Blurred memories

War and disaster in a Buddhist Sinhala village

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Abstract: This article analyzes the regimes of truth and efforts at falsification that emerged after the 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka, where the experience of fear, the blurring of memory, and the fabrication of identity became normalized during the course of a long civil war. By shedding light on the memorialization processes in a Buddhist Sinhala village on the border of the northeastern Tamil zones, the article shows how the tsunami has reinforced governmental devices for controlling peoples and territories, insinuating itself into the core of the enduring process of securitization of fear in Sri Lanka. Yet, however much the politics of memory tends to cloud matters, the article also demonstrates that it never goes uncontested, as long as subjects can channel their capacity for action in unexpected directions.

Keywords: memory, civil war, disaster, falsification, nationalism, regimes of truth, Sri Lanka

The 2004 tsunami caused by a 9.3-magnitude earthquake off the northwestern coast of Sumatra struck the coastal areas of multiple countries ringing the Bay of Bengal only a few hours later. In Sri Lanka, initial reports estimated 37,000 to 39,000 deaths, while official governmental sources later fixed the number at 31,000. This is nearly a third of the number of causalities produced by the almost 26 years of the Sri Lankan Civil War, using the officially reported number of 85,000 deaths between 1983 and 2009. There were also a huge number of evacuees: according to Sri Lankan governmental calculations, 110,000 homes were destroyed by the tidal wave, and 500,000 people were forced to flee the places they had been living, joining the already high number of families evacuated as a result of the war (Muggah 2008).

This article is based on repeated instances of ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Sri Lanka between 2005 and 2013,[1] a stretch of time in which a two-faced emergency regime took hold in the country: on one hand, the controversial reconstruction phase following the tsunami, and, on the other, the intensification of civil conflict that in 2007 led to the reemergence of armed clashes between governmental forces and the Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a militarized organization, finally ending in May 2009 with the Tamil rebels' surrender.[2] During this period of national history, the tsunami and conflict ended up being intertwined in political

propaganda, academic debates, and the prevailing rhetoric of the humanitarian entourage involved in reconstruction. While there was hope at first that the tidal wave might dampen the ongoing interethnic tensions once and for all, it soon became clear that the partisan manipulation of international aid had fueled friction between the two groups, opening the doors to the fiercest outbreak of fighting in the country's history (Uyangoda 2005).

The tidal wave affected a wide swath of Sri Lankan coastline stretching from the northeastern territories to the city of Negombo, just north of the capital; it struck both the areas claimed by Tamil separatists and the southwestern provinces that have comprised the political and economic bastion of the country's Buddhist majority since independence. The Sri Lankan state's policy of unconditional openness to international aid gave rise to a sort of "competitive humanitarianism" (Stirrat 2006) that in turn made the process of allocating resources chaotic and conflict ridden. Less than a year after the tsunami, the peace mechanism set up to guarantee reconciliation between the government and the LTTE collapsed under the weight of mutual accusations, claims, and counterclaims. From that point on, violent clashes in the northeast escalated into civil war. The post-tsunami period also saw increasing state power pass into the hands of Mahinda Rajapaksa, the United People's Freedom Alliance leader who held the office of president from 2005 to 2015. As head of both the post-tsunami reconstruction campaign and military offensives against the LTTE, Rajapaksa intensified the Buddhist Sinhala nationalism embedded in his familial tradition. His father, a prominent political figure in Hambantota District, had been nicknamed the King of Ruhuna by his supporters in honor of the legendary ruler who had enlarged this kingdom in precolonial times by reconquering the central-northern areas that had fallen under the control of the Tamil "invaders." Rajapaksa followed in his father's footsteps: leading the national army against the armed wing of the separatist movement, he accumulated widespread support thanks to a crushing victory over the fierce "enemy within."

I conducted my fieldwork in a Buddhist Sinhala village[3] in Southern Province, Sri Lanka, that hosts 218 houses, with a beneficiary population of approximately 918, many of whom are chena farmers. In June, they clear out the forest and shrubs, and in August they burn the remains of the harvested crops. They then wait for the monsoons to arrive sometime in September and October. Only then do they seed the ground. The harvest period, from January to March, is the only time when chena farmers are able to bring in a decent income. At other times, they work as seasonal laborers or fish in the village reservoir. Navigating the hazy terrains that regulate relations between truth and falsehood in this frontier, post-tsunami village at the edge of Yala National Park, I have realized that the tidal wave and conflict both employ similar mechanisms to unveil or obscure specific categories of objects and subjectivities. Dialoguing with the anthropology of humanitarian aid and catastrophes—in particular, the line of inquiry into the "capitalism of disasters" (Gunewardena and Schuller 2008)—this article seeks to delve into the delicate issue of truth by bringing together two classical concepts in social sciences: Michel Foucault's (2014) "regime of truth" and Erving Goffman's (1974) notion of "falsification."

Foucault's notion as defined in his Collège de France course held on 6 February 1980 refers to a regime that constrains individuals to truth acts, that "determines the form of these acts and establishes their conditions of effectuation and specific effects" (2014: 331). Indeed, Foucault designates the "type of obligations an individual submits to in the act by which he becomes the agent of a manifestation of truth" (341; see also Foucault 1995). He essentially posits that, in order to study the exercise of power, we must consider how truth manifests in the form of subjectivity, and "what effects of obligation, constriction, incitement, limitation are generated by the connection between certain practices and a true/false game," which is always specific.

If a truth regime provides the framework within which the subject is recognized, the notion of "falsification" can help us shed light on specific situations in which the subjects participating in defining truth are encouraged to set in motion a machination aimed at fabricating false frames that others will perceive as "real." I use falsification to refer to Goffman's idea of "fabrication" (1974: 83), meaning any intentional effort carried out by one or more individuals to manage an event in such a way that others are led to develop false beliefs about it.

In this article, I will explore the possible forms of these manifestations in a setting characterized by the overlapping of "natural" disaster and armed conflict, as other scholars have done in different frictional zones (e.g., Davis 1999; Hedlund 2014; Simpson 2014). As will become clear, the processes of truth making at work in my field site are inextricably caught up with identity-building practices aimed at redefining the nation's poietic and value-leaden logics, displaying dynamics similar to those observed by Liisa Malki (1995) in the case of Hutu refugees in Burundi. Working with the narratives of refugees of the early 1970s massacres, Malki has shown how the continual process of exploring, reifying, and asserting the boundaries between the self and others is expressed in a collection of mytho-historical accounts aimed at generating a map for moral regulation in an environment of increasing uncertainty. In my case, however, we will see that history making is also a part of struggles over politics that require an act of acceptance: the acknowledgment that the truth, just like lies, does not exist outside relations of power.

To properly present this argument, I begin from the discovery and subsequent disappearance of an inscription in Tamil-Brahmi. By examining the disagreements surrounding this archeological find and ensuing accusations of historical revisionism, I illustrate the misleading deployment of national history in a controversial part of the country. Indeed, Hambantota District is not only the stage for a highly contested, post-tsunami reconstruction campaign but also a friction zone hosting strategic interests associated with the opposing military forces at play in Sri Lanka: the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils. I therefore reconstruct the origins of the village where I did research in order to unpack the tangle of lies and cautious, partial acts of disclosure that hover over it. The ambiguity surrounding the village's name revolves around a thematic axis: the regimes of truth and falsification generated by the tsunami are so stubborn because they take root in an environment deeply scarred by experiences of insecurity and control. I then develop this argument more fully, presenting the cases of a memorial for tsunami victims and three men who disappeared in the jungle to show how emergency devices can be evidence of the inextricable connection between truth and power. Viewed from this perspective, both the disaster and the civil war cease to be a one-time occurrence with the power to overturn the structure of a society and instead become the most tangible outcomes of the societal structure itself. Indeed, the 2004 tsunami strengthened preexisting mechanisms of power, insinuating itself like a silent enemy into the core of the enduring process of "securitization of fear" (Hyndman 2007) in Sri Lanka. Yet, however much the politics of memory tends to cloud matters, the article shows that it never goes uncontested, as long as subjects can channel their capacity for action in unexpected directions.

Act I: Wielding archeology

I was carrying out ethnographic research in the southern Hambantota District, in a predominantly Buddhist Sinhala area bordering the Yala National Park, when *TamilNet* (2010a) reported in June 2010 that an ancient inscription in Tamil-Brahmi dating to the second century BCE had been discovered in precisely that area. Apparently, the find had been made by a group of German archeologists. The article specified that the Brahmi lettering carved into a fragment of ceramic was mixed with graffiti, and presented

this artifact as proof that the area's population had included a local Tamil-speaking community as early as 2,200 years ago. The leading Tamil-Brahmi studies scholar Iravatham Mahadevan highlighted the extraordinary nature of this find: while similar discoveries had long proven the historical depth of the Tamil connection with the island's northern and eastern regions, the results of the Tissamaharama dig indisputably demanded a radical reassessment of the long-standing Tamil presence throughout Sri Lanka.

Four months later, *TamilNet* (2010b) reported on another event that national media outlets had overlooked: the Tamil-Brahmi inscription had mysteriously disappeared from the Sri Lankan Department of Archeology. The report also addresses the controversy surrounding an article that in the meantime had appeared in the *Daily Mirror* and accused the Tamil press of making false reports.[4] According to the Sinhalese sociologist Susantha Goonatilake (head of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka), Tamil reporters had erroneously publicized the discovery of the inscription, making the unsupported claim that it came from southern Sri Lanka; in his opinion, no one at the Department of Archeology had seen this inscription. Goonatilake's name immediately caught my attention because he is a well-known figure in local anthropological circles. His involvement in the campaign to ban Stanley Tambiah's *Buddhism Betrayed* (1992), as well as in attacks against postcolonial anthropology in Sri Lanka (Goonatilake 2001), made him a prominent representative of Buddhist Sinhala nationalism.

TamilNet (2010b) responded to Goonatilake's accusations by publishing not only a photo of the inscription but also a drawing by the German in charge of the dig and signed by a Department of Archeology faculty member. The website administrators decried the deeply rooted attitude that still drives most of the island's population to consider the Tamil northeast and the Sinhalese south two separate nations. And the war between them is fought wielding weapons and archeology. I found this episode striking for multiple reasons: not only because the con-

troversial discovery was made in the area of my ethnographic field, but especially because the parties used antagonistic yet foggy tones that reflected the overall climate of contentious and demanding vagueness, composed of partial concealment and disclosure, that had also characterized my anthropological investigation in the area. Three and a half years after my initial research period following the tsunami, the end of armed conflict allowed me to return to a region near the Tamil territories that is considered the main source of electoral support for the then-ruling party: Hambantota District. There, I was met by a thick blanket of truth claims and falsifications that had coalesced on the village like so many semblances of reality, an arena of opposing presumptions, machinations, and conjectures that had more to do with the moral domain of intention than with the ontological domain of reality. In the mist, however, I was able to glimpse a possible interpretation of the story I had come to investigate—a story in which the tsunami and the war were so inextricably bound up with each other in weaving the country's current "geographies of insecurity" (Hyndman 2009) that one could not be addressed without the other.

The symbolic boundaries for determining the objectivity and accuracy of both sides' truth claims and associated attempts at falsification were nothing more than antagonistic attempts to recompose a global moral order in a context that had been marred by recurrent war. Working at the borders of the forest separating the Tamil and Sinhalese territories, I was in a privileged position for tuning my sensors to recognize such devices for employing historical reconstructions and accounts. My research field was shaped by political violence, direct experiences of the tsunami, the subsequent tidal wave of humanitarian aid, and the securitization of fear connected to terrorist raids in the jungle. In this context, the existential anxiety associated with crisis interrupted daily life in a constant (though periodically contested) climate of indeterminacy in which "national fantasies" (Choi 2012) could easily take root.

"For something like an obligation to be added to the intrinsic rules of manifestation of the truth," Foucault argues, "it must either involve precisely something that cannot be manifested or demonstrated by itself as true and that needs as it were this supplement of force" (2014: 95). Carrying out ethnography on the edges of Yala National Park required me to engage with opposing truth claims in a slippery terrain bristling with antagonistic attempts at falsification. At the same time, however, lies generated apertures, embrasures of potential understanding. After all, "unlike truths, lies together with misunderstanding and diversion at times can produce the expectancy of understanding": they create barriers that seem to be "there just to be surmounted, if you are able" (Palumbo 2009: 30, my translation).

Act II: Foundational camouflages

I was drawn to Hambantota District by the national reconstruction campaign dubbed Helping Hambantota that channeled a significant portion of the international funds received after the tsunami in this specific district. For my fieldwork, I located a village approximately 10 kilometers from the coast that was presented as an exemplary model of the results achieved by post-tsunami reconstruction. The Sri Lankan office of UN-Habitat supported and supervised the construction of this village, which covers an extensive circular area overlooking a water reservoir. As with other residential centers built in this district after the tsunami (Barenstein 2012), local politicians channeled aid toward their own clientelistic networks. In reality, none of the beneficiary families had been impacted by the tidal wave. Their status as victims was a disguise identity aimed at satisfying the funding requirements of humanitarian agencies.

Over the months of my research, the historical origins of this settlement gradually surfaced despite efforts by the village's political leadership to conceal all traces, diverting my ethnographic investigation (Benadusi 2012, 2013). As

it turned out, the areas bordering Yala National Park where the houses had been built represented an integral element of the ruling family's strategy of political consolidation. Back in 1997, when he was Minister of Fishery and Aquatic Resources Development, Rajapaksa had cleared a section of jungle right in this area. This land was then distributed to his political electorate with two specific objectives. The first was to use the presence of loyal Buddhist Sinhala supporters to colonize the peripheral belt of the Southern Province threated by LTTE incursions. The second was to stifle the breeding grounds of insurrection that had characterized this part of the country the decade before (1987–1989), led by the Marxist-Leninist party Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front—JVP).

Many of the colonists to whom Rajapaksa had offered land and the promise of governmental funding to build their houses already lived in the area, having settled there illegally to cultivate sections of the jungle. Construction work was prematurely interrupted, however, when Rajapaksa was removed from his ministerial office in 2001. The tsunami provided an excuse to resume the program with a much larger budget than had been allocated to the original project and no obligation to repay the funds. In order to channel the "golden wave"[5] to this end, however, the village had to have the tidal wave as its founder. The villagers were held together by a secret: every time they were subject to an external gaze, they repeated an established script, a sort of narrative scheme based on the shared fiction of experiencing the tsunami firsthand. The past had to be carefully adjusted to support the regimes of truth required by both international aid and fantasies of reconquering the nation. In reality, none of the project beneficiaries came from the coast. Before the tidal wave, some of them had traded in fish, but their main occupation was agriculture. Nonetheless, the process of identity-based manipulation required them to change their professions, remove their political affiliations, and even shift their home villages from inland to the coast. To follow the community script, they had to assert an original bond

with the ocean and a post-disaster conversion from fishing to farming.

Even the name of the settlement bore traces of this ambivalence. The name, which Rajapaksa gave the settlement during the original construction program in 1997, translates as "people who work thanks to the help of water." This phrase was well suited to respond to the institutional requirements of the Ministry of Fishery and Aquatic Resources Development, from which Rajapaksa drew the funding. Yet, the name also left a margin of ambiguity to allow for recognizing the beneficiaries' farming identity: in one way or another, rice farming, lake fishing, and shifting cultivation all depend on water resources, albeit not ocean water. Furthermore, the village name, a Sinhala word rarely used in rural centers, sounds similar to a phrase meaning "fishermen" that anyone could easily understand. Thus, in spoken language, "the village of those who work thanks to the help of water" became "the village of fishermen." Whether or not it was deliberate, seven years later this lexical misunderstanding unexpectedly lent itself to the placement requirements of the international donors who arrived after the tidal wave. Having been trained to narrate a foundational moment shaped by their experiences of the disaster, the villagers found themselves united by a shared manipulation perfectly matched by the village name: the village of fishermen struck by the tsunami.

The pragmatic contextualization of this foundational lie made my ethnographic work rather slippery. The villagers took part in an intentional effort aimed at enlarging the prevailing circles of power to incorporate the new resources that had arrived in the wake of the tidal wave. They thus allowed humanitarian operators to take at face value the community's apparent connection with the tsunami along with the fictional village's genealogy and local rootedness. The seeming agreement in the village, however, concealed smoldering tensions and resentment fueled by the injustices characterizing the reconstruction phase. The village was still governed by a federation UN-Habitat had established directly, and headed by loyal,

local supporters of the country's ruling party. A Sri Lankan expert from the capital had appointed them and continued to supervise their activities, playing a brokerage role between the beneficiaries and humanitarian agencies, and communicating directly with the Colombo-based political leaders. One responsibility of the federation heads was to monitor the narratives villagers used to present the settlement to outside eyes. This was no easy task.

True, most beneficiaries were prepared to go along with the regimes of truth that had allowed them to intercept tsunami funding, but a minority of opposition sought to contest the roles played by the federation and UN-Habitat. While many beneficiaries had already owned other houses in the small villages along the settlement's edges, the discontented individuals filling the ranks of this minority had lived within the same plots of land even before the seaquake. Initially excluded from the funding, they had successfully put enough pressure on humanitarian agencies to assign them some funds. Although they felt fully entitled to participate in the organs of community government, however, they found themselves continually marginalized. Some individuals, forced to not only stage a personal connection with the seaquake but also conceal their support for the country's opposition party, found it more difficult than others to remain docile in the face of the collective hoax looming over them. The main factor that allowed me to glimpse the emergence of cautious, gradual acts of disclosure regarding the true origins of the village was my continual presence in the field: conducting interviews with beneficiaries, clandestine renters and buyers, and actors, from international agencies to local political leaders, who had supervised the construction; continually visiting the families that lived in the settlement and the small surrounding villages; meeting with on-site institutional administrators and temple monks. In the end, what was said and, even more often, not said in these encounters eventually enabled me to catch sight of tiny fissures of reality through the blanket of fog hovering over the village.

Act III: Rejecting the memorial

The federation leaders had linked the tsunami and the war from the very beginning, asking me to avoid such painful subjects when interviewing the residents. The secretary, Lakmali, a married woman who was very active in the community organizations and maintained a leadership role after reconstruction was completed, was very clear on the subject:

> An international donor recently came to the village and made us a proposal: they wanted to build a memorial in honor of the victims of the tsunami, but we refused. We don't want to keep this memory alive. We said the same thing to others who came to visit the village: don't ask local people questions about either the tsunami or the war; those subjects are too painful. The only thing we want is to look ahead and think about the community's future development.

This rejection of the memorial puzzled me for various reasons. While discouraging me from investigating their traumatic past, the villagers took every opportunity to use ceremonial practices and phrases to commemorate the tsunami victims, who were always linked with the casualties of the latest civil conflict. Furthermore, they promptly mentioned their experiences with the tidal wave without any solicitation on my part. They brought it up when introducing themselves, as if the tsunami served as a calling card. In reality, however, their experiences of the disaster were commemorated just enough to signal their collective belonging, as in a sort of "pseudomythologization" (Affergan 1998: 125, my translation) that allowed them to shape the event into a foundational moment for the community in the absence of corroborating documents or concrete evidence. Such evocation quickly gave way to accounts of the reconstruction phase, which, in contrast, were lengthy and detailed.

Evoking the tsunami instead of simply recalling it meant entering that slippery terrain in which the villagers had to carry on the narrative, providing details about the time before the tidal wave. To do so, they drew on elements of the account they had been taught to perform at need. Lakmali herself was unable to avoid this risk. During an interview, she used one of the village's recurrent plot lines, describing her fictional life in a coastal area near Kirinda where, she said, the tsunami had destroyed her home. In the course of the account, however, she was unable to suppress the spontaneous distrust that people living in rural areas often harbor toward people who live on the coast. She ascribed them the kind of immoral qualities that comprise the most common stereotypes associated with fishing populations in southern Sri Lanka, such as drunkenness and excessive sexual license. As the federation secretary, Lakmali took on the responsibility of fully participating in the foundational lie. Considering her ties with the local political elite, and especially the expert whose brokerage role guaranteed the community's connection with humanitarian agencies, she was obliged to perform the preestablished plot outline, at least when communicating with outsiders. The regime of truth involved an obligation that forced her to move along a precarious ridge that put her personal religious and moral beliefs to the test every time she was called on to recount a counterfeit autobiographical past. Why, then, was she personally so determined to reject the memorial?

Commemorative monuments had been put up in many villages rebuilt after the tidal wave, either by the government or by humanitarian agencies. Sometimes, the survivors themselves built these memorials as a sort of protest against the shortcomings or injustice of institutional efforts to manage aid (Simpson and De Alwis 2008). In these cases, the monuments not only functioned as devices for turning the catastrophe into an object that others could understand and access: they especially served as a terrain for expressing the ethnic and political antagonism that emerged during reconstruction. In my case, however, Lakmali framed her rejection of the memorial as a desire to break with the

past. There was more at stake here than her personal credibility: this issue also touched on the village's collective memory. Her refusal communicated something more than a concern that the memorial would have preserved the memory of an event—the tidal wave—and its effects on the community. Given the climate of increasing uncertainty surrounding the village's identity, the monument would have granted concreteness and permanence to the alleged truth underlying the foundational lie. As long as the falsification remained within the boundaries of communication, it could be selectively represented and enacted in oral interactions with outsiders. If commemorated with a memorial, however, the lie would have been anchored in the physical space of the village. In so doing, it would have taken an official version of the past that was meant to remain merely performable, and rendered it true in a tangible form. The fabricated pre-disaster period had to be selectively evoked in oral narratives lest the villagers suffer not only individual harm but also a symbolic violation at the community level.

As both a collective site of memory and an object of memory, the monument would have forced villagers to face a dilemma brought on by the tsunami. A karmic belief was used to justify the unfairness of an undeserved gift: specifically, that the wealth of resources they received from international donors after the tidal wave must have been due to worthy actions they performed in past lives. Yet, being morally upright in past lives would not have saved them from the moral corruption caused by materially displaying a lie through the memorial. The "proof" of the monument would have rendered incontrovertible a falsehood that instead needed to remain in the uncertain realm of spoken language, a realm that is always open to the possibility of deceit and falsification. The ethno-political tension at the borders of Yala National Park suspended the criteria for recognizing the identity of the Other, thereby generating a performative space of indeterminacy. Within this space, the villagers had to carefully calibrate acts of concealment and disclosure to defuse threats to their safety and reputations in an area subject to political interference, intensive humanitarian assistance, and periodic militarization. The proposed memorial, however, unavoidably threatened this operation.

Act IV: Waves of terror in the jungle

As I extended my stay in the village, local interlocutors tended to slip out of the communicative code reserved for outsiders. In the brief moments in which the register of disclosure prevailed over concealment, people employed linguistic clues to indicate this shift. They used intensifying expressions to signal the desire to reveal information they considered true, in relation to both the events connected to the tsunami and the turbulent months leading up to the outbreak of civil war. On one hand, these expressions were used to emphasize the unreliability of ordinary regimes of communication; on the other, they prepared the ground for truth telling. There were always rhetorical devices for introducing honest statements amid the "insidious spider web of human intention" in situational discourse (Bloch 2013: 51–52). The young farmer Chandana, president of the Rural Farmers Society, lived in one of the houses that predated the tidal wave. In our first conversation, he introduced his lengthy account:

> Don't ask me to talk about the village, because it could go one of two ways: if I speak and tell the truth, I will earn the resentment of the families, who are scared that they might not receive any more aid. If I lie—as the others do—I violate a Buddhist principle, and that is something I don't want to do. It is not that the people are dishonest: the people are honest, but they have been taught to lie.

In a context governed by fear—of the government, of humanitarian agencies, of the army, of being arrested by the police—he had tried to "expose the corruption and injustice happening

in the village," but he was silenced: "The members of the federation told the villagers that, if they listened to people like me, no donor would give them aid or assistance in developing the village." Chandana knew that, amid the moral disorder following the tidal wave, he needed to establish credibility as a righteous person in order for people to trust what he said, which is why he felt it important to distance himself from the tsunami and subsequent aid. He did not need external coercion to become a "subject of truth" (Foucault 2014). He limited himself to generating these discursive plot lines so that his statement would be believed. He used the same kind of rhetorical strategy to reveal inconvenient facts about other subjects, such as terrorist attacks in the jungle.

A series of assaults in October and November 2007 spread panic throughout the area. The violence began when armed guerilla groups identified as LTTE militia attacked civilians, and culminated with the murder of five farmers from the village and the kidnapping of three others (CPA 2008). The reports on these incidents, all of which occurred within 10 kilometers of Tissamaharama, were vague about the details and the people involved: they mentioned the aggressors' false military uniforms and their faltering Sinhala alternated with Tamil, the ineffectiveness of institutional responses and subsequent security measures, and the fact that the bodies of the kidnapping victims had never been found. According to correspondents sent by the *Daily Mirror* (Dilrukshi and Weerasekara 2007), officials at the Tissamaharama police station—rather than responding to reports in a timely manner—had intimidated the victims' relatives, accusing them of providing false information and spreading alarm among the population. Far from reassuring people, the public information campaigns launched after these events only served to aggravate concerns. Indeed, the measures suggested by the local police station were essentially unfeasible: if people sighted a suspicious element or individuals at the borders of the park, they were supposed to shout for help or fire their guns to alert others in the area. At

the same time, however, the police advised residents that soldiers would be circulating through the area dressed in civilian clothing and should not be mistaken for suspects. It was not at all clear how people were supposed to distinguish between a Tamil guerilla wearing a military uniform and a member of the governmental forces dressed in regular clothes.

The statements by the individuals who had witnessed attacks and kidnappings bore traces of this ambiguity as well. The three missing men had been seen with their hands tied behind their backs, with individuals who appeared to be soldiers holding them by force. Since the witnesses were farmers used to cultivating land in a tract of jungle that was often subject to security measures, they had not been too uncertain of the attackers' identity to react to what they were seeing. Chandana mentioned this in the course of one of our conversations, introducing his account with an affirmation meant to frame what followed in a register of truth:

> Don't ask me to talk about it. One time, the local representative of the ruling party wanted to silence me by reporting me to police for having publicly insulted the name of the president [Mahinda Rajapaksa]. All I had said was that no one lifted a finger to protect the farmers in the area, neither from elephant attacks nor from the other dangers in the jungle. If other people there in the meeting hadn't intervened in my defense, I would have been sent to jail, but everyone knew I was telling the truth.

In the same dialogue, Chandana doubted the LTTE had been responsible for the kidnappings, as the police spokespeople had suggested. In his opinion, killing the farmers practicing shifting cultivation in the jungle was not representative of the Tamil insurrectionists' usual guerilla tactics. The victims even included women, who were beaten, tied up, threatened, and hit as they helplessly watched their husbands being taken. Chandana was a firm backer of the JVP before

shifting to support the opposition leader, Sajith Premadasa, during the 2010 elections. This style of violence reminded him of the intimidation tactics that the police forces and army used against individuals suspected of having ties to subversive movements; in his view, it was not the modus operandi of the LTTE's armed wing:

> In 2007, the police kept saying that we shouldn't venture out into the jungle because there were threats of Tamil raids, but what are farmers supposed to do? If you skip the only three months when we can be sure of an income, you can't feed your family for the rest of the year. We have no choice. If we skip the monsoon season, we have to wait six more months for the next one. . . . Even farmers from the surrounding area come to grow in the forest around the village perimeter; they come to farm their pieces of land. The terror sent these people into a panic; there were even shots fired because of some suspicious individuals. Despite the fear, however, many of them kept on farming. Without any help from the institutions, what were they supposed to do? When they were kidnapped, the three men from the village were on their lots of land. The news spread by word of mouth as far as Colombo. Once again, it was us farmers who paid the price. But it has not been proven that all these incidents are the fault of the Tamil Tigers. There are other armed groups in the area that might have an interest in creating civil disorder for their own ends.

Various hypotheses circulated about the group of assailants. In a dispatch denouncing the degeneration of human rights in Sri Lanka, the US Department of State (2008) rejected the possibility of the Tissamaharama incidents being the work of the LTTE, instead mentioning "Sinhalese extremist groups" but without providing further details. The climate of secrecy surrounding these events was further fueled when ABC

(Asia Broadcasting Corporation) was temporary taken off the air right after the attacks in Tissamaharama. Ordered by Rajapaksa (2007), this censorship involved stringent measures to prohibit national media from covering news items in any way related to military and police operations associated with national security.[6] This pressure on the media was reminiscent of similar moves during the first escalation of violence leading to the outbreak of civil conflict in 1983.

While this was going on, a national controversy broke out surrounding the so-called Sinhala Tigers, whom the government had begun to blame for terrorist attacks against civil and military targets in the Southern Province. The JVP was presented as the Sinhalese wing of the LTTE, specifically trained to plan terrorist attacks in the south. The anti-terrorism division arrested several civilians, accusing them of taking part in attacks and killings and transporting explosives and weapons. Human rights activists, however, claimed the defendants' confessions had been made under torture and that the government had promptly silenced the few who had tried to speak out. In a 2014 article published in the *Sri Lanka Guardian*, Tisaranee Gunasekara (one of the few independent journalists still working in Sri Lanka, known for her courageous critiques of the Rajapaksa dynasty) used terms such as "falsification" and "false truth" to allude to the strategy of obfuscation the ruling family used to nip in the bud any possible dissent in the south, the stronghold of its electoral power.

The expanding culture of fear and declining trust in Sri Lanka generated tension in the political sphere as well. In this arena, where uncertainty, suspicion, and intimidation were given performative space, locals were obliged to calibrate challenge and regulation to address the numerous risks looming over everyday life. Experiences of the disaster had unfolded in a damaged terrain in which the tsunami and ethnic conflict walked hand in hand. Despite the obviously different circumstances and actors, there was, from a long-term anthropological perspective, an astonishing similarity in the parapherna-

lia deployed in responding to these two events. The linguistic and performative regime of deceit and omission, just like the regime of truth and disclosure, required the villagers be instructed and trained. The important thing was that outsiders be complicit and participate in reproducing the deception and appearances of truth, not that they be believed. Navigating the rocky path of uncertainty in village life required the use of "uninhibited research methods" (Bouchetoux 2014). Fortunately, numerous ethnographic examples helped me in this task. As John Barnes (1994: 2) points out, anthropologists, more than any other kind of social researcher, have long demonstrated that "lying is ubiquitous," although it takes on different meanings from one domain of social life to another, inevitably structured according to people's divergent expectations of truth.

Conclusions

A decade after the tidal wave, on 26 December 2014, in the Hambantota District conference hall named after him, Mahinda Rajapaksa celebrated National Safety Day under the slogan "Let us unite to eradicate disasters." The location was deliberately chosen in view of the important role the district had played in the post-tsunami reconstruction campaign and the subsequent military campaign. The propaganda accompanying this commemorative event symbolically wove security and safety together with the risks to be eradicated (terrorism and natural disasters) to form a unified instrument of control. Both employ technologies and narrative devices aimed to undermine any possibility of trust. As illustrated by the four ethnographic examples in this article, within the geographies of insecurity at the borders of Yala National Park, terrorism and disaster are two external threats that serve projects of "national purification" (Spencer 2003). The nation's purity requires forms of mytho-historical regulation that not only depend on securitizing fears of an external enemy but also work insidiously to obfuscate

the symbolic and sensorial boundaries of identity, rendering them elusive through the very act of reproducing them.

It is true that tidal waves and civil wars carry with them memories that are too painful to articulate and thus remain hidden. Even more significantly, however, they also trigger strategies for reconstructing the past that are rooted in politics and thus always problematic, controversial, and subject to contestation. This is why technologies of surveillance must be ready to adapt to shifts in the balance of power inherent in social life. Indeed, personal visions of the past encompassing daily life are not the only things at stake: the collective memory forming the national political community's foundation might be called into question. In order to turn Sri Lanka into a "nation of villages" (Woost 1994) ready to march once again down the arduous yet glorious road of reconquest and reconstruction, the villages' histories must be synchronized with the nation's ideology, adapting themselves to present-day challenges. Community strategies of moral construction and regulation must be ready to incorporate new languages (Brow 1996). It is thus no surprise that, to turn the tsunami-conflict intersection into an advantageous opportunity, political actors had to expand their circles of power to include new allies, establishing ties with humanitarian agencies. It is likewise unsurprising that the everyday local deployment of securitization policies was facilitated by figures such as the federation members, who were ready to monitor the boundaries in which machinations surrounding identity take shape by balancing humanitarian aid incentives against the sanctions imposed by a state operating in a regime of emergency.

However, the various strategies of temporary disclosure I have described clearly show that, while the tsunami and civil war required people to stick to a well-consolidated regime of truth and deceit, it is always possible for unexpected spaces of agency and even forms of dissent to surface in the local arena. The federation's opposition to the memorial must be understood in relation to a setting in which the

number of similar monuments demonstrates how persistent the government and humanitarian organizations have been in extending their political ties to newly constructed settlements. The moral risks involved in participating in the foundational lie were contained by rejecting the proposed memorial, suggesting that even the individuals who participated more docilely in the prevailing regimes of truth refused to fully conform to the identity-based mechanisms of counterfeit governing social life. Likewise, the climate of insecurity leading up to the conflict's last phase reveals that, no matter how authoritarian, unscrupulous, and obfuscating silencing technologies might be, as Chandana's case illustrates, there is always space for forms of resistance to emerge from between the cracks in the local context. New enemies might replace old ones or hide out in the forest in the heart of the Ruhuna kingdom just like in other border zones, thereby fueling the devices of fear and surveillance in Sri Lanka. Nonetheless, the ethnographic gaze must be alert and ready to tune into people's efforts to reestablish an alternative moral order in the world, however minimal these might be, sometimes concealed by the fog and at other times blanketed in secrecy.

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Notes

1. I spent four different ethnographic periods in Sri Lanka: the initial scouting mission in 2005; a long research phase from 2006 to 2007; a three-month period in 2010; and a final, one-month period in 2013. If, in the first phase, I mostly dealt with technical personnel, NGO operators, and groups of survivors involved in community-based disaster management, then, in the second phase, after the civil war, I had relations exclusively with local villagers, political leaders, monks, and public administrators living in the area. The disaster sites indeed were less heavily congested by international actors, and the passage of time had allowed life to regain its course without requiring people to be so wholly invested in aid operations. Nonetheless, the detonation effect the humanitarian apparatus had produced continued to affect politics of identity in the field.

2. Sri Lanka is made up of four groups: the Sinhalese majority (approximately 74 percent of the population), which is largely Buddhist; the Tamil minority, mainly Hindu, which accounts for 15 percent; a small percentage, approximately 7 percent, of Muslims; and a limited population of Burgher people deriving from the European colonies established in Sri Lanka between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries. The LTTE fought the Buddhist Sinhala majority for more than 25 years in an effort to create an independent Tamil state in the northeastern parts of the country, the so-called Tamil Eelam. Indeed, Sri Lankan postindependence politics has been characterized by strategic reinforcement on the part of the Sinhalese majority and the gradual reconversion of this former colony into a Sinhala-speaking, non-secular Buddhist state. Multiple Tamil nationalist movements have protested this gradual marginalization, and alternating waves of violence struck the country between 1983 and 2009, with the national army facing off against the LTTE-controlled separatist movements (Winslow and Woost 2004).

3. In this article, I use "village" to refer to the settlement where I carried out my research, thus avoiding the need for a pseudonym. For my fieldwork participants, I have chosen fictitious names to protect their privacy. All interview translations from Sinhala into English were

possible thanks to the support received from my research assistant while I was on the field.

4. The original article is no longer available online from the *Daily Mirror,* but its text can be found at "Fictional LTTE archaeology continues," *Buddhist Art News,* 26 October 2010, https://buddhistartnews.wordpress.com/2010/10/26/fictional-ltte-archaeology-continues. Goonatilake (2013) published an article on the same topic in the *Daily News,* but it does not mention the Tissamaharama archeological find.

5. "Golden wave" (*ran diya dahara* in Sinhala) is commonly used in Sri Lanka to refer to the Indian Ocean tsunami. Both official rhetoric and everyday language represent the disaster as a huge opportunity to achieve social and economic freedom (Gamburd 2014).

6. The full text of the prohibition can be found at "Sri Lanka Government rescinds blanket media censorship regulations," *Asian Tribune,* 1 November 2007, http://www.asiantribune.com/node/8061.

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