

When Interculturality faces a Diaspora. The Transnational Tamil Identity

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ABSTRACT

The Sri Lankan Tamils of the diaspora are a model of a transnational identity.

From the theoretical point of view, Tamil identity challenges our mental habits and intercultural theory. If the Tamil diaspora tend to be distinguished both from the motherland and from Western, multicultural societies, then interculturality ceases to indicate a relationship between two poles, but becomes a three-pole connection, which includes the country of origin, the country of destination, and the diasporic community. The consciousness of these diasporic dynamics forces us to re-think our theoretical framework about interculturality, going beyond our actual approach based on nationally-defined concepts of society and culture. Overall, diasporas can be an excellent observation field of all transnational dynamics and through diasporas we can learn not concentrating on the migrants / residents dichotomy but focusing on people, their movements crossing national boundaries, and their specific needs.

Keywords: *Transnational migrations – Diasporas – Tamil – Interculturality*

Quando l'intercultura incontra una diaspora. L'identità transnazionale dei tamil

La diaspora dei tamil dello Sri Lanka costituisce un esempio paradigmatico di identità transnazionale. Questa identità sfida i nostri modelli teorici e la stessa intercultura. Se tale diaspora tende a distinguersi tanto dalla madrepatria quanto dalle società multiculturali occidentali, l'intercultura può – coerentemente – smettere di basarsi su una relazione a due poli per strutturare un modello con (almeno) tre poli in relazione: il paese d'origine, quello di destinazione e la comunità diasporica.

La consapevolezza di queste dinamiche diasporiche spinge a ripensare le nostre cornici teoriche portando l'intercultura oltre l'attuale approccio basato su una definizione di società e di cultura centrata sullo stato-nazione. Le diaspore possono così essere un eccellente punto di osservazione di tutte le dinamiche transnazionali e, attraverso di esse, possiamo superare la tradizionale dicotomia residenti/migranti concentrandoci sulle persone, sui loro movimenti attraverso i confini e sui loro bisogni specifici.

Parole chiave: *Migrazioni transnazionali – Diaspore – Tamil – Intercultura*

The peculiar condition of the Tamil people, now divided between an unrealised nationalism in Sri Lanka (where there was a terrible civil war between the government of Colombo and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, from 1983 to 2009) and a global diaspora, provides an excellent opportunity to analyse the concept of *cultural identity* and also to discuss the boundaries of this concept¹.

The particular form that the migratory path of the Tamils has taken – a diasporic structure – produces, in fact, an identity clearly different from that of other migrant groups. If, of course, no migration can realize a simple, linear migration from one country to another – consider the issues of confused migration project, long and traumatic journeys of asylum seekers, condition of “double absence” (in homeland and in hostland, too) (Sayad, 1999) etc. – diasporas produce a specific, complex plurality of points of contact between cultures. And so, diasporas question the concept of identity itself, which has always been a thorny issue for Intercultural Studies and in our postcolonial age it seems it is being subjected to ever more theoretical pressure (de Spuches, 2012, p. 57).

From these premises, Tamil identity shows itself to be an extremely complex subject, perhaps a paradoxical entity and questioning the particular structure of the Tamils could be useful to the entire theoretical horizon of intercultural studies to understand more deeply the current transformations of the global landscape and to design, with more foresight and awareness, any educational intervention in our multicultural societies, where diasporas (in a strict sense or in a metaphoric one) are – and increasingly seem destined to be – important acts (Safran, 1991, p. 83).

Global Tamilness

According to the estimates, today there are between 70 million (Sivasupramaniam, 2004) and 130 (Desquierez, 2007b) million Tamils in the world, scattered over more than 50 countries. The vast majority of these people live in India, especially in Tamil Nadu, and a few million in Sri Lanka. After centuries-old migrations, the rest are divided between Canada, the United States, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Malaysia and Singapore, the Seychelles, Guyana, Trinidad, Myanmar, Indonesia, Qatar, Mauritius and Réunion, the United Arab Emirates, Fiji, etc.

From the seventeenth century, the *Dutch East India Company* deported Tamil workers to South Africa, the Americas and Mauritius. The French, then settled in Pondicherry and Karikal, moved them from Tamil Nadu to the island of Réunion. In the nineteenth century the British moved them to Ceylon (the old name of Sri Lanka) where the Tamil population had already existed for thousands of years. Voluntary migrations followed these involuntary

¹ This article revises several publications of the author, based on ethnographic fieldworks, but it analyses diasporic dynamics proposing a renewing of intercultural theory in a pedagogical frame for the first time.

moves: from Tamil Nadu to Malaysia and Singapore and even to South Africa and Fiji. In the postcolonial era, the migration of Tamils from India has instead been directed primarily towards Norway, France, and Great Britain, while that coming from Sri Lanka – following the civil war – has mainly been directed towards Britain, Canada, Germany, Australia, Switzerland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands. More recently, the migration flows of Tamils have also been directed towards the Maldives, the Seychelles, and the Near East (Jones, 2013, pp. 20-3).

The Tamils then, given their historical background, are quite obviously different between themselves: there are differences, for example, between those of Tamil Nadu and those of Sri Lanka, as well as between the latter and those who were transferred to the Mauritius in the eighteenth century. Beyond the differences among a people scattered over various parts of the world, however, there are also bonds that hold these groups together. To outline the characteristics of Tamil “planetary” identity some cultural elements help; these can be identified in such areas as literature, cinema, dance, music, and especially in the language.

For the cultured Tamils, reference to the *Sangam* is inevitable, being such an important element of Dravidian culture. The cultural roots of this literature are steeped in legend: three literary academies (*Sangam* means “academy”) occurred over time, only the work of the last was saved from oblivion, constituting a reliable historical reality. The essentials of this were conserved: an anthology dating from the early centuries of the Common Era, made up of 450 authors from all walks of life. It is a court poetry – born in Tamil Nadu – characterized by a refined academicism in which every word, every image, is loaded with an underlying, coded, metalanguage (Gros, 1984, p. 32). Following the *Sangam* we have wisdom texts such as the *Tirukkural* by Thiruvalluvar, a manual of ethics, politics and the erotic that consists of 1,330 couplets (Sorrentino, 1987).

The long history of Tamil literature continues with the Hindu devotional hymns and with epic narratives (*Cilappatikaram*, *Manimekalai*, *Valayapathi* and, later, the *Ramavatharam*). In the fourteenth century we have the *Tiruppugal* focused on the god Murugan, moving through until we reach the poet Subramanya Bharathi, the novelist Ramakrishnan and contemporary literary production of the diaspora.

In addition to the literature there is the cinema, which is central in the global Tamil culture, and which is, according to Ramakrishnan, the most ubiquitous and popular means of communication of the Tamils, wielding great influence and stimulating multiple fan clubs of movie stars (Ramakrishnan, 1984b, p. 11). The film industry of Tamil Nadu, in fact, can boast of one hundred years of history and, deeply influenced by literature and traditional dance, it has been a strong promoter of the language and culture of the Tamils.

Dance is, then, another bond that ties together Tamils together; *bharata natyam* is the modern name of the classical dance of Tamil Nadu. It is a complex art that combines theatre, poetry and Carnatic music (dating from about the fifth century of the Common Era and based on a scale of 22 musical notes) (Jones, 2013, p. 111). It is expressed through a sign

language – that was codified in the *Natya Sastra* (a Sanskrit treatise written by Bharata) – that includes 108 figurative movements (*karana*) of the hand.

Beyond these cultural elements, what constitutes a Tamil identity that transcends state memberships is definitely the Tamil language (Dequirez, 2002, p. 24), which is one of the four major Dravidian languages still spoken. It is the heir of one of the oldest civilizations of the world, already present in India in the year 1000 BCE (Ramakrishnan, 1984a, pp. 4-8) and its symbol is a goddess (*Tamilttay*: Mother Tamil), “the apotheosis of the Tamil language as founding mother, sovereign queen, and guardian deity of the Tamil culture and its community” (Ramaswamy, 1993, p. 686). It occupies eighteenth place among the most spoken languages in the world and is officially recognized in Malaysia, Mauritius and South Africa. Since 2004 it has been referred to as a classical language of India and despite fears over the disappearance of minority languages, the acquisition of Tamil is steadily increasing and indeed, it is becoming a global language that allows transnational – family, friendship, economic and political – contacts, to be maintained (Murugaiyan, 2007, pp. 93-5).

Connecting the Tamils of the various nationalities are also some festivals, such as *Pongal*, or the procession of the god Ganesh, which, in Paris for example, brings together Tamils from Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Réunion and Pondicherry (Goreau-Poncheaud, 2009).

There are also a number of institutions which are involved in keeping this common identification alive: the Global Association of Teachers of the Tamil language, the Global Association of the Tamil Civilization, the International Association for the Worship of the God Murugan, a series of international conferences and the Tamil Heritage Foundation, which collaborates with the British Library for the preservation of the cultural heritage of *global Tamilness* (Murugaiyan, 2007, p. 94).

In addition, there is a wide choice of TV channels which have informative programs, series, movies, cookery shows, cartoons, quizzes and cultural and religious broadcasts in the Tamil language.

There are stations of Tamil Nadu such as *Sun TV* and *Jaya TV*, as well as European stations, such as *Cee (I) TV*, attentive to the conditions of the Tamils settled in Europe. Since 2008, a Tamil broadcaster that has its studios in Middlesex, *Deepam TV*, has produced news and documentaries on Sri Lanka and Europe, as well as a popular serial, *Pidikkala Pidikkala*, based on the daily lives of a group of Sri Lankan Tamils who live in London (Jones, 2013, pp. 151-2).

Although mostly originating in Tamil Nadu, these media are consumed by Tamils of the various national backgrounds, producing a set of shared interests and themes that reinforce a sense of mutual belonging and identity. As is the case with two weekly newspapers published in India, *Kumudam* and *Ananda Vikatan*, which are well known among the Tamils and sold in kiosks in India, Malaysia, Singapore, and Sri Lanka (Dequirez, 2007a). From a political point of view, again, the existence of a Tamil identity is strongly evoked in Tamil

Nadu (where there are two main Dravidian political parties) and also in Sri Lanka (for example by the website Tamil Nation) (Jones, 2013, p. 10).

On the basis of these elements, we can say that there is a *global Tamilness*, linked to a de-territorialized diaspora that is cemented and constantly recreated through artefacts, popular culture, and a shared imagery (Cohen, 2008, pp. 6-8). With this moral, transnational Tamil identity, there are different levels of identification and it will have different implications, according to the national, social, economic or cultural differences, and to individual spirit. There are Tamils who proudly identify with this transnational *Tamilness* and others for whom instead national allegiances prevail.

Some are deeply involved in the activities of this *global Tamilness*, while others will feel united only with their own national group.

Sri Lankan Tamilness

Within this complex landscape, the migration of Sri Lankan Tamils shows specific characteristics and forms a kind of diaspora within the diaspora. The non-Sri Lankan Tamils moved in ancient times and have not maintained contacts with their homeland, so they have developed an identity marked by a certain autonomy and, above all, have developed an international migration with just two poles (for example, the Tamil Nadu and Mauritius). The Tamils of Sri Lanka have mostly moved in more recent times, due to the civil war, and subject to the various possibilities offered by the laws of receiving countries, have created a multi-pole diaspora. In addition, as this diaspora has taken place in the age of telecommunications and information technology, maintaining contact among groups scattered across various countries has been made possible and consequently a more pronounced transnationalism has developed. Finally, the collective experience of the trauma of civil war strongly characterizes Tamils of Sri Lanka and differentiates them from those originating from other countries. The memory of victimization is the basis of the construction of their Tamil identity, in Sri Lanka (Jones, 2013, p. 83) and in the diaspora, which shows the specific characteristics of a “victim diaspora” (like Jews, Armenians or Palestinians) (Cohen, 2008, p. 4). There is also the fact that due to their tragic history, they are also more subject to media attention than Tamils of other nationalities.

Sri Lankan origin, however, is not enough to establish a unique and clearly defined identity for them. On the island, in fact, Tamils are not a homogeneous minority but are constituted by two groups: there are “native” Tamils (11.2 per cent of the total population, according to the 2012 census), present since prehistoric times, and those who have transferred from Tamil Nadu in the nineteenth century to work on the British plantations (4.2 per cent) (Tambiah, 1986, pp. 88-9; Amarasingam, 2014, p. 205). These immigrant workers, who settled in the centre of the island, form a group distinct from those living in the north-east, with whom they have shared religious, cultural and linguistic traits, but not the political struggle for the establishment of the independent state of Tamil Eelam (Pace, 2004, p. 6).

Beyond the “plantation Tamils”, considerable differences also exist among the “native” Tamils: among those of the north (Jaffna), of the Vanni district, of the east (Batticaloa), and especially those in the south (Bouchard, 2009, p. 43). Another differentiation is of a religious nature: Muslim Tamils (who make up about 9 per cent of the entire population of the island) claim now a distinct ethnic identity, although they share the language and culture of other Tamils (Imtiyaz & Hoole, 2011, pp. 209-210). Furthermore, the events of the recent civil war have created a clear and increasing differentiation between the “Eelam” Tamil identity (that of the Tamils in the north-east) and that of others (Muslim Tamils and those of the south) (Ismail, 2000, pp. 220-1 and pp. 239-240). Obviously, the identity boundaries are not clear and often merge into each other. However, the struggle for a state of Tamil Eelam produced a well-defined community. This community has preserved cultural patterns and social ties and has maintained a difference both with respect to the Sinhalese society in Sri Lanka and with respect to the Western hostlands of diasporic nodes. In the Tamil language, this commonality has a name – *inam* – which indicates people held together by feelings of solidarity and affection, something akin to an extended family ties (Schalk, 2007, p. 101).

Following the war, however, about one in four Tamils now live outside Sri Lanka (Srisankarajah, 2005). Therefore, we must now turn our attention to the diaspora.

The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora

The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora has particular characteristics: first of all, communities around the world maintain – as mentioned – a multipolar structure with a dense network of travel, weddings, movement of goods, money, information, etc. You could say, therefore, that the Tamils have not moved once and for all, but that they are constantly moving: many of the Tamils of Palermo – for example – have previously lived in other European cities, some think about moving to other countries, others think of having daughters marry abroad. They are still moving, even within the diaspora. Goreau-Poncheaud defines this condition as “living-in-mobility” (2012, p. 27).

Tamils then, are not “at home” at any hub of the diasporic network: they are a minority in Melbourne and Paris, as well as in Sri Lanka, a Sinhalese state that has Sinhala as the official language. That is, there is a diaspora that is deprived of a homeland: a stateless diaspora. A characteristic of a diaspora is the condition of exile from a place where you want to return to, for many of the Tamil diaspora, however, returning “home” is now an unlikely (because of political obstacles) or even impossible (because their land has been colonized by Sinhalese) option. A paradoxically related feature of this aforementioned state is that we may also say that the Tamils have never moved from their homeland in a sense, given that they have never left their Tamil society, even if they now live in Oslo or Toronto. The emigration from Sri Lanka, in fact, is almost always thanks to the network of the diaspora that provide initial reception, working on and taking care of the paperwork. And even afterwards, in fact, the Tamils never leave this network: remaining, wherever they are, predominantly within the

community, which is structured like a micro-society internal to the countries of destination. From the researches conducted in Sicily (Burgio, 2007; Burgio, 2014a), for example, it is clear that the Tamils do not watch Italian television, preferring satellite channels and Tamil movies in their own language, and buying food and clothing in shops that import from their motherland. In short, there is then, a noticeable sense of closure of the Tamil community, a suspicious of the culture of the countries where they have settled. They seem to have chosen selective acculturation: they seek to acquire skills such as linguistic fluency and academic achievement, but refuse Western aspects considered unacceptable, safeguard the cultural codes of their country of origin and maintain community cohesion (Ambrosini, 2008, p. 35). They seem to comply with national laws and local customs (integration), but to reject the culture of the countries of destination (acculturation).

Acculturation is in fact considered a risk; potentially contaminating their identity, and so they defend themselves by creating places of social and cultural reproduction. A paradigmatic example is offered by the schools: they are created in each hub of the diaspora and are aimed at the reproduction of the *Sri Lankan Tamilness*, serve to perpetuate social codes (respect for elders, obedience, discipline, modesty, discretion...) and to counterbalance the codes learned in European schools.

The intra-communitarian dimension is strong: in London or Boston, the Tamils seem members of a single multilocalized community (Clifford, 1997), even if geographically fragmented, they show a translocal identity (Geertz, 1973, p. 87). As is general in diasporas, the Tamils do not base their identity on a territory but on a group, a sort of supranational “us”, characterized by strong bonds of solidarity (Burgio, 2010; Burgio, 2014b). The effect of this is the creation of “Tamil districts” within countries of destination.

In the Parisian neighbourhood of La Chapelle, for example, a concentration of commercial Tamil enterprises has favoured the presence of various Tamil associations and organizations from the *Fédération française des associations tamoules* to *Tamil Cholai* (the network of Tamil schools), from ORT-France (*Organisation de réhabilitation des Tamouls*) to the *Comité des femmes tamoules*, not to mention the presence of two Hindu temples (Desquirez, 2007a, pp. 86-7). Even in Toronto, Tamils are concentrated in just a few districts: Scarborough, Markham and North York (Tyyskä, 2004). In Montreal they live in the districts of Côte-des-Neiges and Parc Extension (Bouchard, 2009, p. 13). In these cities, the “Tamilization” of the urban environment produces a “little Eelam”. Streets and squares are marked by symbols useful for the transmission of a Tamil memory: the names of the shops, political manifestos, parties, a religious pilgrimage, even the elegantly hand-written notices of deaths, meet a need of memory that is rooted in city inhabited by the diaspora (Goreau-Poncheaud, 2009).

In this way, the Tamils mark a place, carve out a territory for themselves, assert their identity and differentiate it from the Western. According to Bruneau (2006), reviving their cultural practices in the new place of settlement allows the Tamils to acquire a new sense of

territoriality. It is this way that Tamil culture and identity link to a new location to integrate into it. So, these *Little Eelam* have become a sort of “decompression chamber”, an intersection between Sri Lanka and hostlands, where some of the social characteristics of the motherland are played out.

The diaspora is not, of course, homogeneous but is divided by differences of caste, class, gender, village of origin, education, religion, date of migration, reason for migration, legal status in the countries of destination, degree of integration in the new society, etc. This complexity is held together by a centripetal movement created by a large number of associations. From 1995 (until 2007), as many as 77 Tamil associations were, for example, created only in Île-de-France (Desquirez, 2007b, p. 86). These organizations entrust small responsibilities to many members of the group and thus integrate them into the community and make them participants of the *Sri Lankan Tamilness*. This system – sometimes very controlled and hierarchical – allows a certain degree of individual freedom and, at the same time, produces a strong sense of belonging: it allows Tamil women to leave home to acquire a public role, enables young people to escape a family sometimes oppressive in terms of education (Burgio, 2008), and immigrants – who often do very menial jobs – to take on prestigious responsibilities. There are Tamil associations that deal with every aspect of collective life (including Alumni Associations and Home Village Associations). In this way, individual differences and preferences become occasions of collective organization. At the same time, this almost maniacal tendency to make associations means that no space of social life remains “outside” the community: all the differences become internal, reinforcing a common belonging. The identity of the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora, in fact, is not a given fact, but is actively produced through urban concentration in specific districts, selective acculturation, cultural reproduction through the Tamil schools, and through a powerful associations. Today, this organization – plural but united – is transformed through a series of transnational activities that connect the Tamil area of Sri Lanka to the diaspora, and that – at the same time – link Tamils with the Western peoples that they meet. We need then to look carefully at these (political, economic, and cultural) practices which interact with the identity of the Tamils.

Transnational political practices

The identity of the Sri Lankan Tamils is today made up of a relationship based on three pillars: the communities of the diaspora, their host countries, and the homeland. The diaspora, in fact, is politically active both in the multicultural environment of the destination countries (trying to improve the condition of the Tamil communities), and in Sri Lanka (trying to improve the situation of their countrymen who have stayed there) (Sriskandarajah, 2005, p. 496).

Associations work, on the first level, to present the Tamil community to Western society, to gain recognition and to obtain their rights. But the diaspora groups act also on the political

level. Today, in Toronto and in London, the Tamil community already has an electoral weight that local politicians cannot afford to overlook. Tamil candidates were also elected to the local governments of Canada, Norway, Switzerland, and France.

The second level involves a translocal political commitment that we can define as “diasporic nationalism” (Anderson, 1983), which in the past supported the civil war waged by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and now supports – essentially – development projects in the homeland (Jones, 2013, p. 91).

The transnational political action is today guided by the Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam (TGTE), democratically elected in May 2010, at every site in which the Tamils have settled around the world, and which has Visvanathan Rudrakumaran as Prime Minister, assisted by representatives of thirteen communities (Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, New Zealand, Norway, Ireland, South Africa, Switzerland, Great Britain, and the United States). The Transnational Government has the goal of self-determination of Tamil Eelam, and it is flanked by the Global Tamil Forum (GTF), a group of civil society organizations engaged in various campaigns supporting the cause of Tamils, and the *Makkal Avai* (National Councils) that are present in many countries.

The political activism of the diaspora had begun long before the civil war and before the political monopoly of the LTTE (Srisankandarajah, 2005, p. 497). The defeat of the LTTE in 2009 and the end of the civil war have not, therefore, meant the end of national aspiration, which is still alive and vital. A new generation of activists emerged and has fielded protests and roadblocks in Oslo, Canada, London, Paris, and many other Western cities. Unlike in the past, young people and women (of all ages) have taken a more visible role as leaders and organizers of the protest, showing a more substantial gender equality in the ranks of the activists (Rasaratnam, 2011). The actions of Tamil transnational politics today are multiple: public opinion campaigns and petitions, protest marches, sit-ins, hunger strikes, even up to the extreme case of self immolation (Nandakumar, 2011). In Britain, for example, seven political groups are currently active. To these must be added four humanitarian organizations for the promotion of human rights, not to mention the organizations for development and welfare (Vimalarajah, Kanapathipillai & Neuweiler, 2011).

The political activism of the diaspora is pluralized. This is not only due to the disappearance of the *de facto* state of Tamil Eelam, but also because the diasporic network (like any other network, such as the Internet) which is composed of hubs and does not provide a single, organizer centre. The transnational activism of the Tamils, which was led by the LTTE in the past, cannot endure a centre, a guide, for long because of its very network constitution. Like any network, it cannot have that a polycentric, multilateral, multi-faceted structure. In short, since the multi-locality of a diaspora inevitably tends to become “multivocality”, probably the transformation of Tamil politics would be made anyhow, just as the effect of the diasporic structure itself.

Within the dual political level that I have described, the transnational commitment is not opposed to integration in hostlands: for many Tamils, homeland is in fact a source of identity, while hostland is a source of rights, creating a mix between rights and identity, culture and politics (Ambrosini, 2008, p. 92). The transnational political dynamics tend to criticize the distinction between domestic politics and foreign policy: as shown by the huge demonstrations of the Tamils in London or Geneva, for example, or recent criminal trials for international terrorism in Paris or Naples, the internal politics of Sri Lanka is now a global affair. There is today, a new relationship between politics in Sri Lanka and that of the Tamil diaspora: there is neither a conflict nor a simple transplant of local practices abroad, rather the social changes brought about by living in the West tend to transform the forms of political mobilization, even in the motherland. Tamil activism in our multicultural societies produces an innovative political commitment, fertilized by cross-cultural contacts that the diaspora experiences.

Transnational economic practices

According to Appadurai (1996, p. 113), in today's globalized market, commodity fetishism and advertising flows have transformed the consumer and have fashioned lifestyles, desires and imaginative models. Consumption then, has become a practice of subjectification and resistance (Breidenbach & Zukrigl, 1998, p. 147). This is certainly true for the Tamils.

The diaspora consumes material goods and cultural products through commercial networks that are autonomous from those of the hostlands: the product, its source, the provider, the user, etc., are Tamil. The Sri Lankan Tamils, in fact, seem to have built a sectoral economic globalization, active on two levels: one directed towards the homeland and the other living among the diasporic communities.

First of all, family ties and a sense of belonging and of political liability have created a continuous flow of money which connects the diaspora to the motherland, structuring what we could call a "moral economy" made up of remittances, scholarships, development programs etc. The disappearance of the *de facto* state of Tamil Eelam, which provided welfare services to the Tamil population, has pushed the diaspora to become an "almost state", to become a provider of rights in Sri Lanka. The Tamil transnational economy also provides an economic gain for diasporic communities, as in the case of trade. The companies of the Tamils are a privileged means for supplying the diaspora with goods and services – food, aesthetic and cultural services – specifically Tamil, which are hard to find in the more general market. Such firms thus become real agents of identitarian reproduction. These facts allow us to say that the Tamil diaspora has also aspects of a "trade and business diaspora" (like that of the Lebanese in the past and, now, of the Chinese) (Cohen, 2008, p. 5).

Beyond trade, the construction of a labour market based on a common origin is also favoured by an often limited mastery of the languages of hostlands, which leads independent activities being developed to a greater extent. The networks based on family and ethnic links

are able to find reliable workers, to create bonds of loyalty and mutual trust, and sometimes to get a dedication and a flexibility that go beyond the contractual terms (Ambrosini, 2008, pp. 30-2).

Relying on ethnic networks, the Tamils seem to enact strategies of resistance against the economic (and therefore cultural) model of neoliberal globalization. Their separatist consumerism also shows that other, less visible, globalizations exist on our planet as alternatives to Western globalization. The Tamils have chosen a particular type, showing that the Westernization of the differences is not necessarily the fate of each globalization, and that ethnic particularism is not the opposite of globalization. The transnational economy of Tamils seems to show that it is possible to combine “local” belonging and a global deployment; in short, that universalism, far from countering the differences, may be the preferred means for the expression of a particular difference (Amselle, 2001, p. 46; Amarasingam, 2015, p. 81; Amarasingam, 2014, p. 215). Alongside (and within) the neoliberal globalization – Western, cosmopolitan, exhibitionist, based on hybridization, dislocation and compulsive consumerism – the Tamils have developed a different globalization, based on particularism and on diasporic identities, multilocalized but concentrated in specific territories, barely visible, based on a selective consumerism and on alternative economic networks (Burgio, 2007).

This little Tamil globalization is also made up of – as well as by trade – commercial information, investment, translocal development (which is carried out avoiding state bureaucracy), networks of scientists, networking among employees of multinational companies and, like other globalizations, it is also able to take advantage of the economic differential created between the boundaries of states.

This parallel economy also uses an alternative banking system (Cheran & Aiken, 2005), popularly known as *undiyal*, which is constituted by a financial (but at the same time, social and cultural) network that operates in the transnational field, but outside the formal system. It is a system based on ethnic networks and on trust, often run by people from the same village.

This complex economic system, made up of remittances, trade, social capital, development programs, ethnic businesses and informal financial systems, produces a considerable circulation of money. To cite an example, it is enough to consider that – during the civil war – the self-financing system of the diaspora developed an economic volume estimated at between two and three hundred million dollars a year (Bourrat, 2010, pp. 18-9). In short, Tamil money flows quickly, does not have problems at the borders, and connects distant peoples and identities, contributing to a continuing cultural and economic productivity.

Transnational cultural practices

Within the transnational cultural practices, which I have already discussed in relation to *global Tamilness* (from literature to cinema, from the *bharata natyam* to Carnatic music, from the Tamil language to satellite television), some transnational practices are particular and typical of the Tamils of Sri Lanka.

The most striking of these transnational practices relates to religion. Indeed, religion – whether Hindu, Christian or Muslim – is certainly an important part of *Sri Lankan Tamilness*, but is subordinate to language or territorial membership (Schalk, 2007, p. 95; Amarasingam, 2008, p. 166). In Sri Lanka, the Hindu majority (of Shaiva tradition) cohabits with the Catholic and Muslim minorities (Bouchard, 2009, p. 2). According to Obeyesekere (1984, p. 47) and Stirrat (1992, p. 87), all religions in Sri Lanka (with the exception of the Muslim minority) always had a propensity to mix religious practices, before the civil war. Even the LTTE did not make a religious discrimination and welcomed many Christians, even Catholic priests, among its Hindu militants (Jayewardene & Jayewardene, 1987, p. 91).

That attitude to religious syncretism seems to have moved from Sri Lanka to the countries that receive the diaspora. According to Baumann and Salentin (2006), about 8% of the Sri Lankan Tamils living in Germany consider themselves Hindus *and* Catholics, at the same time. In Paris, many Hindus attend the *Sacré Coeur* basilica in Montmartre (Desquierez, 2002, p. 29). In Montréal, many Hindus regularly attend the church of *Saint-Joseph*, in the district of Côte-des-Neiges and many have included St. Joseph in the Hindu religious *pantheon* (Bouchard, 2009, p. 13). And also in Canada, Bouchard said that some Hindus, who participated in Catholic religious festivals, have even tried to take Holy Communion (2009, p. 100). In Palermo, Hindus regularly attend the shrine of Saint Rosalia, the patron saint of the city (Burgio, 2013).

The scholarly literature has identified syncretic practices on the level (public and communitarian) of the Catholic pilgrimages, which are also frequented by Tamil Hindus (and sometimes even by the Muslims) (Cool & Sauvage, 2008). For 22 years, about 10,000 Tamils have visited the sanctuary of *Saints-Martyrs-Canadiens* in Ontario each year (Bouchard, 2009, p. 64). Catholics invite their Hindu countrymen to this pilgrimage and, as a result of immigration, devotional behaviours that were traditional in Sri Lanka (where, as mentioned, many Hindus attend Catholic shrines) have now been transferred to the West. The syncretism thus allows the Tamils, who are physically in exile, to feel back in *tayakam*, in the motherland. The common participation in a religious event reconstructs a piece of homeland in the hostland, it creates a sense of unity and belonging among the Tamils and, at the same time, is a kind of resistance to assimilation into the receiving society (Schalk, 2007, p. 107). The presence of Hindu people in the Catholic rites is explained by the Tamils in terms of cultural and emotional ties (Bouchard, 2009, p. 77). As well as, many Tamil Catholics consider Hinduism as a special feature of their culture, as a source of identity (Amarasingam, 2015, p. 74).

This syncretism crosses the boundaries between religions, but strengthens the common Tamil identity, and differentiates it from the outside. The closeness of Tamil Catholics to the Hindus distinguishes them from other non-Tamil Catholics; similarly, the proximity of the Tamil Hindus to the Catholics differentiates them from other Hindus. A transnational *spiritual* network seems to occur, not characterized by a sense of belonging to the same religion, but influenced by a more universalistic religious sensibility, a kind of “spiritual cosmopolitanism” (Amarasingam, 2014, p. 216) characterized by a common cultural identity: being Tamil.

Towards a diasporic interculturality

The Tamil identity appears as a complex entity, consisting of several layers. As we have seen, the outer layer is the *global Tamilness*, an identity that crosses borders and national origins. The Tamils from Sri Lanka identify with this *global Tamilness* and yet, at the same time, they differ in some linguistic, cultural and historical respects. Their diasporization has produced a strengthening of identity and the Tamils of the diaspora tend to build – within the *global Tamilness* – distinct communities. The community identity is constantly fed by an active, collective, cultural reproduction. At the same time, each individual Tamil is connected – through family and friendship networks – to various nodes of the diaspora and to the homeland. And transnational practices – that are political, economic and cultural – link the homeland to the diasporic communities. In short, talking about Tamils means to include them in the theoretical frame of *transnationality*.

The borders have now become complex, nuanced, and the crossing of boundaries does not occur once and for all but is often periodic and recursive (Cuttitta, 2007; Scieurba, 2009). Transnational migrants then, build social fields that link the country of origin and that of settlement, maintaining multiple relationships (family, economic, social, religious, and political) that cross borders. The new forms of migration, therefore, do not tend to integrate into hostlands, but maintain a bond, a “loyalty”, an identification with the country of origin. The transnational migrants (and diasporic Tamils among them) act, make decisions, feel belonging and develop identity within the networks that connect them to two or more societies simultaneously.

The prefix *trans-*, moreover, means not only a movement across national and cultural boundaries, but it also suggests that something changes during these crossings. This transformation is not only constituted by the loss of a clear point of reference but it also produces a transnational field that develops new cultures and identities, which interact with the country of origin and that of destination, in a continuous dynamic process. Transnationality involves a diasporic experience defined, according to Stuart Hall, “not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*.”

Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (Hall, 1990, p. 235).

The presence of Tamil communities tends to transform our Western cities and we that inhabit them. But if Sri Lanka is setting up on our European streets (with its commercial activities, its temples and its processions, and its associations), the opposite thing is also happening. In addition to the economic, there are in fact social and cultural remittances (ideas, social practices, identity marks) ranging from diaspora Tamils to Sri Lanka. So, the diasporization of Tamils becomes an element of transformation of the motherland as much as of the hostlands.

Obviously, diasporas and transnationality are not synonyms: diasporas are a part of a bigger framework of transnationality, but they can be an excellent observation field of transnational dynamics that seem to affect all intercultural contacts (Ambrosini, 2008).

From the theoretical point of view, Tamil identity – complex, multifaceted and transnational – challenges our mental habits and intercultural theory. If diasporas tend to be distinguished both from the motherland and from Western, multicultural societies, then interculturality ceases to indicate a relationship between two poles, but becomes (at least) a three-pole connection, which includes the country of origin, the country of destination, and the diasporic community.

Furthermore, intercultural theory has focused on the contact between cultures in multicultural societies (Giusti, 2004; Portera, 2013) but has traditionally conceived this contact as one between *national* cultures. It has mostly based its theoretical toolkit (Cambi, 2001; Pinto Minerva, 2002) on the two-pole contact between, for example, a Tunisian (representative of a supposed homogeneous Tunisian identity) and an Italian (representative of a supposed homogeneous Italian identity). Taking as a model the traditional migrants' movement from source country A to destination country B, interculturality has privileged nationally-defined concepts of society and culture (Glick Schiller, 2010, p. 110). A sort of methodological nationalism (Glick Schiller, 2010, p. 111) overlaps, in fact, the concept of culture to the nation-state, forgetting both the social and cultural divisions within each nation-state, as well as the social, economic and political movements, networks and institutions that ignore state borders. When traditional emigrants cross the state borders, they still remain within a theoretical frame based on the nation-state model, while diasporas criticise *de facto* the nation-state's ideology based on the uniqueness and homogeneity of territory, language, and culture. In fact, diasporas teach us that our entire nation-states are – now – frontier zones. In nation-states, diasporic subjects (like Tamils) but also those who are represented as indigenous share every day a common *transnational* condition (Bauböck, 2010, p. 312).

In this new theoretical landscape, a “culture” belongs to a group as a population living inside (or coming from) a state territory, but it can also refer to a global network of human

interactions (Bauböck, 2010, p. 299). This point of view forces us to think interculturality referring no more to a national space (belonging to the majority population) open to people of other national cultures (immigrants), but to a space that does not belong to any national “culture”, using then a post-national intercultural model. Yet, which intercultural contact can we think if old, well-defined boundaries that separated cultures are become so complex?

We need to renew our categories about interculturality. We need a new theoretical model, conscious of the cultural flows that cross national boundaries (Zoletto, 2011). Interculturality can learn it from diaspora studies, that are already characterised by a social constructionist rethinking of terms like “homeland” / “hostland” (Safran, 2005; Elmo Raj, 2014) and “ethnicity” (Cohen, 2008, p. 9; Clifford, 1997). A reflection on the diasporic condition allow us to conceive cultural identities in an anti-essentialist manner, breaking the idea of national wholeness. As Cohen states, in fact, “diasporas are positioned somewhere between nation-states and ‘travelling cultures’ in that they involve dwelling in a nation-state in a physical sense, but travelling in an astral or spiritual sense that falls outside the nation-state’s space/time zone” (Cohen, 1997, pp. 135-136). In this way, we can re-think interculturality not taking homelands and hostlands as methodological tools but focusing on people, their movements and their specific needs.

The prefix *inter-* of “interculturality”, so, will refer to a space of change where identities become more complex and cultures develop, in a continuous, dynamic, creative process (Favole, 2012). This “in-between” space becomes more important of the poles (usually two nationally-defined cultures) that it links. So, we can concentrate not on the migrants / residents dichotomy but on the crossing of cultural boundaries, and on the multi-faceted *relationship* between “us” and “them” (whatever these words mean). If based on a diasporic consciousness, interculturality adopt a *located* approach, focusing on relationships between people, not on contacts between “cultures”. In this theoretical panorama, in fact, cultures do not pre-exist to the human relationship that links them, but are effects of this “in-between” space that let them “talk”.

So, in this diasporic frame, every cultural identity appears void of essence, context-based, relational, tactical, effect of collective constructions and situated negotiations (Laplantine, 2004, p. 24). Consequently, moving the notion of culture from the commonality of a community to the transforming experience of difference and displacement (Melas, 2009, p. 104), each individual is not a representative of a “culture” but is the result of his specific life story (Santoro, 2004, p. 33). As Tamils show, every *identity* is the effect of an *identification*, creative consequence of decisions, desires, projects and determination. Above all, the building of a cultural identity works continuously as an individual and collective, everyday *performance* made of words, behaviours, representations, prejudices, actions, and narratives of the world. As diasporas teach, identity is something to do, not to be!

Obviously, these facts have consequences on our educational models and our nation-states' educational provisions are becoming more and more open to question (Cohen, 1996,

p. 515). The pedagogical reflection on this subject is very recent (Bauman, 2010; Gur-Ze'ev, 2010) but it is important that intercultural theory faces these issues, using a cognitive model that takes into account a world more and more diasporic.

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