  
You rose up  
Tiger! You  
In the Gulf of Bengal  
We lost...nevertheless  
Courage in the heart  
Surging we stood...  
We realised the meaning  
Of the Tamils' life!

Today the music of our land  
Keeping you with the name of  
'Great Hero'  
Upright in death  
As life immortal  
You conducted the war...  
Victorious, our slavery's  
Chains

You shattered!  
Tiger because of you  
We stood tall...  
We realised the goodness  
Of the Tamils' life!  
As dogs with contempt  
We existed oh Tiger  
Only yesterday...  
We forgot to guard  
The soil that was mother...  
Full  
Of empty talk  
We were mouth...  
As deed you came  
You died  
We surged up...  
As fire we stood  
We realised the strength  
Of the Tamils' life!

*Kaci Anantan*

bears the guilt of the others; on the other, the jealous Mother (goddess) who craves violent love from her devotees.<sup>71</sup>

The next poem repeats the same trope: the hero, the martyr who sacrifices himself for the whole by destroying the 'I', to protect the 'Us' (the community).<sup>72</sup> Just as the *natukal*, in which the spirit of the hero resides, protects the group (and its borders, because there the *natukal* are erected), the dead hero protects the living community against the attacks of the Sinhalese. But this selfless sacrifice places a heavy burden on the survivors. They feel guilt about the hero's death

<sup>70</sup> *Curiyap Putalvar*, p.14.

<sup>71</sup> Dipesh Chakraborty states that a similar symbolism was also used for the *swadeshi* campaign in Bengal, where Bengal itself was the mother (goddess). Chakraborty does not, however, detect any secular reinterpretation at all, but for him the religious incorporates the political. See Dipesh Chakraborty, *Habitations Of Modernity. Essays in the Wake Of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp.23–4.

<sup>72</sup> The same process is described by Isabelle Nabokov in her study on Tamil ritual. See Isabelle Nabokov, *Religion Against the Self. An Ethnography Of Tamil Rituals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), particularly pp.179–84. She also discusses the significance of a blood sacrifice in order to redeem a pledge or thank the god for the gift of a child. See pp.156, 160.

and look on it as a debt that has to be repaid. Partly, they try to repay it by bearing public witness to their sorrow and pain each year on the day of remembrance. The sacrifice of the warrior gives life, but lesser mortals have to bear the guilt for it.

**6) He Guards the 'We', Having Destroyed the 'I' (Having Destroyed Himself, He Will Guard Us)<sup>73</sup>**

A grain of dust is enough!  
 For remembrance...  
 From memory the heart takes strength...  
 Out of the eye to burst forth from the broken dam (to burst forth from the tear ducts broken dams)  
 One grain of dust is enough.  
 To stir up out of memory  
 The one who having destroyed himself, will  
 Guard us,  
 One grain of dust is enough.  
 To stir up, to mourn  
 Years and years of wretchedness (insults, degradation)...  
 Through remembrance of the one who was elevated  
 By changing with his own life the deed of the enemy who calls the Tamil cursed...  
 Tears flow with bowed heads united.  
 To raise the heart in a great life that has ended  
 Without fear or pleading...  
 With the memory...of him who fell on the roaring battlefield  
 It is the time when the nation softens and calms down.

This is the time when the stone melts and sobs.

After the seed of bravery for the days of reaping...  
 Now is the time of blooming.  
 Ordered flame (torch flame).  
 Afterwards...mourning faces...  
 Hearts exploding in sobbing, a sorrow unbent.  
 Impossible to stop crying, such a sorrow indeed and yet...

Relatives who beat their breast trembling...  
 And yet...therein the germ of bravery sprouting.  
 In the garden behind the house the mother weeping...  
 And yet, having severed the bonds the young calf skips and frisks.  
 The village bird...cries bravely in the sky.  
 Jasmine strung on the entrance door,  
 The mass of flower garlands overflowing like never before.  
 On the ground so many lives swarming like ants (like a live anthill)  
 How today of all days...it appears so beautiful.  
 Having put on new clothes...at daybreak...

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<sup>73</sup>*Curiyap Putalvar*, p.15.



Like a joyful youngster (like a zealous servant)...

The nation stands flower bedecked.

Like a matured beauty (marvel)...the nation is filled

With splendour.

This is the time of prize (birth).

In the darkness of Kartikai...

In the coolness of the dew...the time when the nation catches fire (when the nation is kindled).

A time when the nation shivers (bristles) Having spoken the name of a historian who tramples death that

Has extinguished his life's flower as dust (after having blown into dust his life's flower).

And even Yama [the enemy] takes fright

Having spoken the name of the Tiger hero...the time when the nation stands erect.

*Jeya*

The description of daily life here is particularly poignant: life goes on, the relations, the mother, must mourn; but meanwhile the germ of courage sprouts. The mother (cow) wails, but the calf tears the rope and runs away. Children grow up and go to war, yet life in the village continues, and only in this way can the fulfilment of the final goal—the liberation of the nation—be achieved. Death (here Yama, the god of death,<sup>74</sup> who takes fright at the pronouncement of the hero's death) can paradoxically only be overcome by death. In this poem, too, we find fire symbolism again: torches; courage that flares; people who burn in their desire to imitate the hero.

Precisely this desire (but simultaneously the recognition of the impossibility of its realisation) can be seen in the next poem which I have named the 'Lament of the Diaspora'. It is one of the weaker poems where lyric quality is concerned—perhaps because its 'author' is a collective, the Arts and Culture Association Germany. It is, however, important because of the emotions expressed in it. Torn between the relative security of the asylum country and the siren song of country and cause, their dilemma begs the question of whether those who go to war are the only ones who serve the country, or whether there are other forms of acceptable national service. Secondly, the poem tackles the problematic topic of the 'innocent' victim. Are bystanders who also suffer 'collateral damage' also playing their part? While no real answer is offered to the first question, the second elicits the bleak response that innocent victims do not become seeds for a new life, and thus should not be specially honoured.<sup>75</sup> Apparently their lives and deaths are considered meaningless.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Because Yama is the god of death he is the enemy, and by extension the Sinhalese.

<sup>75</sup> At least not in the poems discussed here. However during the *Mavirar Nal* celebrations 2003 the civilian victims of the war were specially mentioned and remembrance demanded.

<sup>76</sup> See Daya Somasundaram, *Scarred Minds. The Psychological Impact Of War on Sri Lankan Tamils* (New Delhi: Sage, 1998), p.256f. Note that the book is dedicated 'To The Mother'.

**7) How You Alone...<sup>77</sup>**

Not all who fell became seed  
How you alone...  
As admirable humans  
Glorious form attaining  
How you alone...  
To give the crown to liberty  
This is our wish, too  
But how you alone...  
As freedom's people!  
On the way we travelled  
Our journey unfinished  
For the coming of the dawn we  
Merely empty pledges.  
With questions that find no answers

In vain we are here now.  
We are the answer...  
How you alone!  
By entering the camp of the leader  
indeed—the Tamil race  
To make prosper you risked your head!  
On the battlefield the seed of the race to  
guard  
Heroes grown in the womb of the Tamil  
mother!  
Rather than leading an obscure life abroad—  
we praise and honour in our hearts you  
Who are living in the Motherland.  
*Arts and Culture Association: Germany*

**Figure 5**

***This Inscription reads: 'Heroic Greeting. We Express Our Remembrance to All the Heroes including Major Kecari who in Order to Liberate Elephant Pass Advanced on this Armoured Vehicle'<sup>78</sup>***

<sup>77</sup> Curiyap Putalvar, p.39.

<sup>78</sup> Author's photo.

### 8) One Foot Above the Ground

Floating one foot above the ground  
 Our Tamil Ilam—that one  
 The great heroes' great sacrifice  
 Fighting and dying for Tamil history  
 The sandalwood kings whose feet must  
 be honoured  
 They lie buried as seeds—for the race's  
 Daybreak lives with full consciousness  
 They donated for the nation.

Henceforth from their hearts our soil  
 Maintaining they rest—the nation  
 Both eyes weeping a garland of lamps lit  
 Salutes them every year.  
 On the soil through the blood they shed  
 the country indeed  
 Reddened lies—they  
 Eyes sleeping in the sepulchre the  
 sound of Tamil Ilam  
 Harmoniously rings.  
 Those who yesterday ate, talked,  
 enjoyed with us

Came in procession—our  
 Golden Tamil Ilam national leader's  
 Path of righteousness they trod  
 The heroic poems created in Cankam  
 times again  
 They went to renew—people  
 Without your footprints disturbing their  
 resting place  
 Fittingly step here.

The hero with the snake garland and the  
 throat having eaten the poison even  
 Surpassing they remain—like  
 A large mountain never crumbling,  
 indestructible history  
 They are established in the universe.  
 The rain of the heaving ocean and the  
 wind of the river bearing earth  
 Broadcast them loudly—the flower  
 Garden, house, palace, street,  
 crossroads all  
 Honour their name.

*Katiravan*

Heroes becoming immortal as history is the theme of the next poem, 'One Foot Above the Ground'.<sup>79</sup>

The heroes do not only become seed for a new life and for liberation, the poem tells us they also speak to the living.<sup>80</sup> But it is crucial to approach communications with them with appropriate reverence.

Note again the passage that the soil is reddened by the blood of the fallen. This is not a negative connotation. On the contrary, it is precisely the spilt blood that elevates the fallen warriors and allows them to hover, one foot above the ground. And this same soil sings and praises their names. Again, perhaps, this is a borrowing from

<sup>79</sup> *Curiyap Putalvar*, p.16.

<sup>80</sup> Rajam, *South Indian Memorial Stones*, p.35.



**Figure 6**

***Memorial Stone at the Entrance to Killinocchi Cemetery. The Inscription reads: 'Hush! Tread Softly Here. Here Have Been Put to Rest the Heroes' Bodies as Seed'***<sup>81</sup>

Christianity.<sup>82</sup> But more explicit is the reference to classical literature—to the songs of Cankam times. As in the foregoing poem, the fame of the heroes becomes immortal.<sup>83</sup>

At the same time this poem contains strong mythical-religious connotations that enter in spite of the secular position of the LTTE. The heroes surpass even Siva, the hero with the garland of snakes and blue throat (a legacy from when he drank the poison from the Ganga to save humankind). Similarly the Tigers strive to save the Tamil nation, and in the same manner—by taking poison (cyanide)—to avoid torture. Other poems call the martyrs 'holy/pure', 'children of god' or even 'gods' themselves.<sup>84</sup> Religious symbolism is present here, but still restrained; in the next case it dominates.

<sup>81</sup> Author's photo.

<sup>82</sup> This is similar to some psalms in which wind and waves laud the names of the heroes.

<sup>83</sup> *Purananuru*, verses 264, 265.

<sup>84</sup> See poem below, 'Supporters of the Soil'.

### 9) A King Born From Humanity<sup>85</sup>

Black tiger means  
 A big tiger  
 In ferocious wrath, so say the ancients  
 In his form he resembles a ruler  
 A man of mystery he becomes  
 Death and life he takes as one  
 There in the flower world he creates  
 new works  
 A storm of rays spreading, the thunder  
 of a volcano  
 Having swallowed the thinker a hero that  
 Destroys the fierce enemy without  
 thinking, without any other thought  
 He frightens and startles the enemy  
 even in his dreams  
 To bend even Yama  
 Strength he creates, he the knowing one  
 In darkness he moves, everywhere he  
 proceeds  
 The intended aim speedily he attacks  
 Armed destroyers  
 The bodies of the cruel ones speaking  
 courage  
 Turns into dust defeated [by] the  
 glorious Maravar  
 Beginning and end to know impossible,  
 a riddle he is  
 Turned into a firebomb  
 Of the sweet Tamil Ilam the 'divine king'  
 The hand grenade decoration (a hand  
 weapon decoration) to obtain  
 Is worthy

Five thousand times a thousand years  
 even may go by  
 Like the smouldering destroyed heavy  
 Artillery a new  
 Weapon will come, will come to  
 liberate the  
 Ilam Motherland, he will burn,  
 sacrificing himself  
 The enemy advancing like a mountain  
 will be pulverised  
  
 In the likeness of a man of fire the leader  
 In ancient sayings the enemies kindle  
 (burn)  
 Trapped in the crossfire he may die  
 As a gift to time the fiery black tiger  
 In every age (every time) to be born anew  
 To give a fitting (common) end to the  
 evildoers  
 Who murdered the people, taking shape  
 he will rise  
 A ghostly form, appearing and changing  
 Existing and non-existing finally  
 In a world of ashes burnt into emptiness  
 Like unto a renouncer who has realised  
 the righteous path  
 Is he.  
 In the line of Tamil honour unique  
 pride he generates  
 He brings to bloom a glorious sacrifice  
 having ripened the precepts  
 King made by humanity  
 As a star in the sky may you live on!

*Pantitar Vi. Parantaman*

Comparisons with animals are found in the *Purananuru* as well. This Tiger obviously blew himself up during a dynamite attack, for he is pictured as a form of fire. Simultaneously he is a man who, in righteous anger, renounces all reflection and acts without consideration of the consequences. The image reminds us of Arjuna

<sup>85</sup> *Curiyap Putalvar*, p.19.

who counts life and death equal, and of Siva who would rather let the world go up in flames (*Pralaya*) than interrupt his meditation.<sup>86</sup> But even in dying the hero is not defeated: others will take his place; new weapons will arrive to save the motherland; and by his self-sacrifice, his turning to ashes, the hero fertilises the soil. The dead hero that comes to haunt the enemy as a ghost in his dreams is a new twist on the trope of the body that becomes a seed, yet it is a not unrealistic description of the horror the Sinhalese experience when the Tigers strike—without warning, swiftly, almost like ghosts.<sup>87</sup> Within this traditional framework, the modern terms of warfare are blended into a new type of martial lyricism. The hero is not only a king, but also a philosopher, an ascetic, a prophet. Turning himself into a gift to time, he becomes timeless, always renewed. And as in the poem ‘Distant Star’, he lives on as a star, echoing yet another trope in Greek and Indian mythology.

Religious symbolism dominates the next poem as well, one of the few dedicated to a named hero, Tilipan, who fasted to death in 1987. Both the fast and the naming recall the *Purananuru*; but the length of the work and its fallback on the religious symbolism of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* hint at epic models.

Although composed by the poet laureate of the LTTE, Ratnaturai, the poem does not really convince like some of the other poems. It is, however, important because of its ideological significance. Regardless of the evaluation of Tilipan’s death by outsiders, for the Tamils—and not just for the LTTE—he is a great and true martyr whose memory is cherished in sorrow and guilt. Right at the beginning Tilipan is compared to Visnu in his *visvarupa* form, and the question is asked: why does Tilipan not return when even Rama returned after turning the world to dust and ashes? More detailed comparisons are also drawn to persons from Bhakti literature, for example Navukkaracu, one of the three Tevaram poets who recruited men to service of the Chola kings—to help with the harvest and fight the against the Jainas and Vaisnavas.<sup>88</sup> The lofty Gupta here represents the Indian officers who attempted to dissuade Tilipan from his fast; and he in turn curses them with Draupadi’s curse—she who wanted to wash her hair in Duryodhana’s blood. Even the food donations of the Indians were rejected by Tilipan. Through the ‘mercy of Kantan’, Tilipan was able to walk when he should have been much too weak to do so. Note the lines where it is said that that he enables the LTTE fighters to defeat the ‘monkey army’! This symbolism is definitely contradictory. Initially Rama, the Hindu hero, is exalted but later the monkey army (meaning here the Indian Army, i.e. the IPKF) is defeated, implicitly by

<sup>86</sup> The disciples of the Dravidian movement also chose death by fire to protest against the introduction of Hindi. See Parry, ‘Introduction’, p.37. Cremation is often understood as a voluntary fire sacrifice.

<sup>87</sup> In drawings and photos the faces of the Black Tigers are always masked or made otherwise unrecognisable.

<sup>88</sup> Indira Viswanathan Peterson, *Poems to Siva. The Hymns Of the Tamil Saints* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), p.15ff.

Ravana, the ruler of Lanka. Particularly important in this poem is not so much the religious symbolism, but the way it sacralises the national.<sup>89</sup>

### 10) The Powerful One Who Grows the Inner Fire (in Whom the Fire Blazes)<sup>90</sup>

*In memoriam of the 14<sup>th</sup> death anniversary of Martyr Lt.-Col. Tilipan...*

From where to begin to sing you?  
 From which point to start to draw?  
 With which eyes to see  
 The all shape [Visvarupa] that endures  
 transcending space?  
 In the dark hallway a bird pouring light,  
 Our streets' lamenting songs  
 Questioning the fire burning your  
 feather?  
 Having spread your wings for fourteen  
 years  
 Now you have flown away?  
 Why such precipitate haste for  
 stubborn time?  
 All places he visited torched and  
 burned,  
 Even that Rama returned to Ayodhya.  
 Tilipan, why did you not return?  
 Having fulfilled the journey the flag of  
 heroism flying in our yard  
 We saw the beauty, did we not,  
 indestructible, foremost!  
 That pulled by the roots and threw into  
 the heat,  
 Arrogance high as the Himalayas.

In the morning that increased the  
 hidden burden of suffering  
 You were the Navukkaracu that  
 gathered the columns of men for the  
 work of the cutting sickle.  
 When the exalted Gupta even stooped  
 You were the one seeking nobility as  
 your mark.  
 Waiting for him in Sentankulam  
 You proclaimed Draupadi loosening  
 her bun.\*  
 To bathe in fire goes our nation  
 While they came with loads of rice  
 Like a prophet of old you raised your  
 voice,  
 This is not rationed rice to stave off  
 famine,  
 Us to torch the rice of the burning  
 ground it is.  
 Before a month had passed  
 The guise of those hypocritical animals  
 was torn.  
 The mimicry exposed, their fangs bared  
 Staying before the Fort you raised your  
 voice.  
 To Kurukshetram you went forth to  
 light the fire of wrath.

<sup>89</sup> See Schalk, 'The Revival Of Martyr Cults among Ilavar', p.186f. The question of the possible or even necessary sacralisation of the national, in an extreme case through blood and fire sacrifice, was posed recently by an author of the Subaltern School. See Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition. Violence, Nationalism and History in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp.15, 85. Pandey asks whether Partition may have been the necessary fire sacrifice at the birth of two nations. The difference in our poems is that in India the violence of Partition is repressed or denied, whereas here at least violence suffered is sacralised.

<sup>90</sup> *Curiyap Putalvar*, p.20.

\*In order to wash her hair in the blood of her enemies.

Then you flourished in greatness.  
 'You precede  
 I come behind'  
 Our history pronounces this statement.  
 Our earth shivers  
 Starting then  
 Our joy darkened.  
 At dawn you got up and bathed,  
 You wrote your appeals.  
 Like putting on a new dress for the birth  
 For dying indeed you wear a shirt?  
 While your foot walked by the 'grace  
 of Kantan'  
 The temple road ran cold.  
 Gathered we sat in state.  
 Seeing everything as a witness  
 Muttumari [the goddess of smallpox]  
 sat on her throne.  
 Twelve days in self-restraint  
 While you faded  
 The white-sanded road wept.  
 Staying opposite while you swallowed  
 saliva  
 A feeling of guilt disturbed us.  
 While the dehydrated tongue stuck to  
 the palate  
 The collected crowd sobbed.  
 You lay down,  
  
 Got up,  
 Leisurely you observed the bystanders.

Will we ever forget those days?  
 When the time came for death to  
 swallow you  
 We idly stood by, the guilty ones.  
 Under the Asoka wheel  
 You lay, losing your breath  
 These guilty eyes indeed were  
 watching.  
 The cloud carries away the water of the  
 village tank.  
 As rain it will pour down again  
 Expectantly lies the land.  
 After you went, from your dream hands  
 and feet sprouted.  
 The monkeys who have gathered and  
 entered our village  
 In two years we beat and scattered.  
 Our leader did not hide in Manalaru.  
 Staying in the blinding light  
 brandishing his sharpened sword  
 He routed 'Checkmate'.  
 Look down!  
 Your 'dream of people's revolution'  
 flourishes.  
 I shall look down from the sky, you  
 said,  
 Verily you shall watch,  
 The day when Tamil Ilam blooms  
 The beauty when the leader hoists the  
 flag.

*Kavinar Putuvai Irattinaturai*

The next poem also mentions someone by name, not that of the hero, Tilipan, but of the leader the hero follows. According to Rajam this is again a characteristic trope of the *natukal* in later Cankam times: the faithful servant who dies for his master.<sup>91</sup> One is left feeling unsure whose life is more revered: that of the hero, or that of Prabhakaran.

<sup>91</sup> Rajam, *South Indian Memorial Stones*, p.53.



### 11) A Life Worshipped by All<sup>92</sup>

On Great Heroes' Day they come—the people  
 They cry in a great glow  
 All receive strength—the wealth  
 Gathered there they distribute.  
 Day and night henceforth we shall strive  
 We shall call to us a Motherland  
 One meal we shall leave out—  
 henceforth  
 We Tamils shall be swift to render  
 assistance.  
 Become a great hero for what?—the  
 Tamil  
 Land to liberate the sacrifice of life—  
 for that!  
 The ripening of a thousand eons—a life  
 Worshipped by us all.  
 He dug the Chemmani graves  
 In prison he gauged out the eyes  
 Throwing bombs he killed—the cruel

Bloodthirsty Sinhala was ungrateful.  
 The Tamils from the camp—the  
 Sinhala  
 Cruel fanged villain killed—henceforth  
 The black tiger warriors will go forth—  
 the blood  
 Demon's life he will take.  
 Face and address is he only—our  
 Face and address is he only—of the  
 whole  
 World indeed the essence is  
 Prabhakaran.  
 Keen eyes  
 Which the watchers praise  
 Words from his mouth in  
 Fragrant golden Tamil  
 In an effort uniting  
 The soil of Jaffna thrusting (heaving)  
 Forever for the great one  
 Burning love.  
*'Camp bard' sweet music Cellappa*

Note the image that the strength of the dead hero enters into the people and the mourners, who then continue the fight. And what is the purpose of this heroism? To sacrifice one's life for one's country; but also to revenge the terrible atrocities committed by the Sinhalese, which are enumerated in detail.<sup>93</sup> Ultimately, perhaps, the eulogy of Prabhakaran stays in the mind less than the images of bloodthirsty Sinhalese, and the killing of the bloodthirsty goddess who is bloody and not bloody at the same time: bloody for the Sinhalese; unbloody for the Tamils.

The next poem, 'Supporters of the Soil',<sup>94</sup> opens with a paean to the deeply-felt grief and the sorrow felt by LTTE fighters for the loss of so many of their comrades. It then

<sup>92</sup> *Curiyap Putalvar*, p.22.

<sup>93</sup> This passage refers to the fighters Kuttimani and Jegan who wanted to donate their eyes for Ilam, probably a symbolic act in itself referring to the saint Kannapan who donated his eyes to the Sivalingam. During the excesses in July 1983 fellow prisoners gouged out Kuttimani and Jegan's eyes before killing both.

<sup>94</sup> *Curiyap Putalvar*, p.36.

offers a ghostly, even blood-curdling, invocation of these fallen heroes. It looks as though *Purananuru* motifs and resurrection myths are combined here. Note the distinct rupture between lines 36 and 37. However new life or new ideals do not sprout from the seeds as in other poems, but rather sparks and arrows—in other words, new military equipment.<sup>95</sup> And then quite abruptly comes the awakening of the spirits on Karttikai twenty-seven and the portrayal of death as *maya*—illusion (lines 48–51). I see here a broadening and reinterpretation of *Purananuru* tropes. In the *Purananuru* even the authors of poems that invoke the spirit of the dead at the locations of the *natukal* are not sure whether their calls are heard. *Purananuru* verse 232, a poem by Auvaayar, described as an elegy by Rajam,<sup>96</sup> questions whether the fallen hear what we say—whether they accept our gifts. In the LTTE poems this is never in doubt. And there is never a doubt that the dead can effect something from beyond the grave, either. At the same time, it is made very clear that they do not care for the gifts described: indeed they reject them, because for them other things are important, notably the completion of the task of liberating the country. In this, as in other poems, the heroes are termed godchildren. The deification process mentioned by Blackburn has already begun.<sup>97</sup>

#### 14) Supporters of the Soil

After another planting in the house of rest  
I went home.  
Fell on the bed with the first cock's crow.  
From carrying the body on shoulders  
Shoulders aching, and the mind  
Went far away from sleep.  
One may write a poem  
One may write where to begin?  
Having started where to stop?  
A song written, a song written  
Who may know the sorrow I bear?  
In the crowd the breath failed  
(choking).

Hands hurting from pouring the  
gathered flowers.  
Crying crying every day  
The eyes have dried up.  
Each waking day  
Breaks with the hero's death.  
In the space of a moment  
Thunder rumbles and darkness falls.  
The shining-faced tidy young birds  
Daily oblivion claims for its own.  
(daily go into oblivion).  
For how long will this go on?

<sup>95</sup> See also the poem 'Distant Star' on p.131

<sup>96</sup> Rajam, *South Indian Memorial Stones*, pp.32–3.

<sup>97</sup> Blackburn, 'Death and Deification', pp.258–9, 266; and Stuart Blackburn, 'Songs Of Birth and Death' in Stuart Blackburn (ed.), *Another Harmony: New Essays on the Folklore Of India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p.218.

A field of ten measures begun for the  
 planting  
 Today runs into acres.  
 The ground dug with holes for the  
 planting is enraged.  
 Dust in the eyes of the wind.  
 In the whitewashed sepulchres  
 Take rest the highest gods.  
 Straight as a die  
 Hundreds of seedlings in rows.  
 The expectation that all will sprout  
 Will not be mistaken.  
 Buds everywhere as cinders and  
 arrows.  
 One day  
 They will enter decked with flowers to  
 watch.  
 From the opening a voice asking,  
 Eyes seeing,  
 Life pulsating (breath fluttering).  
 Whose saying, to term these dead and  
 gone?  
 Whose saying, to term them rotten  
 bones and dung?  
 Though there is no coming out  
 In the graves a realm of shadows.  
 Kartikkai twenty-seven  
 Is the day to write the country's revival.  
 The ground will go cold (shiver).  
 With flowers we shall go, pure  
 shadows.  
 Slowly approaching, touching  
 We shall wash the sepulchre with  
 tears.

At the time of lighting the oil lamp  
 Eyes of the precious ones will open.  
 Ears hearing they will laugh.  
 Spirit obtained  
 In the language of silence  
 To cool they will speak  
 Therein a thousand meanings are  
 unbound.  
 'Word has become our sigh'  
 In a bone dissolving song  
 We shall turn into frozen statues.  
 'Having done the task, we sleep,  
 You go the rest of the way'  
 Say the disembodied voices of the  
 godlings (the spirits of the godlings  
 are heard to say)  
 'For us there are no flowers...  
 For us there are no lamps...  
 For us there is not even this song...  
 For us there is only freedom,  
 For us there is only the liberation of the  
 country'.  
 With this great sound rising on the wind  
 The sepulchres close.  
 In the direction of the light the path  
 becomes clear.  
  
 The door is open to come out  
 The land wakens (heaves).  
 Our journey will continue  
 Until the dream of the supporters of the  
 soil becomes reality (sees the light of  
 day).

*Putuvai Irattinaturai*

Our next poem seems to constitute the birth of a new genre, because similar poems were recited at the *Mavirar Nal* celebration in Stockholm in 2002. It is the very special case of the younger sister mourning at the grave of her elder brother, and at the same time promising to join him soon because she, too, is a warrior. Female warriors are still far less numerous in the LTTE community than male warriors, but their numbers are increasing and they have gained a reputation for

courage and ferocity.<sup>98</sup> Notice the trope where the brother hangs a cyanide capsule round the neck of the sister, only then taking leave of her to depart (to his death). That he expects her to die as well is evident from the line where he says that she goes forever to kiss the ground (line 27). The dead call to death. Another theme of the poem is that the dead should not be left in the dark. We alluded to this superstition earlier, in the content of the 2001 Heroes' Day celebration in Dortmund; but here it is given a new twist: the dead must not be lonely, either. The poem explains the sister will soon come to join her brother in a common grave. Moreover, the warrior's comrades sleep near him, so he will not be alone (lines 50–51).<sup>99</sup> The title of the poem is ambivalent: in Tamil it is literally 'Tears *with* the Darling',<sup>100</sup> that is she weeps *together* with the dead brother, not *for* him. The poem is intricate and not easy to render into English, because it fuses narrative, dialogue and interior monologue.

We have repeatedly mentioned the concept of the ascetic that enters into LTTE ideology as well as into these poems. Asceticism confers special power and potency and ultimately leads to salvation. Schalk has discussed this concept at length.<sup>101</sup> However asceticism acquires a special meaning in the following poem. It should be emphasised, moreover, that this concept does not occur at all in the *Purananuru*, even though kings might fast to death after defeat. In the *Purananuru* the hero normally is anything but an ascetic, whereas in the *Mahabharata* we find the *tapasvin* (*tavan*), and in Catholic interpretation asceticism is sometimes envisaged as a substitute for martyrdom.<sup>102</sup> The LTTE, though, take austerity literally: the party interdicts smoking and alcohol, and prescribes celibacy for active fighters. Even before they become martyrs, LTTE fighters already during their lifetime are ascetics preparing for their destiny. The *motcam* (salvation/liberation) of the heroes is identified with heroic death and the eventual liberation of the country. Perhaps the highlight of the poem, though, is the meeting of the ascetic with an old woman (the mother from the *Purananuru*), who pronounces even the sacred Tamil language incapable of expressing the heroism of the fallen. This is a powerful trope. Observe, too, that she is happy about the fate of her son who has chosen 'air and soil' for his domicile—for by his death he has ensured the salvation of his country, the nation of Eelam. Finally the poem turns to the ascetic who does what he has advised the old woman to do and proceeds to meditate on the meaning of dying on the Heroes' Square. He finds it there: bravery brings salvation. Whether ideas of the *viramarga* enter into this poem is not quite clear, but it can be assumed.

<sup>98</sup> See Schalk, *Birds Of Freedom*.

<sup>99</sup> While discussing this article with Peter Schalk, he mentioned that some LTTE cadres speak of making Tamil Eelam into one big grave, out of which presumably liberation will come.

<sup>100</sup> *Curiyap Putalvar*, p.18.

<sup>101</sup> Schalk, *The Revival Of Martyr Cults among Ilivar*.

<sup>102</sup> Weiner and Weiner, *The Martyr's Conviction*, p.47.

### 13) A Few Tears for the Darling Resting in the Sepulchre<sup>100</sup>

Brother when you became a soldier  
 I was just a little girl—but  
 Now the feelings  
 You had, all the courage  
 Are for me now—Did you  
 Really forget that—that time  
 While I as a soldier  
 Walked into the camp  
 Why did you come  
 With eyes swimming in tears  
 Close to my ear  
 You came and asked!  
 Oh...Brother the meaning  
 Of the words asked that time  
 Now you understand, do you not?  
 Brother even though you perished in  
 the war  
 For the liberation of the country, your  
 goal  
 And your weapon already your own sister  
 Took for herself  
 Having thought about that tears of joy  
 You shed, did you not?  
 Brother! Then indeed  
 You knew—You  
 Forever to kiss the ground  
 You go, having said that,  
 Because of that indeed from the string  
 of poison  
 Shaking at your throat  
 Having put one round my neck

After embracing me tightly and kissing  
 me  
 Even if you were no longer your  
 Goal to fulfil was necessary  
 Because you said that your name  
 I had to adorn  
 With a handshake you received  
 From me the leave to depart  
 Now where are you  
 Unending rest you take, do you not  
 Brother?... Not even once your  
 Glorious face you show?  
 Near your tomb  
 Having given you leave to depart  
 As the little sister have I come to linger  
 here, have I not?  
 Brother, once open your eyes  
 With your name—and  
 With the poison garland you gave and  
 With your weapon—and with  
 Whatever ideal you carried—with the  
 Pursuit of that same ideal near to you  
 Have I come to linger.  
 My desire oh Brother!...  
 Do you rest in loneliness?...  
 Do not worry—near you  
 Your comrades also sleep—moreover  
 In a few days near to you I also  
 Shall come to my rest—for me, too,  
 Near to you a place has been marked.  
 In your footsteps I, too...

*Cevvanam*

The message in the above is that for heroes, there is only death; indeed, death is  
 the only form of salvation open to them. Here the equation of hero and martyr is  
 complete, as indicated by the term 'Mavirar': one becomes a great hero not only  
 by dying, but by consciously (*unarvu, unarvotu*) sacrificing oneself, *consciously*

embracing death. In the *Purananuru* this happens by seeking battle, in the poetry of the LTTE by planned death. The latter, though, need not always be a suicide in the narrow sense, so long as it involves death of self.

#### 14) The Great Heroes' Salvation<sup>103</sup>

Having obtained wisdom in the meditation

Of the search regarding death

On the earth's great expanse

One who had wasted away wandering, following

Shapeless he had become,

On a road in Jaffna dressed in saffron.

On the wrinkled brow full of ashes

Having seen heroism standing with bent back

A sigh whispering, smelling Om.

With a white shroud frazzled and torn

With tears like streams of wax

Molten, overflowed and dried

An old woman happened upon him.

Mother, why the tears?

Having seen heroism the heart

In a surge of unbearable greatness

Tears well up and overflow

Our people (son) is one who has attained heroism

Nothing suitable to sing the fame, without words (speechless)

Is Tamil failing indeed!

Anxiously beats the heart.

If they are great heroes...

The mind happy having donated the life

Torching the gangster who took the land

Air and soil becoming his dwelling in the

Salvation of the Tamil son to take tiger majesty who gave his life

Ilam's awakening (rise).

You do not understand, mother!

Down there is a square dedicated to the great heroes

At its foot staying search for meaning.

Staying at the foot of the Great Heroes' Square

He did unceasing penance,

He attained the second stage of wisdom

Measuring a little smile

He related to make the body run cold

Bravery as salvation.

*Je. Karikalan (Malaysia)*

And the same attitude is displayed in the short anonymous poem 'Candle Wicks'<sup>104</sup> on the topic of the light that burns but does not burn itself out. The candle metaphor is apposite. Though their actions, the Black Tigers keep the lamp of liberty burning

<sup>103</sup>Curiyap Putalvar, p.37.

<sup>104</sup>Curiyap Putalvar, p.38.

### 15) Candle Wicks

Consuming itself it dissolves the  
world's darkness  
Not only the candle wick.  
Tormenting themselves, their bodies  
turned to dust,  
The black tigers lit the flame of  
freedom  
Candle wicks—these  
Not only their own sweet life, the  
flower body supporting it,  
Its awareness—for this

Land they sacrificed;  
But there is one difference—the candle  
wick  
Once it is burnt down its  
Light fades—but  
The donations of the black tigers and  
Their self-sacrifice protect  
The lamp of liberty of this land  
inextinguishably.  
Their names even throw light...  
Their gleaming forms' glow enduring  
Will radiate.

*A warrior from Vanni Kalmunai*

indefinitely. By choosing death, they win freedom. Read together, this and the preceding poem convey a simple moral: in salvation the heroes extinguish, but (en)light(en) the world.

Our last poem is called 'Speak the Truth'.<sup>105</sup> The title is self-explanatory for the aim of the work is to remind Tamils of the importance of developing an oral tradition remembering the 'true' deeds of the warriors. What particularly strikes the reader in this poem is its dramatic juxtaposition of peaceful domestic scenes and violent battlefield images of dying heroes.

### 16) Speak the Truth

Mother!  
For your eldest son  
Who learns to hop and walk  
When you sing him to sleep,  
How for the liberation of our race  
The body itself has become  
dynamite—our  
Black tigers' story tell.

Standing still in the sand of the yard  
Enjoying the rays of the full moon  
Children's stories to hear—for your  
Youngest daughter,  
Blown up in the air—of that  
Courage of our darlings tell.

Having built a house of sand, having  
cooked sand rice

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<sup>105</sup>*Curiyap Putalvar*, p.38.

To your daughter happily playing  
 Of the sons loving the land—of the fierce  
 Tamil heroes guarding the Tamils’  
 honour,  
 On land and sea the story that becomes  
 an epic  
 Unhesitatingly and with certainty tell.

Mother!  
 These who carry flowered dreams  
 For the love of the people

To let the soft wind of freedom blow in  
 Ilam  
 They have become a national storm,  
 these—speaking  
 Our life’s bright dawn of day  
 Our soil’s jewels of never fading  
 lustre  
 Apart from this news still  
 Many unspoken truths  
 Not hiding their light speak.

*Ka. Karttika: warrior*

### Conclusion: And Heroes Die

The three concepts we distinguished in the poems—*the hero as seed* out of which new life sprouts both literally and spiritually, *the hero as history* clothed in immortality, and the *hero as victim* who sacrifices himself to pay a debt or provide a gift (to the Mother soil?)—combine to form the core message of these poems. And the message is a bleak one: there is nothing in life but death.

With death as the goal, survival is not an option. Others will survive—the race, the country, freedom—and *Tamilttay must* survive. But heroes die.<sup>106</sup> An informant familiar with Tamil culture expressed it thus: Saivites believe in the manifestation of the gods as super-humans and super-heroes. In this understanding the leaders of the struggle would simultaneously be the gods fighting against evil. Therefore there is no need for the people to fight at all; all they have to do is bear their suffering stoically and await results.<sup>107</sup> This would explain why martyrs in these poems become divine; on the other hand it would strongly contradict the exhortation to self-activism expressed in other poems. A stoical attitude, however, is visible in the expectation of, and preparedness for, death.

Yet this does not solve the riddle posed at the beginning of this essay, namely, why *Purananuru* and Bhakti ideals and concepts are so powerful and influential among the Tamils even today. Roberts’ statement that Bhakti ideals and practices have survived in Tamil religiosity may explain some of this fascination, but it does not really constitute sufficient explanation. For instance, why was the transposition of these concepts to the national and its sacralisation accepted? The mere interpretation of poetry does not help here, but only an investigation of the origins and deeper

<sup>106</sup>*Purananuru* verses 310 and 295 and 277, 278, 279.

<sup>107</sup>Personal communication from Fr. S.J. Emmanuel.



reasons of the militant struggle. We see that the images and traditions hinted at or mentioned in the poems do not always correspond totally to the official LTTE ideology discussed, for example, by Schalk. This would confirm our initial assumption that actual ideas and thinking are to be found in non-normative texts.

Allow me, however, some further speculation: Bhakti—especially in its violent manifestation—incorporated the belief that by violent death not only deification occurs, but also that *injustice suffered is atoned and avenged*. This philosophy still informs the Tamil worldview, especially in rural areas, today.<sup>108</sup> Hunger-strikes and self-immolations are culture immanent and are perceived as legitimate—if ultimate—forms of protest. The ethics of the *Purananuru* were popularised in the wake of the Dravidian renaissance of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And we should not forget that it was the Karaiyar who constituted the soldiery for the Jaffna kings and who can look back to a long military tradition. The success of the LTTE among the Tamil population, often perceived as totally inexplicable, is founded in three components strongly supported in collective memory: the Dravidian movement; religion ('interpreted nationally'); and military tradition. This mobilisation of beliefs, however, only succeeds because tradition has been redefined within a framework that accepts the Karaiyar as guardians of the culture. Old and accepted values are not overthrown, but redefined and filled with new content: the hero has become a martyr.

The LTTE does not merely represent the old symbols and emotions of Tamil heroism; it presents itself as the guardian and protector of this tradition. And this concept is accepted by the people because it is familiar to them from innumerable lessons and tales. 'Tamil' virtues like strict discipline and honourable conduct resurface in the LTTE: we protect *you, your people, and your women*. The demand for an independent Eelam rests as much on the struggle against racial and national discrimination as on past glory.

The complex sources of this poetry, therefore, lead to intratextual contradictions that are, however, not usually recognised as such. Again, this is a sign for the programmatic and ideological skill of the militants who resume precisely those traditions that resonate within the population. The synthesis provides something completely new, something pertinent only to the LTTE. And yet we have to ask whether this is merely the afore-mentioned sacralisation of politics and the national, or something more sinister? Could it be the death wish and love of death of a

<sup>108</sup>See Stuart Blackburn, *Moral Fictions. Tamil Folktales from Oral Tradition* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 2001). Even the departed Chief Minister of Tamilnadu, M.G. Ramachandran might be interpreted as a saviour in this understanding.

specifically Tamil defeatism and a specifically Tamil religiosity?<sup>109</sup> We would then have to ask whether, and how long, this death wish has been sufficient for the cohesion of the Tamils—especially now, after the ceasefire. Are more life-affirming role models required in the meantime? Weiner and Weiner are convinced that the martyr project cannot be continued very much longer; and must eventually end with the capitulation and/or extinction of one or other party.<sup>110</sup> We should not forget that the *Purananuru* at least mirrors the extinction of one society and the emergence of another, and it often presents a picture of stoical acceptance of an unavoidable fate,<sup>111</sup> an attitude that the LTTE rejects.<sup>112</sup>

The poems discussed here use powerful cultural and religious symbols, particularly in passages dealing with mourning and funeral rituals. This may be public poetry or poetry for daily consumption, but it very strongly portrays individual and private feelings and emotions ('the raw emotional power of the young people who put their life on the line', as a colleague put it). And the next logical question would be: how long can these powerful *Purananuru* and Bhakti ideals withstand globalisation? It remains to be seen whether a similarly powerful poetry produced after the ceasefire and arising from the same roots would equally serve the goal of liberation aspired to in our poems. Elderly gentlemen (and ladies) sitting around a table negotiating compromises lend themselves much less to lyrical outpourings than young people marching to war. But maybe from these negotiations a peaceful solution can emerge which can then be lyrically transformed by the descendants. We can but hope.

<sup>109</sup>Fr. Emmanuel would probably term it a defeatist religiosity. This is frequently encountered among diaspora Tamils, and states: we have to work (fight, suffer) hard, that is our destiny, but it will be in vain in any case.

<sup>110</sup>Weiner and Weiner, *The Martyr's Conviction*, p. 62.

<sup>111</sup>K. Kailasapathy, *Tamil Heroic Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968); George L. Hart III, *The Poems Of Ancient Tamil. Their Milieu and Their Sanskrit Counterparts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); and George L. Hart III and Hank Heifetz (trans. and ed.), *The Four Hundred Songs Of War and Wisdom* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p.xxxi.

<sup>112</sup>See Schalk, 'The Revival Of Martyr Cults among Ilavar', pp.152, 159–61.