

Tamil Art Practice in Diasporic Existence

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Abstract

This paper presents a research project concerned with the Tamil diaspora in the UK, in particular how contemporary artists in these expatriate minority communities use art making to investigate their sense of complex and multiple belonging. The study is based on seventeen months of ethnographic fieldwork in London and Belfast, and an additional visit to the Tamil regions in Sri Lanka from where this diaspora has scattered. Positioned at the intersection of art and anthropology, collaborative artistic practices form a vital part of the study's methods and presentations. This paper first addresses the project in relation to the idea of community, which was the theme of the 4th Arts-Based Research and Artistic Research Conference at Aalto University where this paper was initially presented. After a brief outline of the current realignment between art and anthropology, it discusses the collaborative work with the Tamil artists and contextualizes their diasporic existence. The paper identifies the concern with knowledge as emergent through practices and material engagements as a similarity between artistic and anthropological ways of working, and promotes the development of shared methodological and conceptual frameworks. In conclusion, it argues that when this intersectional work involves people and communities, it is necessary to practice thorough self-reflexivity and become aware of how we affect people rather than imagine ourselves as constructors of harmonious and decontextualized situations to be experienced as autonomous events.

Bio

Anna Laine holds a Ph.D. in social anthropology and is trained as photographer and artist. Her research explores possible and impossible combinations of academic and artistic ways of working and suggests experimental strategies where the not yet known can emerge. The main subject matter is Tamil art and material culture, located in South Asia as well as in the diaspora. Selected projects will be published as the book "Practicing Art and Anthropology: A Transdisciplinary Journey" by Bloomsbury in 2018. Laine has lately been an Associate Professor at Dalarna University, curator at the Swedish National Museums of World Culture, and a visiting research fellow at Goldsmiths, University of London.

Community

As participants in the Aalto University conference, we positioned our belonging within a global community of researchers. Yet, we struggled to differentiate ourselves as a particular community concerned with arts-based and artistic research. The conference was one way of producing us into having certain common traits. I further belong to a community of researchers in anthropology, where the understanding of communities across the globe has been a foundational matter. When we, as scholars and artists, address ‘a community’ that we wish to conduct research with, do we consider them as different from us, and what would that mean for how we approach them? Or have we merely constructed a boundary around a group that suits our own interests?

Community refers to a type of social organisation, and we might identify with several groups at the same time, be they national, regional, religious, ethnic, or disciplinary. But the term is fairly unspecific; it holds notions of closeness, shared interests and mutual cooperation. Sometimes it adds a sense of politeness, as in saying the Asian community rather than the Asians. We often think about communities as defined by their particular culture, and tend to use cultural traits in public debates on ethnic minorities. Both community and culture can be defined in several ways, but a main dividing line lies in whether the terms refer to something we make or something we have. Benedict Anderson (1983) established the term “imagined communities” to define people’s perception of belonging to a constructed community, for example a nation. The idea of culture is fundamental to anthropological conceptualizations of social life. The employment of the term during the classic modernist period had certain reifying effects which in turn was criticised within the major self-reflexive challenge of the discipline and its claims of scientific authority during the “Writing Culture” debate in the 1980s and 90s (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Following this framework, Lutz and Abu-Lughod (1990) argued: “For many... the term [culture] seems to connote a certain coherence, uniformity and timelessness in the meaning systems of a given group, and to operate rather like the earlier concept of ‘race’ in identifying fundamentally different, essentialized, and homogeneous social units (as when we speak about ‘a culture’). Because of these associations, ... [it] falsely fixes the boundaries between groups in an absolute and artificial way” (p. 9).

It is central to acknowledge that when we as researchers approach a community, we become part of making it. Gerd Baumann (1996), an anthropologist who studied various forms of community building in the London suburb Southall, argues that “by stereotyping informants as ‘belonging to’ or even ‘speaking for’ a pre-defined ‘community’, one runs the risk of tribalizing people, instead of listening to them, and might end up studying communities of the researcher’s own making” (p. 8). This self-reflexivity, brought forth by the Writing Culture critique, and the complexities of contemporary belongings, elucidated for example by studies of transnationalism and migration (Vertovec, 2009; 2010) and the theory of intersectionality (Cho, Crenshaw & McCall, 2013) demonstrates that whenever we address ‘a community’, we have to investigate its particular constitution in relation to larger contexts and overlapping social categories. Otherwise, we might reify what is actually always in flux. The method ethnographic fieldwork, based on participatory practices and long term engagements with people in their everyday lives, allows the researcher to grasp in-depth perspectives which consequentially minimises this risk.

Art and anthropology

Artists and anthropologists have engaged in renewed alignment during the last decades. This was partly initiated by Clifford and his idea of ethnographic fieldwork as open toward various disciplines outside anthropology (1988). Artists began to explore fieldwork as method and criticise practices of collection and display in ethnographic museums during the ethnographic turn, and current intensified exchange has been motivated by the increase of artistic interventions in social contexts formed by global power relations where anthropologists can contribute with assessments and analyses of these hierarchies. Within anthropology, the collaboration with artists has evoked an intersection at the pre-existing subfields visual anthropology and the anthropology of the senses and provided a framework beyond the incorporation of visual materials as mere illustration and documentation (Schneider & Wright, 2006; 2010; 2013). Both art and anthropology share a critical rethinking of contemporary realities and suggestions of perspectives alternative to classical Western definitions and the current dominance of capitalism, individualism, and loss of community (Sansi, 2015). But already in 1995, Hal Foster presented a sceptical perspective of mutual envy within this interaction, and he cautioned for artists engaged in site-specific works and community art who appropriated the term ethnography without actually implementing the method, and for self-idealized

anthropologists who pretend to be avant-garde artists open to chance. Foster argued that artists risk to objectify the other for their own fame and engage in self-fashioning rather than support the community's well-being. This lack of ethics which might reproduce the power relations one aims to challenge is still valid and needs to be further debated (Bishop, 2012; Grimshaw & Ravetz, 2015; Kester, 2011; Kwon, 2002; Sansi, 2015; Schneider & Wright, 2013).

This paper aligns with the conviction that exchange between different ways of working in the respective fields hold potentials for new creative methodological and conceptual frameworks to emerge, and argue that we should take the opportunity to collaborate across disciplinary boundaries to further our knowledge and improve the ways socially engaged art and anthropological practices can develop. Recent suggestions for example assert more nuanced definitions of participation and collaboration which consider the differences between taking part and co-labour inherent in the respective terms (Schneider & Wright, 2013).

Tamil diaspora artists

The multiple Tamil communities I worked with have a background in Sri Lanka. This nation has been fraught by thirty years of civil war between Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims, partly spurred by British colonial interventions. Early migrant groups began to establish themselves in London in the 1960s, before the war started, and they consisted of upper castes¹ with stable finances who left voluntarily for higher education and better lives. As the brutality towards Tamils escalated, the movement of migrants altered into outright flight were members of different castes and classes were able to escape and become refugees and asylum seekers. The classification of the Tamil liberation struggle as terrorism articulated by global communities such as the UN and the EU has had a large impact on where and how expatriate communities have been able to establish themselves locally. Village communities in Sri Lanka have transformed into global networks where one single family often is dispersed across Canada, Norway, Australia, and the UK. I conducted fieldwork among various groups, and there is a strong hierarchy between newcomers and the already established. This is often reinforced by caste difference, a belonging a person is considered to have but not mention unless in terms of community as a consequence of its association with pre-modern practices. Like renegotiations of caste, much takes place beneath the surface and beyond the first

answer to an outsider's questions, and I would like to emphasize that we need to be careful and attentive in how we approach people - and who we approach - in relation to what we would like our projects to do.

The artists I focused on had a background in relatively affluent communities. But they were marginalised in the British context and acutely aware of increasing racism. The art scene encouraged them to use their ethnic difference as a selling point and they were never evaluated along the same lines as their peers with white complexion and following status. This situation worked on different levels as explained by Reginald Aloysius, who was born in London in the 1970s:

I remember, I wanting to become known as an ARTIST not a SRI LANKAN artist or a TAMIL artist... that I need some kind of... catch, to lure people in, just to like my work, while I wanted to be known as an artist for the sake of my art. And I think that is probably where I DENIED it. While actually that is exactly what I should have been doing, because that's exactly who I am... I thought I would have been a bit of a LIAR because I'm not Tamil Sri Lankan, I'm BRITISH Tamil Sri Lankan, if you know what I mean. WHATEVER that means because we are struggling trying to figure out whether we ARE British.

Aloysius' response to the art market has thus changed over time. He has further experienced considerable resistance from his family, and on the marriage market which is a central site for creating a good life and prosperous future within the Tamil communities. The precarious financial situation of full time commitment to art practice counters the strong emphasis on upward mobility in the caste and class hierarchies which are reconstituted on the marriage market. The dominant construction of Tamil identity focuses on language and literature, and the nationalist ideology has used the notion of community and culture as something you have - in order to mobilize the political struggle for a separate nation during the war. Subsequently, the artists' focus on visuality and materiality defies the idea of what it means to be Tamil. My work thus became directed towards the margins, and some early contacts even questioned the sincerity of my interest in Tamil culture. Although the six artists I came in contact with are marginalised and dispersed, their determination is an example of that norms and values that organise communities and their

imagined boundaries are open to challenge and negotiation, and hereby situated in continuous processes of change (Laine, 2015a; 2015b).

The problem of using community as a singularity is further demonstrated in the contemporary production of Sri Lankan artists. During an exhibition of so called Sri Lankan art at Brunei Gallery in 2014, the majority were Sinhalese, and the Tamils were only represented by artists from the diaspora, not from the island. One was Aloysious, and the other was Nina Mangalanayagam who grew up in Sweden. As the exhibition was curated around experiences of the war, this choice was quite remarkable. At the global biennale in Colombo, the capital in Sri Lanka, Tamil artists living on the island are almost as absent. The lack is related to the fact that the Sinhalese government banished English and Tamil from higher education which made it impossible for Tamils to get a degree in fine art during several decades. These discrepancies are partly understood as revenge for how Tamils were favoured under the British colonial administration, but they also reflect the contemporary majority rule in Sri Lanka responsible for continuous silencing and disappearances of Tamils (Laine, 2015a).

Research across disciplines

The methods and presentations of my research with the Tamil diaspora make use of artistic practices, through explorations of participatory events, workshops and exhibitions, and this approach is founded in my earlier training in photography and art practice. Some actions were organised together with a Tamil refugee centre, others focused on the artists. One of the main works is the 35 min video piece “Making Home: in collaboration with five artists based in the UK.” The videoing developed over months in conjunction with the specific relationship that emerged between each artist and myself. Although they responded in various ways, they can all be considered as co-labourers. Two artists took part in the editing process as well, while all five saw and commented on the first minutes before I continued, and all of them have seen and approved of the final version before it has been shown in public. The artists articulate different ways of working and being, but yet argue that they share certain issues, such as colonial history, Sinhala discrimination, the civil war, and the contemporary dispersion of their families across the globe. They also share emotional affect in resonance with certain objects and materials related to their Tamil Sri Lankan past. The video addresses the notion of home in

relation to constant movements where the diaspora artists have to learn how to reconnect with fragmented memories, displaced skills, lost objects and confused feelings, to make sense of being in-between what was left behind and what might become of the future. The piece is part of my publication in the Journal for Artistic Research and can be accessed through this link: <http://www.jar-online.net/index.php/issues/view/490> (Laine, 2015b).

I suggest that one of the similarities between artists and anthropologists is that we allow knowledge to emerge through practices and materials, through engagements with beings and things. Following Tim Ingold (2013), we do not go out in the world to pick up data but recognize that we are part of the making and that theory can emerge in the process. Particularly when we involve beings and communities in our inquiries, it is necessary to practice thorough self-reflexivity and become aware of how we affect people, rather than imagine ourselves as constructors of harmonious and decontextualized situations experienced as autonomous events. The global condition of increased border control and the neoliberal focus on efficiency and individual success is embodied in our making and thinking, and greater awareness of how the projects we instigate evolve as co-constitutive of their immediate environment, in relation to historical processes as well as future uncertainties, hold potentials to improve our work.

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(Endnotes)

1 Caste is a social category which, at the intersection of class, gender, religion, age and region, constitutes the hierarchical system of Indian society and its migratory communities in South Asia and across the world. Its relation to ritual purity as prescribed by Brahminical texts, reification by colonial interventions, challenges by non-Brahmin and Dalit groups, current debates within the UK Government and continuous negotiations in everyday lives comprise vast scholarly materials and debates that go beyond the scope of this paper (see for example Dirks, 2001; Dumont, 1970; Fuller, 1996; Marriott, 1990; Pandian, 2007; Roberts, 2016; Waughray, 2014).