Condition humaine /
Conditions politiques
Revue internationale d'anthropologie du politique

Requiem for a Sacrifice: Mourning Narratives of the Tamil Tigers' Defeat

Giacomo Mantovan

CITE THIS ARTICLE

Giacomo Mantovan, « Requiem for a Sacrifice: Mourning Narratives of the Tamil Tigers' Defeat », *Condition humaine / Conditions politiques* [Online], 4 | 2022. URL : http://revues.mshparisnord.fr/chcp/index.php?id=831

AUTHOR

Giacomo Mantovan is a researcher at the Centre for Research in Anthropology (CRIA) in Portugal. After obtaining his PhD in Social Anthropology at the EHESS in Paris, he did research at Stanford University, the University of Edinburgh and at the International Institute for Asian Studies in Leiden. Through ethnographic fieldwork among the Tamil community in France and in northern Sri Lanka, he has studied the memory of the Sri Lankan civil war and the construction of the self through the militancy in the LTTE (Tamil Tigers), the life stories, and the experience of living in exile. His current project focuses on resistance and memory among the Tamil community in Jaffna, Sri Lanka.

AUTEUR

Giacomo Mantovan est chercheur au Centre for Research in Anthropology (CRIA), au Portugal. Après un doctorat en anthropologie sociale à l'EHESS, il a été chercheur invité à l'Université Stanford, l'Université d'Édimbourg et à l'International Institute for Asian Studies (Leiden). À partir d'une enquête ethnographique dans la communauté tamoule en France et dans le nord du Sri Lanka, il a étudié la mémoire de la guerre civile sri lankaise et la construction du sujet dans le militantisme au sein des LTTE (Tamil Tigers), les récits de vie, et l'expérience de la vie en exil. Son projet actuel vise à étudier la résistance et la mémoire au sein de la communauté tamoule à Jaffna (Sri Lanka).

ABSTRACT

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were defeated in 2009 after three decades of fighting for the independence of the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka. Unwilling to surrender even when defeat looked certain, the LTTE fighters, taking many civilians with them, retreated for four months as the Sri Lankan army gradually surrounded them and slaughtered thousands of fighters and civilians. What is the meaning of the defeat for those fighters who have survived the carnage? What have been the effects of the defeat? How do the LTTE survivors remember this event in exile?
The proposed analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork on Tamil narratives of the Sri Lankan civil war, conducted in Paris between 2009 and 2019. Through an analysis of the LTTE fighters' description of the defeat, and of their imaginaries, this article aims to understand how the members of a nationalist revolutionary group experienced the annihilation of their organisation. This analysis will show that defeat is associated with deep anthropological issues that are worth exploring: far from being only a military or political matter, defeat has a profound cultural and social impact both on how the vanquished remember the tragic past and on how they deal with the new post-war situation. For the former fighters, the LTTE's destruction was not only a military and humanitarian catastrophe, but also spelt the end of a way of being and of a social organisation.
In their testimonies, the fighters describe the fall of their organisation in the last months of the war. They lost everything, even basic things like shelter, food and the right to cremate or bury their dead and to treat the wounded. Nevertheless, they emphasise that they fought to the bitter end and never thought of leaving or surrendering. Based as it was on the idea of sacrifice in the name of the struggle for independence, the imaginary of the LTTE ruled out the possibility of surrender—their way of thinking revolved around the

dichotomy between victory or death. Indeed, according to the survivors, many fighters and especially the leaders chose to commit suicide rather than surrender to the enemy. The article also analyses how the defeat and the LTTE's imaginary and ideology have impacted the fighters' lives in exile and their relationship with others (i.e. the Sri Lankan state and the Tamil diaspora, particularly nationalist associations). The LTTE's imaginary and ideology have profoundly influenced the fighters' efforts to build themselves a new life as defeated survivors—the fighters continue to think of themselves according to the old categories of the LTTE. Thus, though most of them now lead a decent life in France (they have a job and often enjoy refugee status), they experience the condition of defeat as a silent solitude, an incapability of finding a third way beyond the victory–defeat dichotomy.

This article seeks to contribute to the study of defeat and vanquished people, a neglected topic in anthropology and the social sciences. It has been argued that any major defeat will change a political regime, a people's behaviour, and their forms of political participation (Dower, 1999; Hashimoto, 2015). An event of this sort constitutes an opportunity to critically rethink one's own history and the "intellectual order" of one's country (Bloch, 2006; Koselleck, 2005). However, for the LTTE fighters, defeat concerned all aspects of their world: what has been defeated as a result is a whole world-view. In other words, defeat is a loss. The LTTE fighters, unable to reinvent themselves without the organisation, still need the Tigers in order to think about themselves and find an identity. For them, to be defeated is to be still attached to what they have lost even though the world is changing. The article ends by inviting further research on this topic, also including non-activists. Moreover, it underlines that defeat is never fixed in time: though a particular defeat may be clearly defined in terms of its occurrence and consequences, its interpretations and memories may change over time and across different social groups.

RÉSUMÉ

« Requiem pour un sacrifice. Récits du deuil de la défaite des Tigres tamouls »

Les Tigres de libération de l'Eelam tamoul (LTTE) ont été vaincus en 2009, après trois décennies de lutte pour l'indépendance au nom de la minorité tamoule au Sri Lanka. Même lorsque la défaite était certaine, les LTTE ont continué de combattre pendant quatre mois de débâcle, forçant un grand nombre de civils à les suivre tandis qu'ils se retranchaient dans un territoire de plus en plus restreint. Encerclés par l'armée sri lankaise, les LTTE ont été détruits sur fond de bombardements tuant des milliers de civils et

de combattants tamouls. Que signifie être vaincu ? Quels sont les effets de la défaite ? De quelle manière les survivants aujourd'hui en exil se souviennent-ils de cet événement ? Cet article se fonde sur une enquête ethnographique menée à Paris entre 2009 et 2019, auprès des migrants tamouls de la guerre civile sri lankaise. À travers une analyse des récits des combattants des LTTE sur la défaite, et de leur imaginaire, il vise à saisir la manière dont les membres d'un mouvement révolutionnaire et nationaliste ont vécu l'anéantissement de leur organisation. Il apparaît que la défaite est associée à d'importantes questions anthropologiques : loin d'être seulement une question d'ordre militaire ou politique, elle a un profond impact culturel et social, sur la manière dont les vaincus se souviennent de leur passé tragique et sur la façon dont ils vivent dans le nouveau contexte d'après-guerre. Pour les anciens combattants, la destruction des LTTE n'est pas qu'une catastrophe humanitaire et militaire, elle constitue surtout la fin d'une manière d'être et d'une certaine organisation sociale.

Dans leurs témoignages, ils décrivent la chute de leur mouvement armé lors des derniers mois de guerre. Ils ont tout perdu : de l'abri à la nourriture, en passant par la possibilité de soigner les blessés et d'enterrer ou d'incinérer les morts. Néanmoins, ils racontent qu'ils se sont battus jusqu'à la fin et n'ont jamais pensé à s'enfuir ou à se rendre. Fondé sur l'idée du sacrifice pour l'indépendance de la nation tamoule, l'imaginaire des LTTE ne prenait pas en considération la possibilité de capituler ; leur manière de penser consistait en une dichotomie entre victoire et mort. Selon les combattants, les leaders et un grand nombre de leurs camarades ont ainsi décidé de mourir en martyrs plutôt que de se rendre.

L'article analyse aussi l'impact de la défaite, de l'idéologie et de l'imaginaire des LTTE sur la vie des combattants en exil et sur leur rapport aux autres (l'État sri lankais et la diaspora tamoule, en particulier les associations nationalistes présentes en diaspora). L'imaginaire et l'idéologie des LTTE ont profondément influencé les efforts des combattants survivants pour se construire une nouvelle vie en tant que combattants vaincus : ils continuent à se penser selon les catégories culturelles des LTTE. Bien que la plupart d'entre eux aient une vie acceptable en France (ils ont un emploi et souvent le statut de réfugié), ils font l'expérience de la condition de vaincu à travers une solitude silencieuse et sont incapables de trouver une troisième voie au-delà de la dichotomie victoire-défaite.

Ce texte contribue à l'étude de la défaite et des vaincus, un sujet peu abordé en anthropologie et en sciences sociales. Il a été souligné qu'une défaite importante peut changer un système politique, le comportement des individus, et les formes de participation politique (Dower, 1999 ; Hashimoto, 2015). Un tel événement constitue une occasion de repenser sa propre histoire et l'« ordre intellectuel » de son propre pays (Bloch, 2006 ; Koselleck, 2005). Pour les combattants des LTTE, la défaite concerne tous les aspects de leur

monde : c'est leur imaginaire dans son ensemble qui a été vaincu. En d'autres termes, la défaite est une perte. Les combattants, incapables de se concevoir sans leur organisation, ont toujours besoin des LTTE pour penser à eux-mêmes et à leur identité. Ils restent attachés à ce qu'ils ont perdu, même si le monde a changé. Cet article se conclut par une invitation à poursuivre les recherches sur ce sujet, en étudiant notamment l'attitude de personnes n'ayant pas milité. Il souligne également qu'une défaite n'est jamais figée dans le temps : bien qu'elle puisse être claire sur le terrain, avec des conséquences indubitables, son interprétation et sa mémoire peuvent évoluer au fil des ans et selon les différents groupes sociaux qui la subissent.

KEYWORDS: defeat, LTTE, fighters, sacrifice, Tamil diaspora

MOTS-CLÉS : défaite, LTTE, combattants, sacrifice, diaspora tamoule

Introduction

January 2, 2009, Vanni (northern Sri Lanka)
After three decades of fighting for the independence of the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) found themselves surrounded by the Sri Lankan Army (SLA), and their defeat seemed certain. However, the LTTE decided not to surrender, but to withdraw from their capital, Kilinochi. They continued to pull back, progressively losing control over their territory. Military Studies professor Ahmed Hashim describes the LTTE's withdrawal: "…the LTTE began to resemble a huge nomadic tribe on the move, with families intermingled with fighting cadres and large numbers of civilians, mostly unwilling, forced to move with them as human shields" (Hashim, 2013, p. 162). After much carnage, on May 18, 2009, the SLA killed the LTTE's leaders and the government announced its victory "over terrorism".

July 23, 2018, Paris
Kamal told me about his experience as a fighter during the fall of the LTTE. He compared the Tamils' fate to that of native populations in other countries in which a dominant social group had built its own state and then marginalised the minorities, forcing them to live on reservations like tourist attractions. In other words, according to Kamal, the LTTE's destruction had not only been a military and humanitarian catastrophe, but had also spelt the end of a way of being and of a social organisation. Why did the LTTE wish to continue fighting when they no longer had any chance of winning and when surrendering a few months earlier might have saved the lives of thousands of fighters and civilians? How do the LTTE survivors of the carnage remember this event in exile? What are the effects of the cultural destruction recounted by the fighter, Kamal?

The day after the victory, President Mahinda Rajapaksa declared in parliament that there would no longer be minorities in Sri Lanka but only those "who love this country" and those who do not. According to the president's conception of reconciliation, the minorities had to accept the Sinhala Buddhist essence of the Sri Lankan nation-state and stop demanding any form of self-determination (Guruparan, 2016, p. 21–22). As Jonathan Goodhand put it, this is a "victor's peace" aimed more at "power-building than peace-building" (2010, p. 351). The "LTTE's stunning and surprising defeat" (Bass and Amarasingam, 2016, p. 3) was unthinkable, according to the LTTE cadres: as we will see, the

LTTE fighters were strongly committed to the idea of victory or death and did not consider the possibility of losing the war *and* surviving. The ideology that only victory, realised in the creation of the Tamil Eelam (Tamil nation), matters justified a great deal of violence that has been clearly documented and analysed by many scholars (the killing of dissidents, the eviction of Muslims, the violation of human rights, the coercive approach[1]). At first glance, the LTTE's defeat marked a radical turning point for both the Tigers' experience and the broader Sri Lankan political landscape. However, I will show that there are also some elements of continuity to this defeat when understood through conceptual categories developed during the war. This shows that though a defeat may be clear in terms of its consequences, the interpretations and memories of it may change over time and across different social groups. Indeed, recent or remote defeats may influence generations of contemporary or future activists and/or shape the way they see themselves as a nation, a political movement or a diaspora (Valensi, 2009; Bensa, Goromoedo and Muckle, 2015).

In order to grasp the complexity of the new post-war context, I propose to take the "world-view of the vanquished" (Wachtel, 1971) into consideration. Understanding why the defeated acted as they did (i.e. not surrendering even when defeat was certain), as well as how they reasoned and what they did after their defeat, will help us to study how a collective group restructured itself in the aftermath of the war; as the LTTE did not represent all Tamils, more research on the other segments of the Tamil community should be carried out to broaden the analysis. In other words, studying the vanquished will allow us to further contribute to the research showing how warfare, nationalism and politics shape communities, build new groups and create new political subjectivities (Spencer, 1990; Fuglerud, 1999; Wickramasinghe, 2006; Cheran, 2009; Thiranagama, 2011).

Through an analysis of the LTTE fighters' description of the defeat, and of their imaginaries, this article aims to understand how the members of a nationalist revolutionary group experienced the annihilation of their organisation. This analysis will show that defeat is associated with deep anthropological issues that are worth exploring; far from being only a military or political matter, defeat has a profound cultural and social impact,

1 The bibliography on the LTTE's violence is vast. Here I will only refer the reader to the evidence produced by the University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) and to the work of Sharika Thiranagama, who has shown how people lived through the LTTE's authoritarian rule.

both on how the vanquished remember the tragic past and how they deal with the new post-war situation. It will try to show what it means to be defeated and how the LTTE's defeat shaped the political subjectivities that had emerged during the war. As I have addressed the issue of the diasporic implications of the defeat in depth elsewhere (Mantovan and Guyot, 2021), the analysis proposed here will focus on how defeat impacted the lives of the fighters exiled in France and their relationship with other actors within the Tamil diaspora.

The Words of the Vanquished

I met former LTTE fighters in Paris during my fieldwork on Tamil narratives about the Sri Lankan civil war between 2008 and 2019. I was able to meet the fighters through the help of my key informant, Vimal. Although he was open to criticism of the LTTE, I conducted my interviews, not as a detective, but as "a good listener" (Malkki, 1995, p. 51) because I wished to learn how much he and his former comrades were willing to share with an outsider. Their stories are the portrait of a generation of young men and women who grew up during the conflict and enlisted in the LTTE during the 1990s, believing they were fighting a liberation war which could ensure a decent future for the Tamil community. Indeed, all of them felt they belonged to an oppressed community where there was no future for the youth. During their careers in the LTTE, they experienced an upgrade of their social status and found meaning in life. As we will see, the LTTE survivors feel that defeat shattered their old lives, forcing them into an anonymous condition of exile. Thus, their narratives are full of nostalgia and pain for an unachieved world—the Tamil nation—which was what mattered most to them.

The narratives presented in this essay were produced in an intimate setting, i.e. in the fighters' homes or in my own. Because I have already discussed the ethical and methodological issues raised by the fighters' testimonies elsewhere (Mantovan, forthcoming), here I will engage in a reflection on how the defeat has shaped their words and their way of seeing their past and of recounting it. The defeat and the dramatic way in which it occurred have greatly undermined the fighters' capacity to bear witness. During an encounter I had with an ex-servicewoman, when the conversation turned to the issue of the last months of the war, she stopped talking. She had actually fled a few weeks before the end of the conflict in order to save her younger daughter's life, while her husband and her older daughter had stayed on to fight. As she had stopped receiving news from them, she could not bring herself to record these painful events. Similarly, during an interview with three fighters, one man remained silent the whole time. While the other two had been sent

on a mission abroad during the last months of the war, the silent man had been brutally tortured by the SLA, which is why he could not bring himself to speak of these tragic events. The other two fighters expressed their own difficulty in bearing witness by stating: “We joined a cause and didn’t win. So, there is no point in going over it today. The memory of it is painful”.

In Sri Lanka, remaining silent was a way for the fighters to survive and to protect their organisation. In the diaspora, it becomes a form of resistance, also practised by other subaltern groups against the domination of the state or other social groups (Feldman, 1991, p. 11). To remain silent sometimes amounts to an impossibility to share things with others. Jeganathan noted that in Sri Lanka “no one wants to listen” to the Tamil victims of the 2009 carnage (Jeganathan, 2012, in de Alwis, 2016, p. 150). The mute victim is functional to the claims made by the government, which says that it enacted a “zero civilian casualties” policy during the last stages of the war. Primo Levi wrote that the “real witnesses” are not those who recount their painful experience, but those who did not come back, or came back mute (Levi, 2007, p. 64). As power passes through silence (Achino-Loeb, 2006), the muted survivors are the real defeated ones: unable to share their experience and their point of view, they are no longer capable of opposing the government’s narrative about their victory.

The Encirclement, the Fall and the War Crimes

The LTTE was founded in 1972 with the aim of gaining independence for the north-eastern areas of Sri Lanka. This area is home to the Tamil minority community, which has been discriminated against by the government that has represented the Sinhalese majority ever since the independence of Sri Lanka in 1948. In the late 1980s, the LTTE gained control of a large stretch of this territory. It began exercising political, military, economic and cultural hegemony over Tamil society both in Sri Lanka and in the diaspora. However, after the peace talks with the government (2002–06), the SLA found itself in a position of great advantage over the LTTE. Mahinda Rajapaksa, who was elected president of Sri Lanka in 2005, succeeded in hemming in the LTTE diplomatically, logistically and economically. From 2005 till the end of the conflict, Rajapaksa increased the strength of the army from 100,000 to 300,000 (Hashim, 2013, p. 187–88), turning it into a force which proved overwhelming for the LTTE army. Faced with a serious shortage of troops, the LTTE began a mass campaign of forced recruitment, which eroded its support among the population and produced poorly motivated and under-trained cadres (Hashim, 2014). War was resumed in July 2006, and by 2007, the SLA had conquered all the east-

ern areas previously under LTTE control. In 2008, the SLA launched an attack on the Vanni area in the north, where the LTTE found itself under siege until its final defeat on May 18, 2009.

While a UN report (2011) provides an estimate of 40,000 civilian casualties from January to May 2009, BBC journalist Frances Harrison (2012) claims that the UN, after an internal investigation following the 2011 report, raised this figure to 70,000 (Harrison, 2012, p. 236). The UN report (2011) accuses the Sri Lankan government of war crimes and human rights violations: the government is said to have encouraged the civilian population to move into three “No Fire Zones”, which it later bombed; all hospitals in the war zones were systematically shelled, even though the army knew their location perfectly well; the government refused to provide basic humanitarian aid to civilians, and even prevented non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from offering any aid; at the end of the war, the roughly 290,000 survivors were forced to spend several months in overcrowded detention camps; in these camps, many suspected LTTE members were executed in cold blood, others vanished, and many women were raped; finally, during interrogation, people suspected of belonging to the LTTE, or simply of having aided it, were tortured. I will discuss the LTTE’s war crimes later on.

The Building of a New World

In Sri Lanka, Tamil nationalists have widely used history and archaeology to justify their demand for autonomy and independence (Spencer, 1990). However, the fighters never discussed Tamil history with me: their narratives began with the war and were based on their experiences and on representations which they shared with their comrades. They are very proud to describe how the LTTE was born from nothing and turned into a quasi-state. One man explained: “In the first 30 years we expanded, we conquered some territories, we acquired knowledge. …We started from the bottom and we expanded”. This narrative of progress was a step towards the LTTE’s main aim: the establishment of the Tamil Eelam, seen as the salvation of all Tamils. In the speeches of their leader, V. Prabhakaran, we can detect some similarities with the conception of time marking the modern revolutions analysed by Hannah Arendt: the revolution is a new beginning. The American and French revolutions introduced a different conception of time compared to previous revolts, marking a transition from the idea of restoration (cyclical time) to that of the beginning of a new history (linear time) (Arendt, 2006, p. 61–63). The revolution is a new beginning that possesses an ineluctable character: it is an unstoppable process, driven by a force which exceeds the will of individuals—“the force of history and histori-

cal necessity" (Arendt, 1963, p. 150). Even though the Tamils do not have a linear conception of history, but rather conceive of their past as a living heritage (Daniel, 1996, p. 27), and even though the LTTE presented itself as the guardian of "Tamil culture", according to Prabhakaran, the LTTE constituted the beginning of a *new* epoch for the Tamils: "…the Mavarar (martyrs) who bound death in chains will write a new history. They will light the light for the dawn of our generation" (Prabhakaran, 2007, p. 276).

It was on the basis of this ineluctable conception of the LTTE's history that the fighters embraced the dangers of a soldier's life. LTTE fighters experienced the precariousness of existence as the likelihood of individual, yet not collective, death—soldiers may die, but the organisation will live on, not least thanks to their sacrifice. Certainly, from its founding up until the early 2000s, the LTTE grew steadily. Even while losing some battles, it always managed to hold itself together and to increase its power. This gave the cadres the impression that the LTTE was practically invincible and in complete control of its collective destiny. However, during the last months of the war, the situation changed swiftly and irreversibly. As one man put it, "it all came down so strongly that we could not get up again. It's like when you dive into the water, and you don't even know if you'll be able to get back up for air".

The Dismantling of the LTTE and Its World

During my interviews with the fighters, it became clear to me that what pained them the most—apart from the death of their comrades and relatives—was the collapse of everything they had built, their entire world. Their accounts of their defeat do not follow any clear chronological order, but focus on the breakdown of the social organisation which had come to influence all aspects of their social life. In the fighters' narratives, three points show that the military defeat entailed the destruction of the LTTE's cultural world.

First, the fighters mingled with civilians, while normally they lived separately. Before the retreat, the combatants had mostly led separate lives in the barracks, and permission to visit one's family was granted infrequently. It was commonly acknowledged that joining the LTTE meant leaving one's biological family to join a new family (Herath, 2011). In Tamil militancy, kinship was constructed explicitly and performatively as an alternative to traditional kinship (Thiranagama, 2011, p. 184). At the beginning of its withdrawal, the LTTE brought along with it between 300,000 and 400,000 civilians from the Vanni area. The UN has accused the LTTE of having forced civilians to remain in areas under its control, of having opened fire on those attempting to flee, and of having used military

equipment in the proximity of civilians (UN, 2011, p. 65). However, the LTTE had collapsed, and civilians and combatants had only one thing in mind: to try to survive and save their relatives. As the LTTE was no longer able to ensure a line of defence capable of stemming the advance of the SLA, and drew further and further back, civilians and fighters ended up side by side: one officer stated, "I would go and fight in the front line at night, and during the day I would go back to build bunkers because I had some injured men that I had to bring to safety. I dug a bunker for my injured men and for my family. As a matter of fact, they were all in the same bunkers".

Whereas the UN regarded this mingling of civilians and soldiers as a war crime, the fighters themselves experienced it as a tragic consequence of the destruction of their organisation, which was no longer in a position to defend its people and land.

Secondly, the more the LTTE withdrew, the less it was able to treat the wounded and to bury or cremate the fallen. The difficulties in treating the wounded were not simply due to the loss of drugs and other medical supplies, but also the systematic bombing of hospitals by the SLA (UN, 2011, p. ii). One combatant paints a depressing picture of how he was forced to take his wounded mother to the hospital during the last days of the war: "I brought her [my mother] to the hospital. When I arrived, there were injured people everywhere, but there were no longer any doctors. Nobody was there, no staff, because the army was a few metres away from the hospital, so everybody who wasn't injured had fled because they were scared".

An equally tragic turn occurred in the disposal of bodies. In the early stages of the retreat, the LTTE would set up emergency hospitals and try to identify the deceased. They would record all deaths and inform the victims' families, and then they would bury the bodies. In the final weeks, by contrast, the LTTE could no longer take care of the dead. One fighter remarked: "They died completely outside of their culture. Never before in our history had anything of the sort happened".

The third aspect which my interviewees were keen to highlight was the loss of their material culture: "When the SLA arrived, we lost all the basic things: roof, shelter, food, clothes. First, our shelter: we sheltered under the trees, we had nothing to cook with, and for one month we did not have any clothes. …There was no longer any help (from the LTTE). Those in charge of the food could not go to get it: they would be locked up, and then could not leave anymore".

During the last weeks, many people had only plain rice to eat. My interlocutors declared that many individuals were killed while out looking for food or simply for a place to relieve themselves. As there were no longer any toilets left, people were forced to relieve themselves together, in shared spaces, and this was perceived as shameful by the men and especially the women, who, as one combatant noted, were accustomed "to the modesty of Tamil culture".

In addition, a fighter recounts that although the LTTE bank had given everyone back their savings, money had become practically useless—everyone preferred to barter. Given the lack of basic goods, people realised that exchanging items made more sense than selling them. Material culture—things like dwelling places, clothing, personal items, even toilets—defines the way of being in the world of groups and individuals. In other words, it is through objects that human beings see themselves as subjects (Julien and Rossellin, 2005, p. 65). While referring to a completely different context, Primo Levi states that in concentration camps, dehumanisation occurred even before daily acts of brutality commenced: it started with the prisoners' arrival at camp, when they would be stripped of all personal possessions, down to their hair and beard: "Imagine now a man who is deprived of everyone he loves, and at the same time of his house, his habits, his clothes, in short of everything he possesses: he will be a hollow man, reduced to suffering and needs, forgetful of dignity and restraint, for he who loses all often easily loses himself" (Levi, 1958, p. 21–22). Likewise, according to my sources, the survivors had to face deep humiliation: they felt as though they had fallen into a non-human condition, a condition closer to that of animals.

A Worthwhile Fight, a Worthy Death

My interlocutors tended to dwell on the moment when they were forced to surrender themselves to the enemy army. They especially stressed the chaos of the last days: some combatants received orders to surrender, while others continued to fight. With the command chain broken and the prospect of defeat certain, fighters and civilians were now free to surrender. In this unexpected context, the lack of orders for those fighting created much uncertainty: "Should I stay there until the end? Should I leave with my family? I didn't know. However, I thought I had to stay there because I was an engaged fighter and could not end up under the control of the SLA". Kamal described to me the spirit with which he faced those last days: "We lost almost everything, but we were still fighting….

We no longer had any obligations, we were free; we could flee, *but we knew that we would die and we wanted to die with dignity*[2]". All my interlocutors emphasised that even though they realised that defeat was inevitable, they continued to fight to the bitter end. The Tigers clung to the only things they had left: their role as fighters and their ideology, which did not entertain the possibility of defeat or surrender, as the words of their leader Prabhakaran demonstrate: "When I made the decision to confront the Indian Army I did not bother about the chances of victory or defeat: I only reflected whether we had the determination and bravery to take up this war. An ethnic community never gives up its aim and rights for the fear of possible defeat" (Prabhakaran, 2007, p. 262).

The LTTE ideology had no room to even contemplate the possibility of defeat and surrender: the idea of sacrifice for the Tamil homeland was the cornerstone of the Tigers' imaginary. According to my key informant, Vimal, the upper echelons of the LTTE gave their soldiers the option to either surrender or kill themselves. On May 18, Raj's superior told him to surrender and gave him the following orders: "The wounded who could not walk or be transported were to be given a choice as to how to commit suicide: cyanide capsules or bombs". The LTTE developed the idea of death in combat through a vast cultural production ranging from its leader's speeches and propaganda to political rituals and forms of artistic expression (poetry, theatre and dance). Death and self-sacrifice were celebrated in the name of the motherland. Fallen LTTE members were referred to as *maveerar* ("great heroes") based on the concepts of *tiyaki* ("one who abandons") and *tiyakam* ("renunciation, abandonment"), "specifically the sacrifice or devotion of somebody who has freed himself from all earthly bonds" (Hellmann-Rajanayagam, 2005, p. 123). Those who joined the LTTE's ranks as fighters were ready not just to die in combat, but even to take their own life, as evidenced by the existence of the suicide commando corps, the Black Tigers, which had more volunteers than it needed (Hopgood, 2005), and by the fact that every fighter had a cyanide capsule on a string around their neck which they were expected to take in the event of imminent capture. They would rather take their own life than reveal the organisation's secrets under torture.

In 1991, the LTTE established a new funerary practice: it created burial places called *tuillam illam* ("sleeping houses"), not unlike the war cemeteries in Western countries (Natali, 2004). Even after the defeat, November 27 is still celebrated as Great Heroes' Day (*Maveerar Naal*) in the 18 *tuillam illam* of Sri Lanka and across Tamil diaspora

2 Italics my own.

communities (which set up cemeteries for the occasion). Alternatively known as *Elucci Naal* (Day of Rising), it is also a day of national uprising. National liberation (*cutantiram*), the Tigers' ultimate goal, is expected to be accomplished through the fighters' sacrifice (Fuglerud, 2011). The *tuillam illam* are gardens in which the martyrs are "planted" like seeds in the soil and, like plants, they will sprout up again (Natali, 2004, p. 130–34). The same concept has been expressed by Prabhakaran himself (2007, p. 294): "We buried them as seeds of liberation in the lap of our mother. …Many thousands of individual lives have entered the womb of history. …They assume the form of independence of the nation".

My interlocutors said that according to their leader, there were only two things a fighter could do to fulfil their duty: establish the Tamil Eelam or die trying. A man explained his point of view thus: "What touches us is that martyrs gave their lives for a cause, and this cause concerns us all. We are still here and we may have doubts about the cause, we might disengage from it, but for them that's it, it's over—they have died for the cause. They have achieved something…they have completed their journey". Their lives, their self-identity and their belonging to a community of fighters took shape within the context of the construction of the nation-state (Hellmann-Rajanayagam, 2005). With the collapse of this project, their life has lost all meaning. The idea of dying for the motherland haunts those who have survived. Hence, the fact of having survived without attaining their objective gives them a sense of incompleteness and guilt.

Within this context, we can understand why certain fighters, and particularly most of the LTTE leaders, killed themselves at the end of the war. In taking their own lives, they completed the fighter's journey and spared themselves the dishonour of being helpless witnesses to the destruction of their organisation. From the Tigers' perspective, the end of the war was a collective sacrifice that secured the martyrs a place in the history of the Tamil struggle. It may be argued, therefore, that the LTTE leaders' decision to fight to death was dictated by a world-view which ruled out the possibility of surrender. To the bitter end, the top brass of the LTTE remained faithful to what they had preached: a Tamil Eelam or death. The radicalism of this idea ruled out the possibility of finding a third way beyond the victory–defeat dichotomy, making the survivors' life even harder.

The Solitude of the Vanquished

The destruction of the LTTE had a profound impact on the fighters' social life, particularly with regard to their relationship with the Sri Lankan state and its inhabitants (both Sin-

halese and Tamil), and with the Tamil diaspora. The defeat put the LTTE survivors in a position of inferiority with respect to both the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil community, making them disappear from the political arena and silencing them. The Sri Lankan government did not treat the LTTE survivors as political actors with political demands, but as ruthless terrorists to be sent to rehabilitation camps and kept under surveillance by the security forces. As Rachel Seoighe (2017) has shown, the government has sought to erase the LTTE's memory—for example, by destroying all LTTE cemeteries—through a "cultural annihilation" process in which "annihilation is not eradication but rather the stripping away of effective cultural resources for resistance; not the killing of bodies but the spirit" (Brewer, 2010, p. 22). As regards the suffering of Tamil civilians, the government has exhorted the Sri Lankan population to forget (de Alwis, 2016, p. 149). In post-war Sri Lanka, the struggle is no longer over culture and history, but over memory (*ibid.*). In such a context, recounting one's own story as a freedom fighter is an act of resistance. But this act of resistance is framed by the cultural resources that the fighters learnt during their service in the LTTE. Following Marshall Sahlins (1985), we might argue that the event of defeat, as a historical act which enters into the structure of a society, is interpreted through the pre-existing categories of that society, while at the same time transforming those categories and the social structure. The Tigers interpret the SLA's slaughtering of the LTTE through their categories, i.e. as a paroxysm of the Sinhala oppression of the Tamil minority. This pattern of continuity is even stronger among the nationalist associations in the diaspora which, unlike the fighters, do not accept the death of the LTTE's leader and prefer not to mention the military defeat. Rather, they emphasise the humanitarian tragedy in order to demand an international enquiry into the SLA's war crimes. This interpretation of the defeat serves the purpose of carrying on the struggle for independence by other means (Mantovan and Guyot, 2021). The defeat and the different responses to it by fighters and associations complicate the relationship between these two groups. Now that the LTTE has been defeated, Tamil nationalist associations have become independent and refuse admittance to former fighters. Some members of the associations even consider these survivors to be "traitors", particularly those who were taken to government-run rehabilitation camps and are suspected of having collaborated with the Sri Lankan security forces in exchange for their release (Mantovan and Guyot, 2021). The associations also refuse to commemorate on Great Heroes' Day those martyrs who died during the last months of the war, arguing that the LTTE's central committee (which no longer exists) did not record them as martyrs. This has created much tension between the associations and the fighters, who, in 2016, organised a separate commemoration on the grounds that—as one man told me—"they [the associations] do not respect

the martyrs". Already silenced by the death of the LTTE and by the Sri Lankan state, the fighters do not find in the associations an interlocutor willing to listen to them.

The defeat complicated even further a social life in exile that was already difficult for the fighters who had moved to France before 2009. Demobilisation and exile are "critical events" (Das, 1995) in each fighter's life journey (Mantovan, 2015). Already during the war, former fighters complained that they were being discriminated against by their community in France: as they did not receive any public recognition, they did not usually share their stories with Tamil civilians. The defeat brought an end to these individuals' dream of returning to their homeland after the establishment of an independent Tamil country, a narrative spread by pro-LTTE associations during the war (Étiemble, 2004). Thus, the exile has become permanent. The LTTE's alternative between victory and death has deprived former fighters of any cultural strategy to deal with their condition as defeated survivors. This emptiness is exacerbated by the loss of comrades and relatives, the loss of social status, and the difficulty of adapting to an anonymous life in exile, which makes former fighters so attached to their past identity.

Anthropologist Michael Jackson has argued that life stories help to tame reality: they make it bearable and lend it meaning; they give the subject a place in the world and the impression of having control over their own life (Jackson, 2006). Stories allow us to believe that we can discern and determine the meaning of our life journey: where we come from and where we are going (Jackson, 2006, p. 16). However, this analysis is implicitly based on the liberal premise that the self exists separately from the political regime in which the individual lives. But Holbraand (2014) has shown that the socialist revolutions sought to erase the separation between the self and the state. And this was also the LTTE's project (Mantovan, forthcoming). The fighters now find themselves facing the difficult task of having to rethink their life journeys, with the paradox of no longer being bound to a specific political form of government (i.e. of no longer being obliged to give precedence to the LTTE's needs over their own personal desires) while still reasoning through the LTTE's mental categories. Telling their stories could help former fighters fulfil this task, yet few people are willing to speak, and fewer still, even among foreigners, are willing to listen. To be someone defeated is to endure a condition of silent solitude. The fighters express their pain, regret and nostalgia for a life which demanded enormous sacrifices, yet was more meaningful and worth living than the life they now lead in Paris.

The testimonies I have examined are cries of pain and revolt against the destruction of the LTTE. Through their accounts, these people reconstruct their own world, which is no

longer the world of the LTTE as an organisation, but rather the world of vanquished men and women remembering the rise and fall of the context and the organisation that made them the individuals they feel they are. They try to take control of their own history and to recount it in their own words, reversing the narrative woven by the government and by mainstream media, which describe the end of the war as a victory over a band of blood-thirsty terrorists. However, even when they succeed in recreating their own world and imaginary by sharing a narrative with an anthropologist who can help circulate it, they do so with the sadness of individuals who know that their "real" world is lost and that they can share it with very few people.

Conclusion

The testimonies of the fighters interviewed here show that defeat is far from being merely a military issue with exclusively political and humanitarian consequences. The fighters' military defeat entailed the destruction of all aspects of their world: from its imaginary and culture to its economy. The defeat undermined a way of experiencing and conceiving of their society and their relationship with others. Ultimately, what is defeated is a whole world-view (Wachtel, 1971).

The fighters' testimonies are "narratives of mourning" (Connerton, 2011) for the loss of their organisation, which they regarded as their family and hope for the future. Defeat is therefore a kind of loss, to which each person responds in a different way, according to their position with respect to what has been lost. Judith Butler (2004) says that with each loss we lose a part of ourselves, thereby becoming inscrutable to ourselves: "Who 'am' I, without you?" asks the philosopher. Significantly, a servicewoman told me: "Since the last combat in the Vanni, every Tamil has felt lost, abandoned like an orphan". John Dower has shown that in the aftermath of World War II, though defeat shaped the way in which the Japanese behaved and reasoned, in order to cope with this traumatic event, people in Japan sought to find "something familiar to hold on to" (1999, p. 30). In this regard, we have seen how the fighters (along with the nationalist associations), unable to reinvent themselves without the LTTE, still need the Tigers to think about themselves and find an identity. For them, to be defeated is to still be attached to what they have lost even though the world is changing. However, the LTTE does not represent all Sri Lankan Tamils. Are civilians too defeated people? Have they found a third way beyond the victors–vanquished dichotomy? How has the end of the war changed civilians' social life in the diaspora, and shaped the connection between diasporic sites and the homeland? New

research that also includes non-activists should help us to grasp other aspects of this overlooked topic.

Walter Benjamin (2000) argued that history is a tool which victors use to marginalise the vanquished, the subaltern, the working class a second time. Since then, many social scientists have tried to give the subaltern and the working class a voice. The defeated fighter is often mute, alone and socially invisible, but if we point our gaze in their direction, we may be able to grasp hitherto unnoticed fragments of our contemporary world—fragments that could be forgotten forever, or could become a source of inspiration for future generations, or for future social scientists willing to rethink the way we write history, as Koselleck (2011) has optimistically suggested.

- ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article has been funded by the FCT as part of the CRIA's (Centre for Research in Anthropology) strategic plan UIDB/04038/2020. I thank Michèle Baussant and the anonymous reviewers of *Condition humaine / Conditions politiques* for their valuable comments on the first draft of this article.

ACHINO-LOEB Maria-Luisa (dir.), *Silence: The Currency of Power*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2006.

ARENDT Hannah, *On Revolution*, London, Faber & Faber, 1963.

BASS Daniel and AMARASINGAM Amarnath, "Introduction: Problems and Prospects for Post-War Sri Lanka", in BASS Daniel and AMARASINGAM Amarnath (dir.), *Sri Lanka: The Struggle for Peace in the Aftermath of War*, London, Hurst & Company, 2016, p. 1-11.

BENJAMIN Walter, "Sur le concept d'histoire", *Œuvres. Tome III*, Paris, Gallimard, 2000, p. 427-443.

BENSA Alban, GOROMOEDO Kacué Yvon, MUCKLE Adrian, *Les sanglots de l'aigle pêcheur. Nouvelle-Calédonie : la guerre kanak de 1917*, Toulouse, Anacharsis, 2015.

BLOCH Marc, *L'étrange défaite*, in BLOCH Marc, *L'Histoire, la Guerre, la Résistance*, Paris, Gallimard, 2006, p. 519 - 653.

BREWER John, *Peace Processes: A Sociological Approach*, Cambridge, Polity, 2010.

BUTLER Judith, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, London, Verso, 2004.

CHERAN Rudramoorty (dir.), *Pathways of Dissent: Tamil Nationalism in Sri Lanka*, New Delhi, SAGE, 2009.

CONNERTON Paul, *The Spirit of Mourning: History, Memory, and the Body*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

DANIEL E. Valentine, *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in an Anthropography of Violence*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996.

DAS Veena, *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1995.

DE ALWIS Malathi, "Trauma, Memory, Forgetting", in AMARASINGAM Amarnath and BASS Daniel (dir.), *Sri Lanka: The Struggle for Peace in the Aftermath of War*, London, Hurst & Company, 2016, p. 147-161.

DOWER John, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*, New York, Norton & Company, 1999.

ÉTIEMBLE Angélina, "Les Tamouls du Sri Lanka dans la région parisienne : l'emprise du politique", *Revue française des affaires sociales* [Online], no. 2, 2004, p. 145-64, URL: https://www.cairn.info/revue-francaise-des-affaires-sociales-2004-2-page-145.htm.

FELDMAN Allen, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1991.

FUGLERUD Øivind, *Life on the Outside: Tamil Diaspora and Long-Distance Nationalism*, London, Sterling, Pluto Press, 1999.

FUGLERUD Øivind, "Aesthetics of Martyrdom: The Celebration of Violent Death among the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam", in WEISS Nerina and SIX-HOHENBALKEN Maria (dir.), *Violence Expressed*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2011, p. 71-88.

GOODHAND Jonathan, "Stabilising a Victor's Peace? Humanitarian Action and Reconstruction in Eastern Sri Lanka", *Disasters*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2010, p. 342-367.

GURUPARAN Kumaravadivel, "The Politics of the Discourse on Post-War Reconciliation in Sri Lanka", in BASS Daniel and AMARASINGAM Amarnath (dir.), *Sri Lanka: The Struggle for Peace in the Aftermath of War*, London, Hurst & Company, 2016, p. 15-34.

HARRISON Frances, *Still Counting the Dead: Survivors of Sri Lanka's Hidden War*, London, Portobello Books, 2012.

HASHIM Ahmed, *When the Counterinsurgency Wins: Sri Lanka's Defeat of the Tamil Tigers*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013.

HASHIMOTO Akiko, *The Long Defeat: Cultural Trauma, Memory, and Identity in Japan*, Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, 2015.

HELLMANN-RAJANAYAGAM Dagmar, "And Heroes Die: Poetry of the Tamil Liberation Movement in Northern Sri Lanka", *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* vol. 28, no. 1, 2005, p. 112-153.

HERATH Tamara, *Women in Terrorism: Case of the LTTE*, New Delhi, SAGE, 2012.

HOLBRAAD Martin, "*Revolución o muerte*: Self-Sacrifice and the Ontology of Cuban Revolution", *Ethnos. Journal of Anthropology* [Online], vol. 79, no. 3, 2014, p. 365-387, URL: https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2013.794149.

HOPGOOD Stephen, "Tamil Tigers, 1987-2002", in GAMBETTA Diego (dir.), *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 43–76.

JACKSON Michael, *The Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression, and Intersubjectivity*, Copenhagen, Museum Tusculanum Press, 2006.

JULIEN Marie-Pierre and ROSSELIN Céline, *La culture matérielle*, Paris, La Découverte, 2005.

KOSELLECK Reinhart, *L'expérience de l'histoire*, Paris, Points, 2011.

LEVI Primo, *If this is a man*, London, The Orion Press, 1958.

LEVI Primo, *I sommersi e i salvati*, Torino, Einaudi, 2007.

MALKKI Liisa, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania*, Chicago/London, University of Chicago Press, 1995.

MANTOVAN Giacomo, "Making the Invincible Tigers: Embodiment, Discipline and Violence in LTTE Training Camps", *Conflict and Society*, forthcoming.

MANTOVAN Giacomo, "'Ils étaient les rois…'. L'adieu aux armes d'anciens combattants des Tigres tamouls exilés en France", *Migrations Société* [Online], vol. 5, no. 161, 2015, p. 89-104, URL: https://www.cairn.info/revue-migrations-societe-2015-5-page-89.htm.

MANTOVAN Giacomo and GUYOT Lola, "Une défaite, des formes de résistance mémorielle multiples. Enjeux de la prolifération des récits parmi les militants LTTE en diaspora", paper presented at the 8th ABSP Convention, 2021, 7-9 avril.

NATALI Cristiana, *Sabbia sugli dei. Pratiche commemorative tra le Tigri tamil*, Torino, Il Segnalibro, 2004.

PRABHAKARAN Velupillai, *Tamil Source in English Translation: Reflections of the Leader. Quotes by Velupillai Prabhakaran*, Translation by Peter Schalk and Alvappillai Velupillai, Uppsala, Uppsala University, 2007.

SAHLINS Marshall, *Islands of History*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1985.

SEOIGHE Rachel, *War, Denial and Nation-Building in Sri Lanka: After the End*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

SPENCER Jonathan (dir.), *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict*, New York, Routledge, 1990.

THIRANAGAMA Sharika, *In My Mother's House: Civil War in Sri Lanka*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.

UN, *Report of the Secretary-General's Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka* [Online], UN, 2011, URL: https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/document/poc-rep-on-account-in-sri-lanka.php.

VALENSI Lucette, *Fables de la mémoire. La glorieuse bataille des trois rois (1578)*, Paris, Chandeigne, 2009.

WACHTEL Nathan, *La vision des vaincus. Les Indiens du Pérou devant la Conquête espagnole, 1530-1570*, Paris, Gallimard, 1971.

WICKRAMASINGHE Nira, *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age: A History of Contested Identities*, Honolulu, HI, University of Hawai'i Press, 2006.