ON RESILIENCE AND DEFIANCE OF THE ĪLAMTAMIL RESISTANCE MOVEMENT IN A TRANSNATIONAL DIASPORA

Peter Schalk

1. Background

As a reaction to the Christian mission in Ceylon/Īlam/Laṃkā¹ in the 19th century both Tamil speakers and Siṃhala speakers organised themselves in religious resistance movements, the former into a Caiva² and the latter into a Baudhha movement.³ In the early 20th century this Caiva movement transformed mainly into a territorial movement that could unite all Tamil speakers on the basis of territorial demands, whether Caiva, Vaṇṇava, Christian, Muslim or Atheist. Religion was suspended in the self-presentation of this movement, but the connection between language and territory was strengthened. These territorial demands for a homeland – not yet a state – by the Tamil movement, that also implied strong economic interests, were mainly directed not against the colonial administration, but against growing expansive territorial demands of Buddhist Siṃhala speakers who saw the whole island as an island of and for Buddhists only. These demands by Siṃhala Buddhists were directed against both colonial Christian administrators and against ethnic minorities on the island who were classified as “latecomers” to the island. This close connection

¹ Īlam is Tamil and Laṃkā is Sanskrit and Pali. Both have the same referent, the island as a whole. Īlam is not TamilĪlam which is a part of Īlam. The expression “Īlamtamil” is now frequent. It has the same referent as “Lankatamil”. Eelam or Īlam <sihala. An Assesment of an Argument. Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis. Historia Religionum 25, Uppsala: AUU, 2004. “Ceylon” is a colonial, corrupted form of Siṃhala being here a toponym.


between Buddhism and language (Sinhala) and territory (“island of the dhamma”) became a characteristic the majority, the Sinhala Buddhists, continually shared whilst the Tamil Caiva movement changed into a territorial movement that intended to embrace all Tamil speakers in the North and East. It became “secular” in a specific sense (see below). The colonial conflict generated an internal conflict between the majority and minorities within the integrated administrative system of the state created by the British in 1833.

The conflict between Tamil and Sinhala speakers on the island Īlam started with a war of words in the early 1920s. The concept of a Tamil tāyakam ‘motherland’, sometimes rendered as ‘homeland’, was created as a cultural region of and for Tamil speakers in the North and East. It became clear to the Tamil speakers concerned that on a coming day of Independence from colonial administration, the majority of Sinhala speakers would take over the role of the British colonial administrators and introduce majority rule. This became true in 1972 sometime after Independence in 1948.

The verbal conflict that started in the 1920s developed into militant, but non-martial demonstrations in the 1950s and 1960s and subsequently into rural and urban guerrilla wars in the 1970s. They then were to turn into conventional wars, four in total, from July 1983 up to May 2009 and into an economic embargo of LTTE controlled areas from the 1970s onwards. The LTTE responded by setting up parallel institutions in areas under its control: the Tamil Ealam Administrative Service, the Tamil Ealam Economic Development Organization, the Tamil Ealam Police, Tamil Ealam Judicial Service, the Tamil Ealam Health Service and the Tamil Ealam Educational Service. In this process of institution building, which of course was hampered by the Sri Lankan Armed Forces (SLAF), the ideology of Tamil nationalism, including the LTTE concept of martyrdom, became an expression of the LTTE’s resistance and resilience.5

---
