Building cemeteries, constructing identities.
Funerary practices and nationalist discourse among the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka

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My paper deals with the construction of Tamil national identity in the LTTE-controlled areas of north-eastern Sri Lanka. In particular it focuses on the relevance of the new LTTE burial practices within the process of nation building. In this context I will pay special attention to the perception that Tamil people, both civilians and fighters, seems to have of the Tigers' cemeteries as symbolic centres of the new nation, the Tamil Eelam[1].

In my paper I will analyse the reasons which have led to this perception. On one side I will discuss the functional analogies between the LTTE cemeteries and the war graveyards of military Western tradition. On the other, I will emphasise their peculiarity of being perceived as holy places. The Tigers' cemeteries are indeed called *Tuillum Illam*, literally "Sleeping houses", and are often portrayed as temples. I will argue that the LTTE, in spite of their secular nature, have decided not to reject this religious interpretation, because it allows them to include the *Tuillum Illam* in the mainstream of Hindu tradition. In this context the ability to integrate the religious dimension represents a crucial component in the process of nation building.

This paper draws upon findings of fieldwork I carried out between July 2002 and January 2003 in the north-eastern regions of Sri Lanka controlled by the LTTE.

The change in funerary practices

At the beginning of the '90s, in a Sri Lanka ravaged by civil war, a great change in the funerary practices reserved to the LTTE fighters took place. Until then the bodies of the *Maaveraar* (literally "Great Heroes") were cremated in accordance with Hindu tradition and the ashes were given to the families. From that period onward LTTE began to bury their dead and to collect them in the *Tuillum Illam*.

To understand the meaning of this change in ritual we have to consider the mortuary practices which are performed in the north and in the east of Sri Lanka. These practices depend on the religion professed by the families of the dead. Both Christians and Muslims bury their dead, and put the bodies in their graveyards[2], while Hindus resort to cremation and immerse the ashes in rivers, though there are some exceptions that we will discuss later. This means that in this context

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[1] Tamil Eelam refers to the separate state claimed by LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam).
[2] Christians sometimes are buried close to the area where Hindus perform cremation.

burial is not unknown, but is reserved to people belonging to Christianity and Islam, and that most people, being Hindu, are not accustomed to this practice. It might be argued that the shift from cremation to burial should have been perceived as a radical move from traditional practices, and therefore should not have been so readily accepted.

Before discussing the strategies that are carried out by *Maaveerar's* relatives and Tamil civilians in order to accept the new practices, I would like to illustrate the official explanation given by the LTTE's leadership to justify this change. When questioned about the reasons for the shift in ritual, Mr. Pontyagam, in charge of *Maaveerar's* office, stated:

Before 1991 we burnt [the fighters] according to Hindu rites. If the parents asked for the ashes, we gave them. But Christians and Muslims didn't take ashes. We had this problem. There were Christian soldiers, and the parents didn't want to burn them. A meeting of the leaders was organized and they decided to study what did for their soldiers other countries like America and England. They saw that they used to bury their soldiers. Then they decided to proceed in the same way [...][3].

Then, when asked about the reaction of Hindu relatives, Pontyagam replied:

Yes, relatives agreed because they [the LTTE leaders] explained them it was a worldwide custom. Before that there were problems, and then they decided, Prabhakaran[4] decided, what to do.

Indeed if we have a look at the pictures of *Tuillum Illam*, we can recognize in their structure the pattern of Western war graveyards, particularly if we compare the *Tuillum Illam* with other cemeteries in the area.

PHOTOGRAPHS

It is not surprising that the LTTE chose to adopt funerary practices utilized by Western armies. In fact, Tigers do not like the epithet of "terrorist" and claim the status of liberation fighters. That is why they never miss an opportunity to emphasize that they are a regular army: for instance, they point out that they wear uniforms. From this perspective, an acceptance of Western military funerary customs might be considered a logic consequence of such a claim.

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[3] Personal interview, 7 December 2002.
[4] In passing we may observe that Prabhakaran is supposed to take all central decisions regarding the fighters. The LTTE's members themselves explained to me that, although many decisions are joint resolutions, actually is better to ascribe them to the leader. In this way people will accept them more easily.

Conversely, what is really surprising is to ascertain that the official explanation for the transition from cremation to burial is never mentioned by civilians or fighters. Indeed, if questioned on this issue, both tend to refer to other explanations for the change. In the course of my fieldwork, I interviewed LTTE fighters, Tamil civilians living in both LTTE- and government-controlled territories, and eventually Tamils living in Italy. The persons interviewed gave me different interpretations for the transition, but nobody referred to the official one. This official explanation is probably neither significant nor acceptable to Tamil civilians, particularly for the relatives of the dead. In fact, when a daughter or a son, a sister or a brother are given burial as opposed to the customary ritual cremation, it is likely that relatives would not be satisfied with an explanation that justified this practice on the basis of conformity with Western military tradition. Indeed, it is more than likely that they would seek other more meaningful explanations.

There are in fact two main interpretations[5] which tend to emerge to justify the change in the LTTE funerary practices. The first one emphasizes the need for remembrance, whether the second one places the burial practice within the mainstream of Hindu tradition.

Tuillum Illam as places of remembrance

To elucidate the process which make it possible for the *Tuillum Illam* to be regarded as places of remembrance, I would like to quote some passages from interviews I took in Sri Lanka during my fieldwork. For instance a fighter in Vavuniya asserted: "This is a place of memory, if you burn them [*Maaveerar*] the history will be destroyed". Similarly a man in charge of Koppai's *Tuillum Illam* explained:

At the beginning we burnt them [*Maaveerar*]. Then we thought: "It is not nice, it is better to have a place to remember them". If you have a monument, every year you can celebrate them, and the relatives can come to visit them, they often do this.

A civilian in Jaffna affirmed:

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[5] Although the detailed description of all the interpretations is beyond the aim of this paper, it is necessary to mention that to some fighters (but not to civilian) the burial of dead fighters is considered as a return to the practices of the ancient Tamils, who in fact buried their fallen warriors. References to the custom of the Chankam period are quoted also in some of the LTTE's publications. As Fuglerud points out, 'The ideological project of the LTTE is directed towards homologising the pre- and post-colonial situation, of linking the present claim for statehood with the restoration of authentic Tamil culture" (2001: 203). For further details, see also Cheran 2001, Natali 2004.

In this situation we did need a place to make our people happy. When our children ask [showing the *Tuillum Illam*]: "What is it?", we reply: "Here there are the people who sacrificed their life for the freedom of Tamil Eelam".

A young Tamil man living in Italy pointed out:

The *Maaveerar* are people who defend the land, our homeland. If we burn them, they become dust, and they will disappear. To keep their memory alive, the Tigers bury them and build tombs. They write on the tomb "This person died to defend the homeland" and in this way they [the *Maaveerar*] are with us longer.

Finally the sister of a fighter fallen at Elephant Pass clarified: "We have to preserve the [*Maaveerar*] bodies, at least the bones must be preserved".

It could be argued that to have places of remembrance it is not necessary to have tombs. However we must keep in mind that in Hinduism, as Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry stress,

nothing of the individual is preserved which could provide a focal symbol of group continuity. The physical remains of the deceased are obliterated as completely as possible: first the corpse is cremated and then the ashes are immersed in the Ganges and are seen as finally flowing into the ocean. The ultimate objective seems to be as complete a dissolution of the body as possible (1982: 36).

Such a dissolution imply the absence of a public space where the dead are remembered. Even if there are postcremation rituals in which ancestors are worshipped (Knipe 1977), such rituals are performed in the private space of the house and are carried out by relatives. The cultural background provides reasons for the lack of any correlation between cremation and public place of remembrance.

The perception of *Tuillum Illam* as place of remembrance would also explain, according to my informants, their destruction by Sri Lankan Army[6]. M. R. Narayan Swamy, a journalist, describes in this way the capture of Jaffna:

It is clear Prabhakaran will one day certainly try to recapture Jaffna, whatever be the cost, if nothing else to avenge the humiliation of 1995 when victorious Sri Lankan troops rolled into ancient Tamil town amid frenzied celebrations across the country. *The LTTE has not forgotten the way the military destroyed without trace the LTTE's sprawling martyrs' graves that were spread over a vast open ground* (2002(3): 355) (italics mine).

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[6]Here has to be reminded that the destruction of *Tuillum Illam* is not officially acknowledged either by Sri Lankan government or by international organizations such as International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

At the entrance of *Tuillum Illam* in Koppai and Naundil the visitor can see, encased in glass, the collected pieces of devastated graves and cenotaphs. A stone book has been placed on the pieces, and the following words are impressed on it:

After our displacement in
1995, the Sri Lanka army
damaged and destroyed
the monuments of our
war heroes, treasured by us.
The stone remains of the
left over have been collected
by us. Let us bow our
heads and wait at this
point for a few moments.

The destruction of tombs by Sri Lankan Army can be considered as evidence of governmental soldiers' appreciation of *Tuillum Illam*'s significance within the Tigers' struggle. In order to better understand the symbolic value of the LTTE's burial grounds, we need to pay attention to the functional analogies between such places and the war military cemeteries of Western tradition.

Functional analogies with war cemeteries in military Western tradition
It could be argued that *Tuillum Illam* share many functions with war cemeteries of Western tradition. As George Mosse (1990) points out, to concentrate all the dead soldiers in the same space gives the opportunity to stress the importance of their deeds and to focus people's attention on their sacrifice for the nation. It is exactly in this perspective that we may read the words of Prabhakaran who, talking about the graves, affirms "The tombs of the fallen Tigers heroes will be the foundation of our new nation" (quoted in the 1995 LTTE diary).

Another important function of Western war cemeteries is their being places of commemorations, which is also the case of *Tuillum Illam*. The *Maaveerar* are celebrated on November 27th, officially remembered as the day in which the first Tiger died. In this day the LTTE pay honours to their dead fighters all over the world. Tamils of the Diaspora organize

celebrations in public places such as theatres and public halls[7], while in Sri Lanka the ceremonies take place in the *Tuillum Illam*. Ceremonies start in the afternoon, when people go to the *Tuillum Illam* bringing flowers, incense, camphor and candles and stay by the tombs; women weep and cry out in pain. The *Maaveerar* day is a main LTTE political event, not only because of the extensive involvement of civilians, but also because it is the occasion in which Prabhakaran's yearly speech is delivered and broadcast through loudspeakers in all *Tuillum Illam*. Prabhakaran's speech is considered, as Cheran emphasizes, "a sort of throne speech in which he usually elaborates on the victories, ground situation, future plans and an analysis of the current political situation" (2001: 17). In this sense the *Tuillum Illam* are the setting for the exercise of "intentional rhetorics" which, as Elizabeth Tonkin stresses, are a central element in the processes of nation building. Indeed "Intentional rhetorics" are utilized "to convince people of a social identity which they may not otherwise experience as such" (1992: 130).

Eventually - to conclude the analysis of functional analogies - in war cemeteries belonging to Western tradition there are symbols which can be interpreted in different ways. As George Mosse clarifies,

English cemeteries were centred upon the Cross of Sacrifice and the Stone of Remembrance. The Cross of Sacrifice, in Rudyard Kipling words, has "a stark sword brooding in the bosom of the cross" whose symbolism, by the Commission's own admission, was somewhat vague. It could signify sacrifice in war or simply the hope of resurrection […]. The Stone of Remembrance and the Cross of Sacrifice projected a Christian symbolism which dominated the cemetery, though originally the Stone was conceived by its architect, Sir Edwin Lutyens, as a non-Christian pantheistic symbol. Yet, at times, the Stone of Remembrance was referred to simply as "the altar", conferring the same religious significance upon it that the Cross of Sacrifice possessed (1990: 85).

Similarly in the *Tuillum Illam* the "flame of sacrifice" burning on the central platform could be compared, as suggested by the chancellor of Jaffna university, to the flame of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, but at the same time it could also be perceived as a symbolic substitute of the fire of cremation.

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[7] For further details on the ceremonies outside Sri Lanka, see Cheran (2001) for the Canadian case, and Natali (2002) for the Italian case.

Tuillum Illam as temples

I would now examine the second interpretation which emerges from popular narrative to justify the transition in funerary practices. This interpretation is given mainly by civilians and is connected with the religious Hindu tradition. As already mentioned, in Hinduism there are some exceptions to cremation. In the context of the Sri Lankan civil war, such exceptions are utilized to give a sense of cultural continuity to the funerary practices reserved to the LTTE's fighters. An analysis of the exceptions to cremation within Hinduism is obviously beyond the aim of this paper. Therefore I will restrict myself to mentioning that these exceptions are associated with either economic reasons (poor people do not have the resources to cremate their dead) or religious ones. From a religious perspective, the concept of the cremation ritual as a sacrifice offered to the gods has in fact several implications: in case of "bad death", that is non-voluntary and untimely death (for instance, death by drowning, act of violence or some kinds of disease), the body does not symbolize an appropriate sacrifice to the gods, and is therefore not cremated[8].

However, there are other cases in which the corpse is not cremated: this happens when the dead is a child or an ascetic. With regard to children, there are cross-cultural evidences of different practices performed for those who die in the early years of their life. The reason for the specific treatment of dead children's bodies within Hinduism has given rise to a widespread debate (see Das 1976 and Malamoud 1982). Scholars have suggested several interpretations, some of them stressing on the characteristic of liminality showed by children. With regard to ascetics, they can also be regarded as liminal figures, because of their transcending the customary partitions of Hindu society and being located in the symbolic *limen* between life and death. The burial of ascetics is in fact justified on the basis of their renunciation of ordinary life. As Charles Malamoud points out,

La cérémonie complexe qui marque l'entrée en "renoncement" consiste à laisser s'éteindre les feux sacrificiels après y avoir fait brûler, ultime oblation, ultime combustible, les divers ustensiles du sacrifice. Les feux ne sont pas abolis pour autant : ils sont intériorisés, inhalés, on les fait "remonter" en soi […]. cuit de l'intérieur, et de son vivant même, le *samnyasin* n'a pas a être cuit après sa morte : il n'est donc pas incinéré, mais inhumé […]. en intériorisant leurs feux, ils ont aussi aboli la possibilité d'être transportés vers une divinité qui leur soit extérieure. En s'instituant d'emblée comme offrande, et en persistant jusqu'au bout dans ce rôle, ils ont fait de leur propre personne, de leur atman identifié au Soi universel, leur divinité (1989: 65).

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[8] This does not necessarily mean that the body is buried: sometimes it is indeed set adrift on a river (children too are often treated in this way).

Thanks to the exception represented by the interment of ascetics, Tamil civilians have the opportunity to place the burial practice within the mainstream of Hindu tradition. In order to provide an understanding of the symbolic analogy between ascetics' interment and the *Maaveerar*'s burial we have to dwell upon the self-representation of the LTTE fighters. The combatants are portrayed as men and women who are not involved in the "bad habits" of ordinary people: they do not drink, do not smoke and do not have forbidden sexual intercourses. Abstaining from alcohol and cigarettes is significant particularly for male fighters, because in Tamil culture women are not supposed to drink or smoke. With regard to female fighters the most important peculiarity is therefore their purity:

The LTTE ideal of the armed guerrilla woman puts forward an image of purity and virginity […]. The women are described as pure, virtuous. Their chastity, their unity of purpose and their sacrifice of social life supposedly give them strength. The armed virginal woman cadre ensures that this notion of purity, based on denial, is a part of the social construction of what it means to be a woman according to the world view of the LTTE (Coomaraswamy quoted in Schrijvers 1999: 316).

Michael Roberts suggests that the ascetic mould of the LTTE fighters implies "the influence of Hindu tradition of *tapas* (strength via abstinence) as well as Maoist strains of revolutionary self-discipline" (1996: 256). The ascetic attitude of fighters is also a subject of LTTE-filmography. In this regard Peter Schalk, explaining the plot of a film on the Black Tigers – the suicidal commandos –, points out:

The hero of the film is described as a *tavan*, "ascetic", not by the word, but by his behaviour. Although he is of marriageable age, there is no sign of a girlfriend […]. Living in the group of Black Tigers, he seems to be dedicated to the holy aim [to free Tamil Eelam] only (1997: 160).

The symbolic association between fighters and ascetics is not restricted to their behaviour in life. After their death, the combatants, as the ascetics, are worshipped and regarded as gods. When I asked if *Tuillum Illam* were cemeteries, all the people replied saying "How can you say such a thing? *Tuillam Illam* are temples, gods are seeded [buried] there". If we take into consideration the expected behaviour of the *Tuillam Illam*'s visitors, actually we can realize that the prescribed practices when going to or coming back from *Tuillum Illam* are exactly the reverse of those contemplated in case of visiting cemeteries. The absence of women and the need to take a bath when coming back from burial grounds can be considered as the central differences.

The identification of *Maaveerar* with gods – which would require a deeper analysis – is not rejected by the LTTE, in spite of their secular nature. During my fieldwork, I observed that not only civilians, but also some people involved in the movement, although not fighters, assert that the *Maaveerar* are gods and *Tuillum Illam* are temples. In my understanding the LTTE do not reject this interpretation because it is necessary in order to make acceptable the introduction of the new funerary rituals. In fact, as pointed out by Paul Connerton, in his book *How Societies Remember*,

All beginnings contain an element of recollection. This is particularly so when a social group makes a concerted effort to begin with a wholly new start. There is a measure of complete arbitrariness in the very nature of any such attempted beginning. […] But the absolutely new is inconceivable. It is not just that it is very difficult to begin with a wholly new start, that too many old loyalties and habits inhibit the substitution of a novel enterprise for an old and established one (1989: 6).

It is not surprising, then, to find out that Prabhakaran himself compares the fallen Tigers to ascetics:

Prabhakaran, the leader of the LTTE, requests the people to venerate those who die in the battle for Eelam as *sannyasis* (ascetics) who renounced their personal desires and transcended their egoistic existence for a common cause of higher virtue (Chandrakanthan 2000: 164).

I would argue that the attitude of the LTTE with regard to the identification of the *Maaveerar* with gods emerges as an ambiguous but necessary one. On one side the *Tuillum Illam* are the places where the secular values of the future nation are displayed: the ideological rejection of all the differences among people (cast, class and gender differences) is symbolically carried out through the performing of the same funerary rituals and the building of equal tombs. On the other side, the idea that *Tuillum Illam* are temples where the *Maaveerar*/gods are worshipped allows the LTTE to avoid a break with the religious feelings of civilians, guaranteeing popular consent to the new project of nation-building.

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