



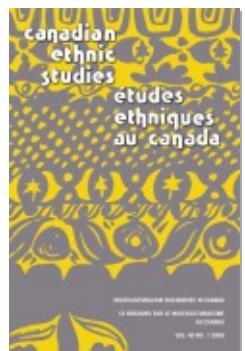
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Religion and Ethnicity among Sri Lankan Tamil Youth in Ontario

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Abstract

The paper presents survey and interview data from twenty-five Sri Lankan Tamil youth in Ontario, specifically dealing with the interaction between religion and ethnicity, the experience and expression of religion, the importance of religion, as well as the importance of the Tamil language for religious and ethnic identity. Herbert Gans's ideas about "symbolic ethnicity" and "symbolic religiosity" are used to explore the ways in which Tamil youth in Ontario interact with their ethnic and religious heritage. Many express their ethnicity through seemingly mundane acts such as wearing a sari to a family gathering, eating with their hands, and watching Tamil movies. Many are losing their proficiency in the Tamil language, but see it as essential for their ethnic identity. Many only attend a Hindu temple three to five times per year, but see it as essential for passing on their cultural heritage to their children. In other words, much of their ethnic and religious identity is constructed through a symbolic transnationalism. The research, although preliminary, begins to fill gaps in scholarship on the Sri Lankan Tamil population in Canada, as well as the role of religion in the lives of immigrant youth.

Résumé

Cet article présente les résultats d'une enquête et d'entrevues faites auprès de vingt-cinq jeunes Tamouls sri-lankais en Ontario, et portant particulièrement sur l'interaction entre la religion et l'ethnicité, à savoir : l'expérience et l'expression de la religion ainsi que son importance, tout comme celle de la langue tamoule concernant l'identité religieuse et ethnique. Nous nous appuyons sur les notions d'«ethnicité symbolique» et de «religiosité symbolique» d'Herbert Gans pour explorer la manière dont les jeunes Tamouls ontariens composent avec leur héritage ethnique et religieux. Plusieurs d'entre eux expriment leur ethnicité de manière banale, comme de porter un sari à une réunion de famille, de manger avec la main ou de regarder des films tamouls. D'autres perdent leur capacité de parler couramment le tamoul, mais voient dans leur langue un facteur essentiel de leur identité ethnique. D'autres encore n'iront que trois ou quatre fois par an au temple hindou, mais y voient un élément fondamental du passage de leur héritage culturel à leurs enfants. En d'autres mots, ces jeunes construisent la plus grande partie de leur identité ethnique et religieuse à travers un transnationalisme symbolique. Bien que ce travail ne soit que préliminaire, il commence à combler les lacunes de la recherche universitaire en ce qui concerne la population tamoule au Canada ainsi que le rôle de la religion dans la vie des jeunes immigrants.



INTRODUCTION

The Sri Lankan Tamil population in Canada has been increasing in size since the first refugees arrived in the early 1980s. However, studies of the Sri Lankan Tamil

community in Canada have thus far been limited to exploring the community's relationship to the ethno-political conflict between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan government (Bell 2005; Wayland 2004), its mental health needs in Toronto (Kendall 1989; Beiser et al. 2003), parent-teen relations (Tyyska 2005), very general surveys of the community in Toronto (Kandasamy 1995), and ethnographic treatments of single immigrant families (Ramachandran 1995). Although there are academic treatments of Tamil diasporic communities around the world (Engebrigtsen 2007; Wise and Velayutham 2008), they tend to be restricted to the study of transnational networks. This paper will explore the experience and expression of religion, the importance of religion, as well as the importance of the Tamil language for the religious and ethnic identity of Sri Lankan Tamil youth in Ontario.

This study adds to the scholarly literature on South Asian youth in Canada (Rajiva 2005, 2006; Tirone and Pedlar 2005; Aujla 2000; Pearson 1999) by examining the religion and ethnicity among immigrant youth (Eid 2003; Bankston and Zhou 1995). Studies of ethnicity in Canada often neglect to incorporate religious identity (Beyer 2005, 179). More specifically, when academic treatments of the South Asian or Tamil community in Canada do mention religion, they often do not go beyond simply noting that many of them are Hindu and pointing out which religious texts they read and holidays they observe (and how these are observed differently in Canada). Statistics Canada (2005) projects that by 2017 South Asians may number 1.8 million people, equaling or surpassing the Chinese population in Canada. Even with such a significant presence, not much is known about them and their religious beliefs. This paper, then, serves as a more in-depth foray into this under-studied area, focusing on Sri Lankan Tamil youth in Canada, specifically on their beliefs in relation to religion and ethnicity and the manner in which they practice and experience both.

Once Sri Lanka obtained independence from Britain in 1948, latent tensions between the Singhalese and Tamil populations began to come to the surface (Wilson 1999).¹ In 1983, an all-out civil war erupted and close to one million Tamils began to leave Sri Lanka. Canada granted refugee status to a sizable number of asylum seekers. Tamils continue to arrive in Canada at a steady rate as the settled members of the community attempted to sponsor their extended families. Sustained immigration has pushed the numbers of the Tamil population in Canada into the hundreds of thousands. Although it is difficult to calculate their exact number, most authorities place the number between 110,000 and 200,000 with about 90% living in Toronto. Sarah Wayland (2004, 418ff.) notes that "this estimate is based on an analysis of immigration data, census data, and figures given by Sri Lankan Tamils and those who work with Tamils." Thus, this number seems to be closer to reality than

the much lower figures taken solely from the Canadian Census (Statistics Canada 2006).² Many of the first generation immigrants are now citizens and are making a life for themselves in Canada. The children of these immigrants, many of whom left Sri Lanka with their parents, are now completing degrees in Canadian universities, working in an array of jobs, and starting families of their own. They are the focus of this paper.

THE SAMPLE

Participants were acquired through online social networking sites such as Facebook and Tamil message boards. A call for participants was posted on approximately thirty Tamil youth groups on Facebook, encompassing university student groups, ethnic and religious groups, and more general South Asian youth groups. The majority of these groups contained hundreds of members and were fairly active on a daily basis with “wall” posts and event updates. Forty-five individuals responded with an email message indicating that they would be interested in participating in the study. They also referred friends and relatives who might also be interested. Of the forty-five distributed surveys, completed results were obtained from twenty-five participants. Five of these individuals also agreed to more in-depth interviews, conducted through MSN Messenger for convenience.³ The survey and interview questions were very general, encompassing many different aspects of religion and ethnicity. The answers received were often extensive, consisting of several typed paragraphs of informal, free-flowing reflection. The names of participants have been changed, and other details of their life have also been masked.

Of the twenty-five final participants, sixteen were female and nine were male. They varied in age from 19 to 33 years with a median age of 23.5. Their age of arrival also varied: two individuals were born in Ontario and one arrived when he was fourteen years old.⁴ Most of my participants arrived when they were fairly young: the median age of the sample was 6.5 years old. All of the participants have been in Canada for at least twelve years, and the vast majority of them (twenty-three) have either completed their bachelors degrees or are currently attending a post-secondary institution in Ontario. Seventeen individuals originally came to Toronto (mostly to Scarborough); six participants arrived in Montreal, but grew up in the Toronto area, and two arrived in Mississauga. In this paper, the ways in which Tamil youth identify with their religion and ethnicity are first explored. This discussion is followed by a more in-depth examination of how religion and ethnicity are experienced and expressed, the role of religion in their lives, as well as the importance of the Tamil language for religious and ethnic identity.

RELIGION AND ETHNICITY

Because of the way in which questions were presented to participants, religion and ethnicity are dealt with separately. However, it should be kept in mind that the separation of religion and ethnicity is not so straightforward. The religious and ethnic practices of Tamil youth in Ontario overlap in several cases, but, as Bramadat (2005, 18) has noted, “it is nonetheless extremely valuable to ask members of ethnic and religious groups about the ways they define these identities and how they affect their lives and communities.” Nineteen individuals (76%) identified their ethnicity as Tamil, while six (24%) identified as either Canadian or Canadian-Tamil. For many respondents, the question of ethnic identity was a matter of “blood,” which could not be changed regardless of how long they had lived in Canada. They were proud to be Canadian, but felt that their ethnicity would never be anything other than Tamil. As one respondent noted:

Just because I reside in Canada[,] and I'm a citizen of this great country, does not make my ethnicity a Canadian by blood. Canada will make this differentiation as well, and label us or differentiate us as immigrants who became citizens.

For those respondents who felt more Canadian than Tamil, it was not an issue of blood, but of history and culture. As one participant, Thushan, noted, “I've grown up in a Canadian culture [,] listening to Western music, arts, movies, and celebrating Western holidays and traditions.” Individuals like Thushan *feel* more immersed in Canadian culture, but would still identify as Tamil if asked. Vasuki, another respondent, had no problem identifying herself as Canadian. She noted that she was asked about her ethnic identity when she first arrived in Canada. At that time, she answered that she was Sri Lankan because “to state that I'm a Canadian somehow felt like betrayal.” Twenty years later, however, she considers herself a Canadian, “not a Sri Lankan Canadian, but a Canadian. How you define yourself identifies where you feel you belong. And I belong here, in this vast, diverse, and beautiful country.”

In terms of religious affiliation, nineteen individuals identified themselves as Hindu, two as Christian, and four as having no religion.⁵ When asked whether they define themselves primarily in terms of their ethnicity, religion, or both, eleven (44%) respondents stated that ethnicity was more important and ten (40%) noted that both were equally important. Only four (16%) respondents stated that they primarily defined themselves with their religion. The two Christian participants fall within these four respondents, indicating that religion and ethnicity are probably more closely linked for Hindus.⁶ Most participants, however, did not choose one or the other, but discussed whether religion or ethnicity was more important. Many

respondents do not normally make a distinction, but forcing them to do so, elicited some interesting observations. The interplay between religion and ethnicity is a relatively understudied phenomenon within minority populations. This is unproductive and is, in fact, neglecting a very important interaction that takes place in the formation of ethnic identity (Eid 2003, 31).

Some of those who stated that they primarily identified themselves by their ethnicity felt that it mattered more in Canada. As Varun, a twenty-two-year-old criminology student at the University of Windsor, noted,

Growing up in Canada I feel people care more about where you're from, not what or who you believe in. I was raised to define myself as a person who immigrated to Canada from Sri Lanka[,] not as someone who is Hindu.

For others, ethnicity came to the fore as they began to identify less with their religion. As the practice of their religion became more personal, ethnicity became their primary identifier. As one respondent noted,

Religion isn't an everyday constant in my life. It used to be a few years back, but I've found that after entering university, I've ceased to make a conscious effort to pray everyday[,] and I'm starting to rely on myself more to make things happen in my life. I still have a lot of respect for religion[,] and it's still something that I hold close to heart and like to discuss, but the very personal appeal it used to have for me has faded.

For other respondents, the identification seemed more to be a practical matter. Identifying primarily with their religion meant that people could become confused as to whether they were Sri Lankan or Indian. Identifying primarily with their ethnicity meant that people could become confused as to whether they were Christian or Muslim (or maybe even Buddhist). Thus, they often used both religion and ethnicity as identifiers. As Kubeskaran, a twenty-eight-year-old law student at the University of Western Ontario, noted,

Primarily, I define myself through my ethnicity, but my religion plays a large role in my identity. I do consider myself different from other Tamils from other countries, since Tamils from Sri Lanka share a commonality of a shared history. However, it is easier to relate to any other Tamil[,] than it would be to another Hindu of a different ethnicity.

Another said,

I define myself by both. I find when I say Hindu, a lot of people quickly assume that I am from India[,] so I like to say I am Tamil and Hindu[,] which doesn't allow them to randomly guess. I think that's very important in my own view.

Many other respondents could not make the distinction. They noted that several aspects of Hinduism and Tamil culture went hand in hand. For example, as one respondent states below, Bharatanatyam, the classical form of dance that originated in Tamil Nadu, often depicts scenes from Hindu mythology. Thus, both are experienced in tandem and cannot be easily separated:

Hinduism and the Tamil culture seem to be heavily intertwined. I learn Bharatanatyam, which I consider to be part of my Tamil culture, and it also teaches me about stories and epics from Hinduism.

Another respondent put it well when she stated, “I feel that my ethnicity is the cloth and my religion is the thread keeping the cloth together.” For some, religion was, in fact, more important for their identity, but they still noted that both were important. As one respondent noted:

I define myself both within my ethnicity and my religion[,] though I would say that my religion takes a higher precedence in defining who I am. The reason is that my religion helps get a better understanding of the realization of my true self (my soul) and its relationship with God. My ethnicity does define me as well in terms of the way I think, the values I have[,] and my outlook on family, culture, etc. However, in terms of my approach to life and the values I hold, I believe religion has a stronger influence on me[,] and that’s why I state that my religion defines me more than my ethnicity.

In other words, religion and ethnicity could function in separate spheres of influence. Ethnicity may influence views on family and culture, while religion prevails over issues of soul and salvation.

THE EXPERIENCE AND EXPRESSION OF ETHNICITY AND RELIGION

Tamil youth in Ontario seem to experience their religion and ethnicity separately, although the two are intricately tied together. For this reason, it was difficult to find respondents who identified as Tamil, but who also did not feel surrounded by religion much of the time. The notion of “cultural scripts,” first developed in the area of linguistics, is useful for the study of religion and ethnicity (Goddard 1997; Wierzbicka 1996). When applied to the study of ethnicity, cultural scripts are

systems of symbols, structures and processes, localised in what is perceived as one’s “home country,” that act as directions and orientations for an individual’s adaptation to new environments. In exile, ideas and values that people see as expressions of “our traditions,” although no longer lived experience, still motivate people’s sense of belonging (Engebretsen 2007, 728-729).

In other words, “cultural scripts” (and, as discussed below, “ethnic goods” and “symbolic religiosity”) are enormously important in the construction of what Anderson (2006) has called an “imagined community.” For Anderson (6), “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined.” Thus, although individuals may feel that they belong to a “nation,” they will likely live their life without ever meeting or knowing most of the other members of this collective. However, each and every individual will feel that members of this “nation” have something in common, be it language, culture, religion, etc. Adherents to the religion of Islam, for example, will feel a comradeship rooted in the belief that their fellow Muslims, regardless of whether they live in Nigeria or New York, have taken the profession of faith (*shahada*) and may one day hope to circumambulate the Ka’bah. In a multinational state such as Canada, there are many competing nations that an individual may identify with. To the extent that Tamil youth (or any other ethnic group) wish to identify with their heritage, they must undertake a process of constant re-creation. Just as Canadian identity is constantly under threat from Quebecois nationalism, regionalism, and American culture, ethnic groups must also contend with the dominant construct (White, Christian). I argue, and will demonstrate below, that the maintenance of ethnic identity (an imagined community of “Tamil-ness”) and the re-creation of a Tamil heritage in the Canadian context is sustained by the use of cultural scripts, ethnic goods, and symbolic religiosity.

For example, Shanthi, a psychology student at McMaster University, noted that she was not very religious during her childhood, but was rediscovering her religious heritage while in her twenties. For individuals like her, cultural scripts are enormously important. As immigrants in another country, cultural scripts situate the individual who wishes to re-entrench him/herself in his/her “birth” culture. If individuals who have grown up in Canada become drawn later in life to the culture of their parents or grandparents, these cultural scripts serve to guide them in their exploration.

Part of the way these cultural scripts are upheld is through a celebration of minor differences. In Toronto, for example, through the use of the English language, through Western popular music and movies, and participation in the dominant political and economic culture, members of the mainstream society and minority communities all experience a common culture (Tirone and Pedlar 2005). Many members of these minority groups, however, also attempt to celebrate their “minor” differences through cultural festivals, watching Tamil movies with their parents, speaking Tamil at home, and eating Tamil food. These minor differences are essential for the maintenance of a distinct identity and a feeling of belonging in their ethnic community. At the same time, however, they allow individuals to weave in and out of Western culture at will.⁷ Tirone and Pedlar (*ibid.*, 35) state as much when

referring to “ethnic goods,” which are “consumables of a minority ethnic group” such as music, food, dress, cultural festivals, language schools, and, of course, religious organizations. Experiencing one’s ethnicity through these ethnic goods, as we will see, can be as mundane as eating traditional food using one’s hands instead of utensils.

What is operating here is an example of Gans’s “symbolic ethnicity” and “symbolic religiosity” (1979; 1994). For Gans (1979, 9), symbolic ethnicity is “a love for and pride in a tradition that can be felt without having to be incorporated in everyday behavior.” Ethnic practices will often be taken out of their context and take on symbolic value and significance. As Gans (*ibid.* 8) notes, “most people look for easy and intermittent ways of expressing their identity.” This statement is not meant in a derogatory way; it simply points out that in their quest to express their ethnic identity, individuals will quite often choose those practices that can be easily transplanted into their host country (Gans 1994, 578). Practices such as wearing a sari to a family gathering or religious festival and eating with one’s hands become disembodied from any structural significance they may have had in the “old country” and take on symbolic significance for those who want to experience and express their ethnic identity in the “new country.” Almost all of my respondents spoke implicitly in the language of cultural scripts, ethnic goods, and symbolic ethnicity. As one respondent noted:

When functions or celebrations are called for, I don’t hesitate dressing in traditional attire. As for expressing myself, I fully entrench myself in Tamil music, movies[,] and speak with friends in my mothers [sic] tongue.

Cowsigan, a business student from Lakehead University, noted,

When I’m around my ethnical group, peers, family, and friends[,] I will be more comfortable knowing that they share views and beliefs similar to my own. One good example of this is eating a good meal by using my hands instead of utensils; after all[,] there is nothing better than eating rice and curry with your hand. If I was around my Canadian friends and family, I would feel somewhat embarrassed.

Another stated,

I eat and cook Tamil food, I watch Tamil movies, I have Tamil friends, I wear Tamil clothes[,] and when I get married, I will have a Tamil wedding (a Hindu wedding with distinctly Tamil touches).

Finally, a biology student from the University of Toronto said,

I talk to my friends in my language (Tamil), and wear cultural clothes such as saries, or half-saries to parties & [sic] functions.

The density of the Tamil population in Toronto ensures that symbolic ethnic goods are turned to and used with more frequency and effect. When friends get together at high school or university, they may choose to consume what is believed to be the “goods” of “Western” culture (for example, drinking at the local lounge, going to the mall, or clubbing). They could just as easily engage in what Gans (1994, 577) calls the “consumption of ethnic symbols” by going to a Tamil theatre, a South Asian restaurant, or simply choosing to discuss more “ethnic” topics. While much scholarship often paints such “split” experiences in a negative light, many of my respondents felt that their ability to experience and participate in Canadian as well as Tamil culture was one of the benefits of living in an ethnically diverse city like Toronto. As one respondent noted,

A lot of my close friends from high school happen to be of Sri Lankan Tamil heritage as well, so we share common interests when it comes to cultural music, movies, clothes [,] and food [,] and these topics will find their way into discussions we have. I think that where you live in Canada has a strong influence on how you experience your ethnicity within the context of this country. Since I've always lived in cities that have high Tamil populations, I've never felt removed from my culture, neither at home nor at school.

Another said,

I experience being a Canadian by living in this country and sharing in its culture[,] which is really multicultural in my opinion — especially Ontario. I express my Sri Lankan ethnicity at home by what I eat and how I eat (i.e., with hands).... I participate in Sri Lankan cultural shows and wear cultural clothing to special events sometimes. I even teach my non-Sri Lankan friends how to eat with their hands and feed them rice and curry when they come over.

Although a Gansian interpretation of these sentiments seems promising, more research is required before any definitive statements can be made. This is the case especially since Gans’ notions of symbolic ethnicity and religiosity (1994, 577) have been challenged (Winter 1996; Kivistö and Nefzger 1993) almost as much as they have been supported (Rebhun 2004).

Tamil culture in Ontario is also sustained by a wide variety of social institutions. There are more than ten Tamil language newspapers, several radio stations, and numerous theaters showing Tamil or Indian movies (Wayland 2004, 419). As a member of the Segaran family told Ramachandran (1995, 158) in an interview, it was difficult for new immigrants to buy groceries when they first arrived, but today “there are more than 100 Tamil shops in the Toronto area. It is not a problem to purchase all those things now. Whatever things we used to get in Sri Lanka, we are able to get them here now.” There are also several major Tamil directories operating in

Toronto such as *Thamilar Mathiyil*, *Thakaval*, and *Vanikam*, which list businesses and social services ranging from Tamil jewelers and Tamil carpet cleaners to movers and repairmen. The most widely used one, *Thamilar Mathiyil*, has been in operation for over fifteen years. These directories are available free of charge at most Tamil stores around Toronto and do much to put Tamils, especially newly arrived immigrants, in touch with businesses and services around the city. For new immigrants, who may not know where to find a priest, immigration lawyer, or temple, these directories are invaluable. Indeed, many will turn to them before turning to the local Yellow Pages. There are also several institutions that specifically cater to Tamil youth. The Canadian Tamil Youth Development Centre (CanTYD), for example, provides leadership and volunteer opportunities for Tamil youth in Toronto. The Centre hosts barbeques, walkathons, discussions with parents about youth issues, and an annual Awards of Excellence gala designed to highlight the achievements of Tamil youth in a variety of endeavors. Such a strong institutional presence ensures that Tamil youth do not have to try very hard to experience their ethnicity. The sheer density of the Tamil population in Toronto ensures that the culture is present even when individuals leave home for school or work.

In terms of the expression of religion, Gans's (1994, 585) notion of symbolic religiosity proves to be somewhat useful. "Symbolic religiosity refers to the consumption of religious symbols, apart from regular participation in a religious culture and in religious affiliations – other than for purely secular purposes." For Gans, who uses the example of Judaism in America, symbolic religiosity could take place through decontextualized objects such as food, books, candles, the Star of David, and others. "People who come as occasional spectators of, rather than participants in, religious worship – especially on major religious holidays – may be prime practitioners of symbolic religiosity" (ibid. 585-586). It is again important to point out that Gans does not state this in a derogatory way. As he writes (ibid. 578), he is not arguing that symbolic ethnicity or religiosity is somehow "unauthentic, unserious, or meaningless." He is simply noting that the nature of ethnic identification and religious practice are inevitably different for immigrant communities, especially immigrant youth. Tamil youth in Ontario practice their religion through prayer (privately, perhaps at home shrines), by attending a temple or church, and during religious festivals. As Cowsigan noted,

We get together as friends to share some special religious days, New Year's, and other such occasions where we share our mutual beliefs and values. There are festivals that I attend with hundreds of other individuals to share our religious views as one, to share our beliefs with the other individuals in our society.

Cowsigan, a business student at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, notes that in cities like Thunder Bay,⁸ there are no Hindu temples, but there are what he calls

“house temples.” He says that these are “huge get-togethers with students and people at a doctor’s house, who had his basement done up into, like, [a] fairly large altar.” At these gatherings, the students “sing and chant the holy name. We always had a monk there, too, that would share some pastime stories of the Lord. Then we eat and the whole experience is just relaxing.”

Other ways in which Tamil youth express their religious identity is by refraining from meat during religious holidays, listening to *bhakti* (devotional) songs, and looking at *sathiram* (astrology) before making significant life decisions. As one respondent noted,

I experience religion when I go to temples, or when religious holidays come. I express it by listening to bhakti-songs during that time, and every Friday &[sic] Saturday not eating meat. Also, sathiram (not really sure how to say in English), well[,] my grandmother looks at it, and tells me what it says about my situation right now and my future, and if it’s bad, there are certain things we have to do, like not eat meat on certain days, go to temples this day and burn fire and pray to this specific god.

Looking at *sathiram* is important for many Tamil families in Canada, and significant life decisions are often not made without looking at *sathiram*, which consists of both astrology and numerology. Numerology books may be consulted in order to ascertain an auspicious colour before buying a new car, a lucky address for a new house, a name for a baby, or a date for a wedding ceremony. For example, if a man believed that the number 8 was an unlucky number for him, he would persuade his family not to move into a condominium suite numbered 602 ($6+2 = 8$). Astrological books would be consulted for marriages, the direction that the front door of a new house should face, as well as the dates on which it is auspicious to move into a new home. Arranged marriages usually do not take place without ensuring that the bride and groom are astrologically compatible. Most of these books are written by astrologers in India and Sri Lanka and can be purchased at most Tamil stores across Toronto. Sethuraman, a numerologist living in India, and Ayarpadi Ramakrishnan, an astrologist living in Sri Lanka, are two famous *sathiris* (astrologers) who are often consulted by Tamil families in Canada. Since these practices are more common in Sri Lanka and India, more research is necessary to understand how communities in Canada use them.

Home shrines are also very important for Tamil families in Canada. Tamil youth living away from home during college or university often do not have home shrines in their dormitories, but will likely use the shrines in their parents’ homes when they visit. Some, however, do have smaller icons or pictures of Hindu gods in their rooms or wallet. The role of fire, which is integral for rituals in the temple and important for many of the older Tamil population in Canada, does not seem to be very important for the religious expression of Tamil youth. One respondent noted that her

grandfather had asked her whether she lights lamps in front of her Ganesha statue everyday or just on Fridays. She responded that she never does. She says, “I felt bad about that but, number 1, I don’t have matches, and number 2, I’m afraid if I do that, I’ll forget about it and burn down the house.”

The Ganesha icons are enormously important for many Hindus, young and old. Narayanan (2002, 43) rightly notes that this “elephant-headed son of Siva and Parvati is probably the most popular god in all of Hinduism.” When I asked one of my respondents whether her relationship to God would change if the icons were removed from her house, she stated that it would likely not change, but the absence of icons would indeed make her feel less Hindu. When you enter a Hindu household, an icon of Ganesha or another god will often be placed in a very strategic place where he or she can watch over the whole house. My respondent told me that God is indeed everywhere but,

God is a little bit *more* where the statues are, which is why I don’t like standing in front of the statues all unwashed and menstruating and chowing down on a burger.

She states that God will hear her prayers regardless of where she prays from, but God will hear her a little more clearly from in front of the icon. Because of this understanding of the presence of God, she is particularly conscious of the statue in her living room. She says, “I’m more careful in everything I do around that statue because God is closer there[,] and I wouldn’t want to do anything offensive or bad.”

This same respondent noted that she only attended a temple about twice a year. As Min (2005, 100) notes in her study of Indian Hindus in New York, Hinduism rarely functions as a congregational religion. The temple “does not serve much as a place for fellowship and social networks” (*ibid.* 107). Many Hindu temples in Ontario are open all day long and adherents may come and go as they please. Although there are set times at which *pujas* take place, individual offerings or *archanas* can also be made at any time. Family and friends do not necessarily attend together, and even when they do, they often scatter around the temple and worship and circumambulate particular deities by themselves.

There are over fifty Hindu temples in Ontario but, of course, Sri Lankan Tamils did not construct all of them. Guyanese and Trinidadian immigrants instituted the Vishnu Mandir temple on Yonge Street in 1981 (Banerjee and Coward 2005, 35). One of the most popular temples in the Greater Toronto Area is the Richmond Hill Hindu Temple. Tamil immigrants from India, South Africa, Malaysia, Singapore, and Sri Lanka began building this temple in 1984 (*ibid.* 36), and they continue its building projects to this day.

The question of temple or church attendance produced a variety of responses. Fourteen respondents (56%) stated that they attend a church or temple on fewer

than five occasions per year. Eight respondents (32%) attended a temple or church at least once per week, and the remaining three respondents (12%) attended at least once per month. These figures correspond closely to Min's (2005) study of Indian Hindus in New York. This is not to say that those who do not attend a temple or church regularly do not have rich personal religious lives. For those for whom religion still had personal significance, what was important were prayer, the proper conduct of life, and spirituality. Such non-traditional forms of interacting with God are fairly typical of many second-generation youth in Canada. As one respondent noted,

I pray everyday[,] and I turn to God in moments of joy, sadness[,] and quiet contentment. I try and do the correct things in life (not quite a What Would Jesus Do type of attitude, but something similar)[,] and be a good Hindu, whatever that may be (I'm not sure yet what that is).

Sheela, a business student at the University of Toronto, said,

I consider myself more spiritual versus religious. I do believe in god, and I love the teachings of Hinduism and believe it has helped me to focus and find some sense of peace in my life.... I consider it to be a big part of my life, even though I may not physically go to the temple.

Others have either left religion and spirituality behind or are struggling with granting greater significance to religion in their lives. Mayuran, a twenty-two-year-old accounting student, states flatly that the role of religion in his life is "very limited," and that he often uses religion as "an example of what is wrong with the world." Gajanan, an engineering student at the University of Toronto, notes,

The role of religion in my life is still undetermined. I want to believe — but coming from a rough upbringing in society (for various personal struggles), coupled with a very technical science-based education background, I find it hard to believe at times. I search for the logic to everything — life included. Religion is an aspect that I feel I should and that I want to include in my life — but I haven't. Be it lack of faith, lack of commitment, or lack of formal education in the subject matter: the role of religion in my life is minimal, but present.

Another reason why many Tamils in Ontario, young and old, are attending Hindu temples less is because they are losing trust in the religious nature of the institution. Some are beginning to feel that the business end of the temple now overshadows the religious objective. As one respondent noted,

I've seen a Mercedes S-class with the plate [temple name deleted].... His 18[sic]-year old son had a Mustang in high school and his wife had a Lexus. Now, yes, he has the right to spend his money[,] but how much money do you think you deserve from running a

temple? I have doubts about how demanding his career is and how he justifies his pay cheque.

He goes on to recall that his father had often told him to pray at home and keep his money in his wallet (instead of giving it to the temple). This sentiment is shared by a fair number of Tamils in Ontario, young and old, who feel that Canadian priests are simply interested in making money and are losing their religion.

Even though most of my respondents rarely attended a temple or church, thirteen (52%) of them stated confidently that they would definitely attend more often when they themselves became parents. The temple was referred to as a place where ethnicity, religion, and culture converged, and a place that would be a valuable tool for teaching children about their heritage.⁹ For those who stated that they would attend a temple more often when they themselves had children, the temple was seen as a place that could instill a sense of religion in their children and provide them with a moral compass. For many it was an important aspect of being Hindu and being Tamil. One respondent said,

I believe religion is the basis for a strong moral compass[,] and I would not want to deprive my children of that — in fact, I would want to promote it as much as possible. Even more than I currently promote religion in my life.

Shaminy, a twenty-four-year-old biology graduate from the University of Waterloo, noted,

When I become a parent, I am hoping I will attend temples more often, only because I grew up watching my mother go to temples and pray, as a form of comfort that we will be protected and fine, and that is why I have not let go of God despite the many challenges I may have faced. I want my children to have that same belief that there is a God who is watching over them and will help them get through their worst moments in life. The belief that life will always go on, only grew on me with time and helped me believe that if I have trust in God I will be guided in the right path. So I would want to teach my children a few things about their religion.

Participants seemed unaware of the contradiction in their attitude towards temple visits; 56% of them rarely attended a temple and many stated that they experienced their religion privately through prayer or through ritual observance with their families. However, they still equated attendance at the temple with introducing their children to religion. In other words, even though the temple may not have any personal significance for them, it was still viewed as a place that could aid them in passing on their religious and ethnic heritage to their children.

Some respondents felt that they would do a better job than their parents in passing

on their ethnic and religious heritage to their children. Most did not blame their parents in any significant way, but recognized that resources were unavailable for them to have adequately learned the Tamil language or elements of their religion and ethnicity. Twenty-five years after the first refugees started to trickle into Canada, these resources are now widely available. There are dozens of teachers, part-time and full-time, working in language and religious education. One respondent, recognizing this, stated:

I might go more often just to introduce it to my children and get them comfortable with the experience. I think it is an important part of being a Hindu even though it might not be for me. It may play a role in my children's relationship with God and I don't want to take that away from them. It's also an important part of being a *Tamil Hindu*. I will probably send them to the Hindu equivalent of Sunday school so they can actually learn more about the religion — I don't know very much[,] but at least I have my parents and grandparents as a repository of knowledge. My children will not have that in me, but I want them to have it for themselves.

In other words, although many of my respondents felt that they did not have the competence to teach their children the Tamil language or about their religious and ethnic heritage, they felt confident that they could use the temple, tutorial services or the older generation to accomplish such ends.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE TAMIL LANGUAGE FOR ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

Another line of questioning attempted to uncover the importance of the Tamil language for the religious and ethnic identity of participants. As de Vries (1999, 261) notes, the question of whether first-generation immigrants are acquiring either of Canada's two official languages is important because those "without proficiency in the language of the host society face formidable barriers on the road to integration." The population density of an ethnic group in a particular city is important in several regards (comfort level in the new country, confidence, social networking, etc.), but it can also be one of the barriers to language acquisition and retention. Members of many immigrant communities in Toronto are at times able to go entire days without having to speak English. Several first-generation Tamils in Toronto speak Tamil at home, go to work where they associate primarily with Tamil co-workers, go to Tamil doctors, and shop at Tamil stores. However, it is likely that they feel more "integrated" in Canadian society because of such an ethnic presence. Thus, what scholars mean by "integration" may need to be rethought in the light of the changing institutional characteristics of some immigrant populations.

The problem of language acquisition and retention is particularly a first-generation issue. The exact opposite problem seems to exist with second- and third-generation immigrant youth. Those that were either born in Canada or arrived at a very early age (the so-called 1.5 generation) quickly lose proficiency in their mother tongue. They often speak English at home with their parents and siblings, shop at Canadian stores, and speak English at school. Of my twenty-five respondents, fourteen (56%) stated that they could speak and understand Tamil. Another six respondents (24%) could not speak the language but could understand it. Only five respondents (20%) stated that they could speak, understand, read, and write Tamil. Many expressed shame that they were forgetting their mother tongue and would likely need to hire language tutors if they wished their children to be proficient in the language.

Twenty-three respondents (92%) felt that the Tamil language was crucial for their ethnic identity (Wason-Ellam 2001). Many expressed a sense of shame for not being proficient in the language. As Janikan, a student at Ryerson University, noted,

I've always considered it a shame that I don't know how to read or write Tamil, and speak Tamil fluently for that matter. I find speaking the language is an obvious marker of being Tamil, but by no means is it the only marker. I consider myself Tamil (broken Tamil speak and all). I believe this was a realization when I met friends who were born in Canada and could speak/read/write fluent Cantonese or Mandarin. And I took a look at what my sis/bro and I could do in terms of communicate to others in our community on that level, and it was a sad realization that the disconnect was there.

Gajanan seconds the sentiment:

I believe since the Tamil language is part of my ethnicity — it is an extremely important part of my ethnic identity. Personally, it is also one of the most difficult parts of my own identity because my ability to speak, read, and write Tamil is limited to none. However, it is also an aspect that I would want to retain — learn and teach my children.

Several respondents went so far as to state that the Tamil language was fundamental to their ethnic identity. Acts as mundane as reading food labels at the Tamil supermarket in Scarborough strengthen, at a very basic level, the feeling of membership in an ethnic community. One respondent said,

The Tamil language is the sole entity that holds the Sri Lankan Tamil community together as an identity. In terms of religion, there are Christians, Muslims[,] and Hindus. In terms of appearance, Tamils vary in skin colour, eye colour[,] and features rather drastically. The basic thing that holds us together and allows us to call ourselves Tamil is the language. If we cannot speak the language, the identity gives very little meaning. So, I feel the language holds vital importance in terms of ethnic identity.

Another stated,

As a Tamil-Canadian, I would have a very difficult time feeling Tamil if I did not understand or speak the language. In Canada, the language is an access point to the rest of Tamil culture. If you did not know Tamil, you would not be able to understand the priests in the temple, read food labels at the Tamil grocery store, understand movies, songs or books, or communicate with older generations. These are all vehicles for knowledge, and without the language, you lose the medium for that knowledge.... There are some concepts in Tamil that are not expressed in English, but are an essential part of Tamil culture (e.g., the word for an unmarried, post-pubertal girl; the word for a ripe mango vs. an unripe mango; the word for an older sister vs. a younger sister). And, it is no coincidence that the name of the language is the same name we have for ourselves.

While 92% of the respondents felt that the Tamil language was important for their ethnic identity, only six participants (24%) felt that it was important for their religious identity. As Gerald, a Tamil Christian, stated, "They are independent. I can be a Christian and speak any language." For Hindus, however, religion and language seem to have a closer relationship. Many of the mantras chanted in the temple are in Sanskrit and thus knowledge of the Tamil language is not necessary. Many of my respondents did not attend the temple that frequently in any case and felt that a spiritual relationship with God did not require knowledge of Tamil. As one respondent noted,

The Tamil language is not so important when it comes to my religious identity. Most priests chant in Sanskrit (or so they say!)[,] and no one has any idea what they're saying anyway. Devotional songs are written in Tamil, and I think they lose some of the poetry when translated into English, which is unfortunate, but that's about it. God understands all languages [,] so I don't feel the need to speak Tamil to communicate with God.

Another noted,

The Hindu religion is practiced by many ethnic groups speaking numerous languages. The religion does not attach itself specifically to one ethnic group or one specific language. Thus, in that sense, it is easier to state that the Tamil language does not play as important of a role that it plays to my ethnic identity.

Put simply, Hinduism is not restricted to the Tamil population, and thus proficiency in the Tamil language was not necessary for the practice of the religion.

CONCLUSION

For most of the Tamil youth interviewed, ethnicity was their primarily identifier. Some believed that Canadians cared more about where an individual was from than

what religion s/he practiced. This suggests that, for many, ethnicity has become more important to their sense of identity than religion. For a large number of participants, no distinction could be made between religion and ethnicity; each reinforced the other. In terms of the ways in which religion and ethnicity are experienced and expressed, I have argued that concepts such as cultural scripts, ethnic goods, and symbolic ethnicity and religiosity are particularly useful. Although these concepts do not explain why religion and ethnicity are still important for Tamil youth, they do help in explaining the process by which these youth interact with their religious and ethnic heritage in order to fortify a sense of belonging in their “imagined community.” Many respondents experienced their ethnicity through seemingly mundane practices such as wearing a sari to a family gathering, watching Tamil movies, and eating with one’s hands. Religion was also experienced through practices such as devotional songs, home shrines, private prayer, astrology, as well as religious holidays.

The role of religion in the lives of Tamil youth seems to be going through a transitional stage. Some are rediscovering religion, some are abandoning it, and others are attempting to find a place for it. Even though most do not attend a temple very often at the present time, they still viewed temple attendance as a very important tool for passing on the religious heritage to their children. Questions were also asked regarding the role of the Tamil language for religious and ethnic identity. In terms of religious identity, most participants suggested that language was not very important because not all Hindus speak the Tamil language and most of the mantras in the temple were chanted in Sanskrit. Many, however, stated that the Tamil language was crucial for their ethnic identity. Since only 20% of my respondents could speak, understand, read, and write the Tamil language, they expressed a sense of loss and shame that they were not more proficient in their mother tongue. More research is necessary in order to understand the ways in which Tamil and other South Asian youth are experiencing and constructing their religious and ethnic identities in Ontario. I have argued that the role of religion in the study of these communities in Canada needs to be more thoroughly explored. Research done on issues of assimilation, acculturation, and identity construction under the assumption that religion is not an important element of identity will invariably be incomplete. The formation and maintenance of ethnic identity is often intimately tied to religious heritage, and it would be prudent for scholars of ethnic groups in Canada to pay attention.

NOTES

1. The Sri Lankan Tamils make up approximately 12.6% of the overall population of Sri Lanka. Approximately 74% are Sinhalese, 5.5% are Indian Tamils, 5% are Muslims, and the remaining 2.9% consist of Burghers, Malays, and other ethnic groups.

2. The reason for this is difficult to pinpoint, but it may be that many Tamils simply do not fill out the census form either due to fear or forgetfulness. It may also be that the importance of the census process has not been adequately conveyed to many immigrant populations.

3. Almost all of my respondents were away at school in cities like Hamilton, Kingston, or Thunder Bay, and many of them worked in the evenings. Thus, getting in touch with them was difficult. Online interviews were easier for most of them.

4. The two youth who were born in Ontario did not experience their ethnicity much differently from those individuals who immigrated at a young age. They, like those who immigrated, learned about their ethnicity through their parents, through the temple, through food, through conversation with other Tamil youth, etc.

5. Although the number of participants who chose “no religion” (16%) reflects the larger Canadian population – 16% chose “no religion” in the 2001 Canadian Census (Statistics Canada 2001) — as well as the 2008 Pew Forum Religion Survey (16.1%) — the number of Christians and Muslims is, of course, not reflective of the Canadian population. The two Tamil Christians that make up my sample (8%) closely reflects the Christian population in Sri Lanka (8-10%). Calls for participants were placed on Tamil Muslim message boards and Facebook groups as well, but they went unanswered.

6. Although it is beyond the parameters of this paper, another question to explore is whether Christian Tamils feel that they have integrated better than Hindu Tamils, as their religion is more in line with the religious heritage of the host country.

7. Some have argued that when racism is present, it may force minority youth to re-entrench with their own community thus limiting their experimentation with social identities. However, it is important to note that when populations reach a critical mass, the motivation for this “retreat” back to one’s own community has more to do with pride and the search for community rather than fear and the need for security.

8. Thunder Bay is a city of about 150,000 people in Northwestern Ontario. It is approximately 1300 km northwest of Toronto.

9. Studies show that such sentiments exist in many other immigrant communities. Research into Korean and Vietnamese communities, for example, has found that temples and churches “play a key part in maintaining ethnic identity across generations and in providing psychological support” (Bankston and Zhou 1995, 524). As Eid (2003) found in his study of second-generation Christian and Muslim Arabs in Montreal, individuals often feel a symbolic attachment to their culture and history, but may not find institutional or social significance in the practice of it. As Eid notes, “respondents tend more to have a strong sense of attachment to their religious culture, and to feel that they are under an obligation to their religious community, than to actually practice their religion or to be involved with, and socialized into, groups of religious peers” (40).

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