



City Research Online

City St George's, University of London

Citation: McDowell, C. A. (2011). Tamils in Switzerland: An Emerging Post-Asylum Community?. *Revue Hommes et Migrations*, 1292,

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version. To cite this item please consult the publisher's version.

Permanent repository link: <https://city-ref-test.eprints-hosting.org/id/eprint/4870/>

Copyright and Reuse: Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, unless otherwise indicated, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way. For full details of reuse please refer to [City Research Online policy](#).

Tamils in Switzerland: An Emerging Post-Asylum Community

Dr Christopher McDowell

Reader, Department of International Politics, City University London

This article begins from the observation that for the first time since Sri Lankan Tamil asylum seekers began arriving in Switzerland in 1980 there is evidence that a Swiss Tamil community is emerging to take its place alongside other communities – French, German, Italian Romansch-speaking plus longer established and more recent immigrant communities - in Swiss towns and cities. It is argued that the process through which the Swiss Tamil community began to adopt a core set of lifestyles and traditions that serve to bind its members, and define with confidence the norms and values that underpin the new immigrant experience, coincided with the military defeat of the LTTE in May 2009. The effect of the defeat was an immediate but ultimately short lived (ICG, 2010) surge in political support for the idea of a break away Tamil state in Sri Lanka among the global Tamil diaspora. However, within months as radical alternatives for future Eelam politics faded and as street demonstrations and demands for boycotts lost momentum, the all-pervasive grip of Eelamist nationalism on the social and cultural life of Tamils in Switzerland and elsewhere was loosened. In practical ways the presence and influence of the LTTE in people's lives fell away, conversations in public and private changed, a post-political future offered new opportunities for creating different kinds of shared experiences that would define the Swiss Tamil community.

This article explores and seeks to explain this transformation and its significance. It does so by first describing the identity of what will be termed the Tamil refugee population through the various phases of arrival and settlement up to the end of the conflict on the island. This identity will be described as being shaped by contradictory pressures. On the one hand a universalising identity that implicitly emerges out of a human rights-based asylum or refugee 'global citizenship' (Soysal, 1994) buttressed by a diasporic experience itself rooted in scattering and dispersal. And second a fractured identity emerging out of fragmented asylum migration, community divisions and a lack of confidence in the Tamil populations' place and role in their country of refuge. The second part of the article considers how these contradictions which, when overlaid with nationalist politics in exile, are starting to be resolved and a new community identity is being asserted. However, while the community divisions, that were so much a product of the asylum migration process and the course of the conflict in Sri Lanka, are less pronounced today than they were a decade ago, the author would contend that echoes of these divisions remain and may once again be redolent as engagement with politics in Sri Lanka becomes more organised and structured.

An argument being made in this article, therefore, builds on Crisp's contention 'that asylum seekers, refugees and 'refugee networks' should be considered not in isolation but as an integral part of the new migrant diasporas' (2005:3) and therefore should be analysed in much the same way as other migrant groups are studied. However, in so doing, one needs to be sensitive that the special legal statuses ascribed to asylum seekers

and refugees are formative in defining the asylum migrant experience. Crisp further cautions researchers to consider the embeddeness of refugees in their countries of exile; both the likelihood that refugees are entering a country where previous nationals have established migrant networks and second that international networks are very rarely networks of refugees only but rather incorporate a range of migrant statuses. These are important considerations, however, among Tamils in Switzerland it should be noted that the first arrivals in 1980 were very much the pioneers and Switzerland was Tamil *terra nullius* and in the absence of pre-conflict Sri Lankan migrant populations in a number of countries of asylum, the transnational connections tend predominantly to be among other refugee groups.

A Population Transfixed by the Conflict

Being an asylum seeker, that is someone waiting for a state authority to make a decision on an application for refugee status in accordance with persecution as defined under the 1951 Refugee Convention, or being a refugee and someone who has successfully gone through the process of claiming refugee status, forms an immigrant experience which is quite different to other types of migration. For most asylum seekers one's status in the host country is indeterminate for many years as individuals move through applications, decisions, appeals, and a range of visas which confer ever shifting entitlements. In some countries, such as the UK, the asylum experience may be punctuated by periods in immigration detention, a social life constrained by reporting requirements to police stations, and in all likelihood being dispersed to a town distant from London. In Switzerland while the determination system is swifter than in most European countries the prospect of a refugee gaining full citizenship is remote. Of the 42,000 Sri Lankan Tamils who have entered Switzerland since the outbreak of the civil war fewer than a quarter are now Swiss nationals. The Swiss political system devolves responsibility for managing assistance towards and the housing and settlement of asylum seekers to the level of the Canton and the dispersal of Tamils to avoid clustering in certain urban locations remains impractical. For this reason, Tamil asylum seekers have managed the bureaucratic asylum process from a position of relative geographic stability and most Tamils today live in or near to the places to which they were assigned.

The arrival and settlement experience of asylum migrant populations is therefore shaped in important ways by demands of the determinations process and by government's decisions around asylum migration management. In turn these procedures respond to political demands for new ways of managing the asylum challenge. As many commentators have noted, over the past thirty years European governments, including the Swiss Government, progressively introduced measures designed to reduce the numbers of asylum seekers (which peaked across Europe in 2002-2004) making claims in their jurisdiction by reducing people's access to the asylum system, putting in place a range of deterrents to future migrants, and reducing the population already in country through the removal of failed applicants and voluntary return schemes (see Gibney, 2006). Mulvey (2011) among others have argued that fears about global terrorism and concerns that the haphazard and poorly controlled movement of asylum seekers into Western Europe has

triggered a demonization of asylum seekers, a securitisation of asylum systems and an acceleration of the implementation pre-existing controls after 9/11.

For the majority of Tamil asylum seekers, therefore, their first and for some even their second decade in Switzerland was consumed with an ongoing battle to assert their rights in an ever changing political and legal landscape. In this process a universal personhood emerges in which the metaphoric family photograph album contains images of the global refugee life: the Nansen Passport, Southeast Asian boat people of the 1970s, the ubiquitous Madonna and Child representation of the refugee woman, and the logos of United Nations and humanitarian agencies in all the world's trouble spots. It is a form of global citizenship where the individual is the ward of international bodies and shares a common space with refugees in Africa, South America and in those formative years in Switzerland, with the displaced of the former Yugoslavia. It should be stated, however, that this enforced membership of a global humanitarian dependent population should not be mistaken for automatic solidarity with the causes of others. The author noted in an earlier study how Tamils in Switzerland in the 1990s did not view their shared struggle for rights with the globally displaced as the beginning of a wider political project, rather they remained convinced that their struggle and their claims to protection were exceptional, that they were the "real refugees".

This identity detached from Switzerland was distanced further from the lakeside park benches in Zurich, Lucerne and Geneva by the strong sense that asylum seeking and refugee Tamils were part of a conflict diaspora. The war raged in Sri Lanka through the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s and the idea of a lost homeland and the strong sense of victimhood was the dominant Tamil narrative throughout these years. The asylum seeking process involving the frequent retelling of personal experiences and justifying continued protection ensured that Tamilness in exile was inseparable from past and current events at home. The presence of the LTTE in almost all aspects of life for Tamils in Switzerland served to further ensure that people's engagement with the struggle was a continuous one.

Through the careful placement of LTTE leaders among the Tamil diaspora in Europe a complex network of organisations sympathetic to the Eelamist cause was established linking the major towns, reaching into fairly remote rural areas and importantly reaching beyond Switzerland's borders linking with similarly configured networks in France, Germany and the UK in particular. The LTTE through local committees infiltrated with relative ease key community institutions facing only limited and occasional opposition from elder Tamils some of whom had been active in Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) politics in the 1970s and who opposed the anti-democratic tendencies of the LTTE in Europe. Once the LTTE had effectively silenced other rebel organisations – such as the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) and Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO) – who sought to gain influence in Switzerland it was able to exert quite significant degrees of control over community activities, loading committees with LTTE supporters and driving out of politics anyone unprepared to follow party doctrine.

The strategy involved assuming control of temple management committees, for the building of new temples as well as the running of existing ones. Better established LTTE figures, overwhelmingly men, with a grasp of German or French became the lynchpin in negotiations over the purchase or lease of property often in industrial or commercial areas for use as a temple and importantly these individuals became the representatives of and spokespeople for the Tamil community in the eyes of the media – which frequently covered temple openings – and among local Canton and Gemeinden officials. With the majority of Tamils uncertain about their immigration status and the permanency of their residence in Switzerland and with a poor grasp of the official languages the LTTE capitalised on insecurities to claim for themselves the status of community leaders and up until 2010 the Tamil population in Switzerland had no collective voice that was independent of the LTTE.

Knowledge about the property market and rules over development enabled the LTTE to branch out into other areas of business including a chain of People's Shops selling South Asian produce alongside LTTE newspapers, videos and offering financial services. Tamil women in particular were expected to do most of their purchasing at one of the People's Shops and to only use a supermarket for goods that could not readily be stocked. Failure to patronise the shops, despite the high cost of goods and varying quality was regarded as unpatriotic and families who took their business elsewhere could expect a visit from the 'Boys' with a reminder about their duties to the cause. The LTTE entered into the everyday lives of Tamil migrants in other ways, through for example the establishment of weekend schools attached to temples, by setting up cricket teams, through TV and radio channels, and through internet sites offering news and editorials on the course of the conflict in Sri Lanka.

There was a considerably darker side also to LTTE politics in Europe. It is widely acknowledged that the war for Eelam in Sri Lanka was funded to a significant degree by money raised in Europe among the diaspora and through legal and illegal activities including credit card and phone card fraud, people trafficking and the provision of illegal labour in shops and restaurants. It is estimated that hundreds of millions of dollars was raised in these ways and much of it was used to purchase weapons. Fundraising including "door step" visits in which LTTE cadres would collect a monthly amount from families taking into account their ability to pay. Payments would be made for ostensibly humanitarian purposes, for example, through the Tamil Refugees Rehabilitation Organisation (TRRO) which had its roots in the settlement of Indian Tamils in the north and east of Sri Lanka in the 1980s (Bandarage, 2009: 89-90) and later the Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO), to provide assistance to the victims of the conflict who remained on the island. This form of money collection was very successful across Europe and in particular in Switzerland where those in employment were relatively well paid, they kept their living costs low, and were able to make regular cash donations. It would be misleading to argue that all payments were given under duress as this was not the case. While many Tamils were deeply uncomfortable with the tactics of the LTTE and would have preferred a negotiated political settlement, asylum migrants in Switzerland had left family members and friends behind and there was an unavoidable guilt among those who sought safety away from the island. Giving money to the TRO or

its 'partner' organisation 'White Pigeon' (following the removal of TROs charitable status in a number of European countries in the mid-2000s) with the knowledge that money would be channelled through the LTTE was deemed acceptable. That is not to say however that the repeated failure to make donations, particularly by businesses, often resulted in threats or actual physical violence. The situation in Switzerland though did not reach the same level as in the UK where violent organised crime intersected with Eelamist politics in particularly pernicious ways (Grimshaw and McDowell, forthcoming).

It has been shown therefore that from the first arrival of asylum seekers in Switzerland up until the military defeat in 2009 the Tamil population as a whole was transfixed by the violence of the conflict and its affects on the civilian population, and was unavoidably enmeshed in both diaspora nationalist politics and the bureaucracy of asylum. It is argued that Tamils in Switzerland during this period were not able to form a community in the public sphere because of these utter preoccupations and as a consequence of the LTTE's ability to tightly contain political engagement. Before analysing the significance of the military defeat on Tamil community formation in Switzerland it is important to explain a further important constraint on the building of a Tamil community, namely significant social divisions within the Tamil population that were in part a product of the asylum migration process and the conflict from which people were fleeing.

A Population Internally Divided

McDowell (1996, 2005) has previously discussed how the socio-economic and political dynamics of the Swiss Tamil population came to be defined by a division which arose between two groups of migrants who came to see one another in opposition. The division was significant because it revealed the underlying complexities in Tamil society and showed how social divisions among Tamils in and within the north and the east of Sri Lanka persisted through the dramas of conflict, refugee flight, asylum seeking and adapting to a new culture and society at the heart of Europe.

Internal differentiation among migrant populations, particularly those from countries in conflict, should not be surprising given the fraught nature of asylum migration. Nolin has usefully described how the 'breakdown of close primary social relations' that one would associate with 'community' among Guatemalans living in Canada led instead to weak and unstable ties and internal divisions as well as unreliable transnational "flows" between country of origin, host country and places in between (2006:183-185). Nolin argues that the failure to establish a community or meaningful transnational social fields should be largely understood as a consequence of the immigration policies adopted by the Canadian and other 'transit' governments and the 'changed geographies' they created. Her main contention is that refugee policies create a situation where refugees wishing to make a claim in a particular state cannot do so from their country of residence through, for example, a diplomatic mission, but instead are required to cross borders frequently illegally exposing themselves and others to danger and exploitation and fuelling the organised illegality of trafficking.

Nolin's point is well made and it is certainly the case that the changing geographies of asylum in Switzerland, particularly in relation to attempts after 1990 to restrict the further entry of asylum migrants, to negotiate repatriation agreements with the Sri Lankan Government and return agreements with other European governments, and through the inconsistent application of an elaborate permit system offering permissions to remain and degrees of entitlement to social welfare, together had the effect of reinforcing a two tier population of Tamil migrants. On the one hand there were those 'immigrant' Tamils who arrived between 1980 and 1993 who had attained a level of permit that in theory at least would lead to citizenship and who had been in the country sufficiently long enough to marry and establish a family, enjoy continuous employment albeit in a low or semi-skilled profession; and on the other a population of 'asylum seekers' whose permit status was insecure and for whom the threat of repatriation was constant.

But also social, caste, rural/urban, islanders mainlanders, politically engaged, war hardened.

Caste exists among Tamils in Sri Lanka, although not in such an elaborated form as it does among Tamils in Southern India. While caste is not prominent in public social interactions in diasporic settings, especially in the old diaspora, it continues to have some role in domestic ritual and arranging marriages (Ganesh, 2011: 175-76). Precise figures on caste among Swiss Tamils are not available, however McDowell (1996) has argued that the early migrants to Switzerland arriving in the 1980s and early 1990s comprised mainly high-caste Vellala landowners, who controlled significant areas of farmland in Jaffna; 'Theevans'- Vellala traders from the island off the northwest coast of the Jaffna Peninsula; and Roman Catholic urban Karaiyar and some lower-castes from Jaffna Town (see also Luethi 2005 and Marschall *et al* 2003). Sri Lankan Tamils who sought asylum in Switzerland from 1995, McDowell found, tended to be mainly Karaiyar and lower castes from predominantly rural areas.

It's seems relevant and very interesting. In France the Tamil entry
 > happened also in two phases. Opposed to the first migrants of the
 > 1980s, constituting the first group of Sri Lankan asylum seekers in
 > France, are those of the years 1990s. It is evident that asylum
 > route to France was mainly open to young men in the first decade of
 > the conflict.
 > My fieldwork has revealed socioeconomic patterns of flight and
 > entry, which unravels the composition of the diaspora population.
 > Two main subgroups forms the French Tamil diaspora for these two
 > decades (the 1980s and the 1990s). During the first decade of the
 > migration to France (1980s), the largest of these pioneer subgroups
 > was composed of high-caste Vellala landowners mainly coming from
 > rural and semi-urban areas of the Jaffna Peninsula. They belonged to
 > the lower-middle-class strata of Jaffna Tamil society. Conversely,
 > throughout the 1990s, the Tamil asylum seekers to arrive in France

- > were urban Karaiyar (mainly Catholics) and lower-caste Tamils from
- > Jaffna Town. They were employed in many craftwork roles. Others also
- > came from the Vanni district in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka.
- > Your contribution fits perfectly into this project. The themes of
- > pluralism and multiculturalism are also central to the project.
- > Could you also clarify what it means to belong to a minority in
- > Switzerland?

A Community in the Making

Goreau describes increasing violence among Tamils in France.

Bibliography

Bandarage, A. (2009) *The Separatist Conflict in Sri Lanka: terrorism, ethnicity, political economy*, London: Routledge

Crisp, J. (2005) Policy challenges of the new diasporas: migrant networks and their impact on asylum flows and regimes, WPTC-99-05, Policy Research Unit, UNHCR, Geneva

Grimshaw, R and McDowell, C. (forthcoming)

McDowell, C. (1996) *A Tamil Asylum Diaspora: Sri Lankan Migration, Politics and Change in Switzerland* Oxford: /Berghahn Books, Series on Forced Migration

McDowell, C. (2005) 'An Asylum Diaspora: Tamils in Switzerland', in Ember, C., Ember, M., and Skoggard, I. (eds) *Encyclopedia of Diasporas Immigrant and Refugee Cultures Around the World*, Part Two: Topics - Types of Diasporas, Yale: Kluwer.

Nolin, C. (2006) *Transnational ruptures: gender and forced migration*, London: Ashgate

Velamati, M. (2009) Sri Lankan Tamil Migration and Settlement: Time for Reconsideration, in *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs* July/September Vol. 65, pp.271-294