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The Fantasy of Separatism: An Examination of the Rhetoric of Sri Lanka’s Tamil Separatist Movement

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An Examination of the Rhetoric of Sri Lanka’s Tamil Separatist Movement

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Abstract
The study used symbolic convergence theory to analyze the rhetoric of the Tamil separatist movement in Sri Lanka to garner support for their cause. Examining two texts, the 1976 Vaddukoddai Resolution and the 2008 Heroes Day speech, we identified three main fantasy themes and a dominant rhetorical vision in both. This timely study clearly demonstrates the usefulness of SCT as a method of rhetorical analysis across cultures and also incorporates some recent criticisms of the theory. Thus, the study provides nuanced insights into how terrorists inspire followers through their rhetoric.

Key words: Symbolic Convergence Theory, Rhetorical Analysis, Tamil Tigers, Terrorist Rhetoric, Cross-Cultural

Introduction
From the mid-1970s until May 19, 2009, Sri Lanka battled a devastating Tamil militancy movement aimed at creating a separate homeland for the island nation’s Tamil ethnic minority. Citing the injustices caused to their community by successive governments since independence from British rule in 1948 (De-Silva, 1991; U.S. Department of State, 2010), the Tamils promoted their cause through terrorist acts and rhetoric. The violence unleashed thus took an immense toll on the nation and created much socio-economic hardship for all Sri Lankans, regardless of ethnic identity (Hennanayake, 2004). The Tamil militancy derived its main source of strength from the unwavering loyalty demonstrated by its cadres and the substantial financial support given by sections of the Tamil diaspora based mainly in the West (DeSilva, 1991). The Tamil militancy movement, which was formally conceptualized and endorsed in the early 1970s by an elitist section of the Tamil community, was represented by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE or “Tamil Tigers”), one of the world’s most deadly and successful terrorist organizations (Mahindapala, 2004; US Department of State, 2010). The terror activities of the LTTE included suicide bombings, recruitment of child soldiers, indiscriminate bombings that targeted innocent civilians, and assassination of Sinhala and rival Tamil political leaders (Mahindapala, 2004).

This study examines the rhetoric of the Tamil Tigers for the persuasive themes used to garner support for the cause in terms of recruitment, retention and financial funding. The LTTE was defeated in May 2009 through an aggressive military campaign pursued by the Sri Lankan government and also as a result of dissension within factions of the LTTE. Consequently, an analysis of the persuasive power of the rhetoric of the group may be opportune. Further, the
analysis of the persuasive rhetoric of the separatist movement which successfully maintained its momentum for more than 30 years may prove useful in comprehending and countering the rhetoric of similar movements worldwide, as well as give clues to its ultimate defeat.

**Origins of Sri Lanka’s Conflict**

Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) is an island nation located 31km off the southern tip of India in the Indian Ocean. The population of Sri Lanka, estimated at 21.3 million, is 74 percent Sinhala and 18 percent Tamils (U.S. Department of State, 2010). The Tamil community is composed of 12 percent Sri Lankan Tamils, as well as 5 percent Indian Tamils, who were brought to the island as indentured laborers during the British Colonial period to work on the country’s tea plantations (U.S. Department of State, 2010). Moor Muslims represent another 7 percent of the Sri Lankan population, while the remaining 1 percent consists of Burghers, Malays, and the indigenous Veddha community (U.S. Department of State, 2010).

The socio-economic causes for Sri Lanka’s recent ethnic conflict have been attributed by colonial history theorists DeSilva (1991) and Mendis (1967) as resulting from British policies that employed a strategy of “Divide and Rule” (DeSilva, 1991). This strategy segments a country’s population based on factors such as language, religion, geographical area of residence, etc., and favors a predetermined minority group over the majority in terms of administration and political influence (DeSilva, 1991). Thus, during British rule, the minority Tamil community was positioned favorably in areas of education, political influence in the country, and government employment (DeSilva, 1991). Mendis (1967) noted that animosity between the Sinhala and Tamils was a recent phenomenon, with no evidence of any serious antagonism between the groups occurring before the 20th century. He argued that tensions between the two ethnic groups were caused by competition between the middle classes over the limited number of jobs in governmental service, which was the only stable employment under the British regime. “The British did not pursue policies of encouraging indigenous entrepreneurship for fear that this might compete with their overarching imperial interests” (Mendis, 1967, p. 127). Recently, prominent Sri Lankan scholars such as Uyangoda (1986), Jayawardena (1986), Dharmadasa (1992), Wicremaratne (1995), and De Silva (1971, 1981) have argued that the intensification of social mobilization in colonial Sri Lanka was the root cause for the island’s ethnic conflict (as cited in Imtiyaz & Stavis, 2008).

**The Vaddukoddai Resolution and the Rise of Tamil Militancy**

In 1956, the newly elected government of the late Prime Minister Bandaranaike enacted the “Official Language Act of 1956” which made the Sinhala language the sole official language of the country. As a result, tensions were heightened between the Tamil and Sinhala communities, which led to ethnic riots in 1956 and more serious riots in 1958. Although the government attempted to rectify this injustice to the Tamil minority by two pacts in 1957 and in 1965, these were later abrogated in response to pressure from certain sections of the
Sinhala community. Consequently, ethnic riots broke out every few years for the next quarter century including 1956, 1958, 1961, 1974, 1979, 1981, and especially the July 1983 riots, which were considered the most brutal (De Silva, 1991).

On May 14, 1976, the principal Tamil parties who represented the interests of the Tamil community jointly authored and proclaimed the Vaddukkoddai Resolution (Wilson, 1994). This Resolution called for the creation of a separate state known as “Eelam” in the Tamil-dominated North and East provinces of Sri Lanka, and it encouraged Tamils to resort to arms if necessary for the right of self-determination (Ladduwahetty, 1996). The Vaddukkoddai Resolution identified a number of Tamil grievances that formed the basis for their right to self-determination: (a) the proclaiming of Sinhala as the only official language throughout Sri Lanka, (b) the settlement of Sinhala colonists in the traditionally Tamil-dominated eastern province, (c) the denial of equal opportunity for Tamils in the spheres of employment and education, and (d) the lack of development in traditionally Tamil-dominated areas of the North and East.

The dream of an independent homeland had been envisioned by sections of the Tamil community in the early 1960s and 1970s—even before the Vadukkoddai Resolution (Swamy, 1994). However, only after the formal declaration of the Vaddukkoddai Resolution did the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) devote a significant portion of resources and time to the cause of Tamil separatism (Swamy, 1994). Tamil militancy first emerged in the early 1970s when a plethora of Tamil militant groups sprang up simultaneously, proclaiming to fight for the cause of Tamil Eelam (Swamy, 1994). The group known today as the LTTE (The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) first emerged in 1972 as the TNT (Tamil New Tigers) (Swamy, 1994). The LTTE, also commonly referred to as the “Tamil Tigers,” was denounced as a terrorist group by the U.S. government and was identified on the website of the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation as the “most dangerous and deadly extremist group in the world” (January 2008).

Theoretical Foundations

This study uses Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT) to analyze the persuasive power of the rhetoric of the Tamil militancy. Originally posited by Ernest Bormann in 1972, SCT has described symbolic convergence as a general communication theory, which provides a universal explanation of human communication (Bormann, 1980). Bormann theorized that “symbolic convergence creates, maintains, and allows people to achieve empathic communion as well as a meeting of minds” (p. 102). From an ontological perspective, the theory is based upon the humanistic-rhetorical paradigm, as well as scientific approaches to communication (Bormann, 1980). SCT operates in two ways: as a context-bound and context-free theoretical structure, and as a theory embodying both fantasy and logic. On one hand, the theory is context-bound because it examines the communication of groups in a particular time and space (Bormann, 1985; Bormann, Cragan & Shields, 1996). On the other hand, SCT is context-free because it is concerned with tracking the spread of consciousness outside of its original contexts (e.g., in social movements, mass media, consumers), thus al-
allowing SCT researchers to make claims that transcend time and culture (Bormann, 1982a). SCT is a context-free general theory through its use of technical terms such as fantasy types, fantasy themes and rhetorical visions. The theory achieves symbiosis between diverse ontological approaches because it conceives of communication as embodying both fantasy and logic.

In advancing SCT, Bormann (1972) expanded upon the 1970 work of Robert Bales, whose research on natural groups uncovered a relationship between individual fantasizing and group fantasizing. The tendency of groups to collectively share and repeat fantasies is known as “fantasy chaining,” in which one member may vocalize part of a previously expressed fantasy, followed by other members repeating, embellishing, or providing new examples of the fantasy. Bormann (1972) carried the chaining process beyond the small group context and described the process from a rhetorical perspective. Bormann described the fantasy chaining process:

The dramatizations which catch on and chain out in small groups are worked into public speeches and the mass media and in turn spread out across large publics, serve to sustain the members’ sense of community, to impel them strongly to action (which raises the question of motivation) and to provide them with a social reality filled with heroes, villains, emotions and attitudes. (1972, p. 398)

Thus, a fantasy introduced in a small-group setting may be repeated in other settings, eventually becoming part of the shared fantasy of a larger community.

SCT assumes that a rhetor in a given context manipulates symbols to create a shared social reality within a group. The rhetor’s meaning, emotion, and motives are revealed in symbolic manipulations, referred to as the “manifest content” of the message (Cragan & Shields, 1994, p. 200). Further, the theory suggests that as three “master analogues (righteous, social and pragmatic) emerge and compete as explanations for the followers of the message” (Cragan & Shields, 1992, p. 200). The righteous analogue focuses on a sense of obligation toward some “overarching cause or position” (Bormann, Knutson, & Musolf, 1997, p. 257). The social analogue emphasizes social acts, seeking to develop interpersonal relationships on a concrete level and “to enhance humanity more abstractly by positioning a view of the future” (Bormann et al., 1997, p. 257). The pragmatic analogue emphasizes “pragmatism by focusing upon fulfilling practical and utilitarian goals” (Bormann et al., 1997, p. 257). Therefore, groups participating in competing rhetorical visions will view the same event from different perspectives.

The term “fantasy” is derived from the Greek root phantastikos, meaning to present or show to the mind, to make visible. A fantasy theme presents the group mind, encompassing a common experience and shaping it into shared knowledge (Bormann, 1980). The technical term “fantasy theme” in SCT consists of a dramatizing message in which characters enact an incident or a series of incidents in a setting somewhere other than the present moment of the people in-
involved in the communication process. Fantasy themes are often narratives about living or historic personages or about an envisioned future.

A fantasy theme consists of five structural elements: the rhetorical vision, dramatic personae (the hero and villain), the sanctioning agent, the plotline and the scene (Shields & Preston, 1985). A rhetorical vision is constructed when a given fantasy theme can be identified in most interpersonal, mediated or public communication settings (Bormann, 1982b). Once a rhetorical vision has emerged, dramatic personae and a typical plotline become easily identifiable in all communication contexts and can be further expanded when the need arises to generate an emotional appeal from the targeted audience. Thus, in many persuasive communication campaigns, the message is simply a repetition of what the audience already knows and shares (Bormann et al., 1996).

The creation of a rhetorical vision is guided by three rhetorical principles of novelty, explanatory power and imitation. The novelty principle states that established visions eventually start to lose effectiveness and fail to attract members of the second and third generations of the targeted audience. Therefore, a rhetorician will find common ground using an innovative set of dramatizations among the inheritors of the older rhetorical vision. The explanatory power principle suggests that a community may respond to bewildering events by sharing fantasies that provide satisfying explanations to the altered situation. The principle of imitation states that a bored or confused community tries to create and share fantasies that give the old familiar drama a new production (Bormann et al., 1996).

Dramatic personae are characters given life within the rhetorical vision. The heroes and the villains in the ongoing drama may be attributed with certain qualities, portrayed as taking certain actions, represented as appearing within a certain scene, or motivated or justified by a sanctioning agent (Shields & Preston, 1985). The sanctioning agent justifies the acceptance of a given rhetorical vision within a fantasy theme. In a particular context, the sanctioning agent might range from a higher power such as God to a salient here-and-now phenomenon such as an atom bomb or a warring conflict. The sanctioning agent may be a legitimate or moralistic framework (e.g., the constitution of a country). The plotline refers to the action taking place within the drama: good vs. evil, oppression vs. freedom, or conspiracy. The scene in SCT is the setting, or the place where the action takes place, where the heroes and villains act out their drama.

A fantasy type is described as a standard fantasy theme that represents a common plotline across a number of rhetorical visions (Bormann et al., 1996; Shields & Preston, 1985). A fantasy type could be a recurring script in the group culture. In most instances, group members will narrate stories that are similar in theme and action. These stories will essentially be the same narrative, with somewhat different characters and incidents. As members of a group expand their culture, they begin to use the device of fantasy types to tap old meanings, to arouse shared emotions and motives and to interpret new experiences in terms of old scripts (Bormann, 1982a).
Mirror-Image Fantasies

In this study, the Sinhala community and the Tamil separatists demonstrate the concept of mirror-image fantasies (Bormann, 1982a). In mirror image fantasies, “the heroes of one account are the villains of the other, the laudable action in one group becomes a deplorable action in the other and so forth” (Bormann, 1982a, p. 54). Sinhala history has always denied the existence of a separate Tamil state in the North and East of Sri Lanka before British occupation of the island. The Sinhala insist that the eastern province claimed by Tamil separatists actually belonged to the Kandyan Sinhala kingdom which existed before British annexation of the kingdom in 1815 (DeSilva, 1991). Although they are in the majority, the Sinhala community appears to have felt oppressed like a minority due to the privileged position given to the Tamil community over the Sinhala majority in colonial times (DeSilva, 1991). Therefore, as theorized by SCT, the Sinhala see the Tamils as the villains who have been engaged in a violent struggle, citing unjustifiable claims based on history and oppression (Shields & Preston, 1985).

Aims of the Study

This study examines two seminal texts for the presence of symbolic fantasy themes used to justify the Tamil cause. The first text, the Vaddukoddai Resolution of 1976, signaled the official endorsement by the Tamil leadership of Sri Lanka for the creation of a separate Tamil nation within Sri Lanka. This endorsement included a call to arms directed especially at the Tamil youth of Sri Lanka to achieve this purpose. The Resolution was unanimously adopted at the first national convention of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) held at Pannakam in Vaddukoddai on May 14, 1976. An elected member of the Sri Lankan Parliament, S. J. V. Chelvanayakam, presided over the meeting and personally checked and approved the wording of the Resolution. He is therefore considered the father of the Tamil separatist movement in Sri Lanka (Wilson, 1994). The Resolution opened up a new phase in relations between the Sinhala and Tamil communities. For the first time a conscious decision was made by the leadership of the Tamil community to abandon principles of non-violence and to resort instead to militancy. Thus, this text represents the official sanctioning of violent conflict by Tamils. As a collectively written document, the Resolution represents the shared rhetorical vision of the various Tamil groups that had emerged through the preceding years of riots and oppression.

The second text to be analyzed is the LTTE 2008 Heroes Day speech. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were the only remaining remnant of the Tamil separatist movement that was officially endorsed by the elite Tamil leadership. In 1989, the LTTE introduced the concept of commemorating an Annual Heroes Day on November 27. This day was selected because the birthday of the head of the LTTE, Velupillai Prabakaran, fell on November 26, and the first LTTE fighter is said to have sacrificed his life for the Tamil cause on this date. The highlight of the Heroes Day (Maveerar Naal) celebration was an annual speech given by Prabakaran to memorialize the fallen heroes and to reinvigorate the militancy. Thus, this series of speeches continue the rhetorical vi-
sion of the LTTE. The 2008 speech is particularly important because, since Prabakaran’s death and the defeat of the LTTE in May 2009, this text stands as the final official message of the Tamil Tigers’ rhetorical vision. Together, these two texts represent the first and the final public messages of the Tamil separatist movement. This analysis will demonstrate whether the same fantasy themes propagated 32 years beforehand at the initiation of the Tamil militancy were still being promoted at a time when the militancy was about to suffer its biggest defeat.

Although the original Vaddukoddai Resolution and Prabakaran’s Heroes Day message were presented in the Tamil language, in this study we examined English translations of the documents. Analyzing translations can be problematic because cultural and linguistic differences may interpret metaphors and examples inaccurately. However, these translations were widely published on the internet on Tamil and Hindu news sites as accurately representing the original Tamil texts and remain available on these sites (Prabakaran, 2008; Vaddukoddai Resolution, 1976). Therefore, they appear to be widely considered as accurate translations. Although fantasy theme analysis could be applied to a larger sample of texts, we focus only on these two texts because (a) they are representative of a larger body of rhetoric which has not been widely translated into English, and (b) they stand as important markers of the inception and final days of the active militancy.

**Applicability of SCT**

SCT and its operant method of fantasy theme analysis are considered appropriate to analyzing the two texts because of the method’s versatility as a context-bound framework applicable across diverse cultures and differing communicative contexts. SCT as a context-free theory can be used to analyze the passing of historical time, which is applicable in analyzing the spread of consciousness regarding Tamil separatism in Sri Lanka over 32 years. Therefore, the concept of fantasy chaining is particularly useful in this given context.

In addition, the five structural elements of SCT are evident in the ongoing drama of Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict. The method’s emphasis on master analogues as encoded in the rhetorical vision makes it an appropriate method for analyzing current group consciousness of the movement from a rhetorical perspective. The versatility and applicability of SCT to the given context of the Tamil cause in Sri Lanka as embodying part of a fantasy theme provides the critic with the necessary tools to evaluate a historically-informed analysis of the discourse of Tamil separatism.

**The Vaddukoddai Resolution**

**Fantasy Themes**

Upon examining the Vaddukoddai Resolution, three main fantasy themes are self-evident, namely (a) historical claims to the existence of a Tamil state of “Eelam,” (b) oppression and discrimination of the Tamil people by successive Sinhala governments, and (c) the right to self-determination of the Tamil people.
A fantasy type relating to the acceptance of the Tamil state by the international community is also discernible.

The overarching rhetorical vision of Tamil separatism in Sri Lanka in light of the above fantasy themes is the right to self-determination of the Tamil people based on historical claims and claims of oppression and discrimination by successive Sinhala governments. The concept of self-determination is generally defined as the freedom of a people of a given area to determine their own political status or independence. Consequently, the rhetorical vision of self-determination for the Tamil people reflects the ultimate vision of the Tamil militancy as achieving independence from the Sinhala-dominated government of Sri Lanka—a concept that has been idealized as an inalienable right of the Tamil people. The two other fantasy themes support this rhetorical vision by promoting the legitimacy of the separatist cause.

The Vaddukoddai Resolution opens with the fantasy theme relating to the historical claims of the existence of a separate Tamil kingdom in Sri Lanka as existing “from the dawn of history” (para. 1). This reference to the primordial beginnings of the Tamil state reemphasizes the historical basis for the existence of a Tamil state. History is generally a lens through which an individual comes to understand the world. The worldview of a youth is shaped through education, family, societal and religious upbringing, with knowledge of history comprising a vital component of education. The Vaddukoddai Resolution essentially calls upon the “Tamil youth to throw themselves fully into a sacred fight for freedom” (para. 21) with allusions to history in the beginning of the Resolution, as well as by the later declaration that the Sri Lankan Tamils have always been separate and distinct from the Sinhala “by the virtue of their great language, their religions, their separate culture and heritage, and their history of independent existence as a separate state over a distinct territory for several centuries” (para. 16). Together these words serve to shape the fantasy theme of the historical existence of the Tamil state from the dawn of time (or rather, several centuries) in an effort to influence the worldview of the Tamil youth who will take part in the “sacred fight” (para. 20).

The fantasy theme of oppression and discrimination of the Tamil people by successive Sinhala-dominated governments supports independence as another dominant theme in the Resolution. Nine passages portray the Sinhala as using their power to the “detriment” of the Tamil people:

(a) Depriving one half of the Tamil people of their citizenship and franchise rights thereby reducing Tamil representation in Parliament, (b) . . . planned and state-aided colonization and large scale regularization of Sinhala encroachments calculated to make Tamils a minority in their own homeland, (c) Making Sinhala the only official language . . . (d) Giving the foremost place to Buddhism under the Republican constitution . . . (e) Denying the Tamils equality of opportunity in the spheres of employment, education, land alienation and the economic life in general and starving Tamil areas of large scale industries and development schemes, thereby seriously endangering their very existence in Ceylon (para. 6- a, b, c, d, e).
The theme of oppression and discrimination is also the plotline in the ongoing drama between the Sinhala and the Tamils, who are fighting the oppression of the Sinhala in order to achieve their rightful place as a distinct nation and culture as decreed by history. Hence, the central action or plotline of the Vaddukoddai Resolution might be described as “Sinhala oppression” or “Sinhala oppression vs. Tamil freedom.”

**Master Analogues**

The three master analogues (Cragan & Shields, 1992) also emerge within the Vaddukoddai Resolution. In the righteous analogue, the Tamil youth and the Tamil Nation are reminded of the enormity of their great language, religions and separate cultural heritage (para. 16) and also the continuing oppression of the Tamil people by Sinhala-dominated governments (para. 6- a,b,c,d,e,f,g,h,i). Therefore, a sense of obligation is invoked for the Tamil people to preserve their cultural identity and freedom, particularly in the closing of the Resolution:

> This convention calls upon the Tamil Nation in general and the Tamil youth in particular to come forward to throw themselves fully into a sacred fight for freedom and to flinch not till the goal of a sovereign state of Tamil Eelam is reached. (para. 20)

The words “sacred fight for freedom” reaffirm the righteousness of the cause, whereby arousing the emotions of Tamil youth.

The social analogue also competes as justification for the Tamil cause. The Resolution clearly defines Tamil Eelam as a state in which equal citizenship will be granted to all Tamil-speaking people, divisions of caste will be abolished, and “exploitation of man by man shall be forbidden” (para. 19, f). These statements emphasize the social goals of the envisioned Eelam, presenting a hopeful view of the future to any disgruntled Tamil who has faced discrimination within the Sinhala-dominated state.

The pragmatic analogue emphasizes that the creation of a separate Tamil homeland is the only practical solution to relieve the Tamil oppression:

> This convention resolves that the restoration and reconstitutions of the free, sovereign, secular, socialist state of Tamil Eelam, based on the right of self-determination inherent to every nation, has become inevitable in order to safeguard the very existence of the Tamil Nation in this country. (para. 18)

The Resolution further calls upon the TULF to “formulate an action plan and launch without undue delay the struggle for winning sovereignty” (para. 20). These statements would appeal to the pragmatist who seeks to move beyond mere rhetoric to a concrete action plan for achieving the goals set forth in the Resolution.

The Vaddukoddai Resolution presents a vision of oppression of the Tamils in Sri Lanka which is headed toward “cultural genocide of the Tamils” (para. 6-f) that can no longer be tolerated. Tamils are cast as having patiently sought re-
dress of these injustices through peaceful means, which have been “summarily and total rejected without even the courtesy of a consideration of its merits” (para. 9) by the Sinhala. Thus the Resolution justifies its call to arms as the only remaining avenue for equality and freedom. Now we will turn to the analysis of the final general message of the Tamil Tigers in November 2008

**Vellupillai Prabakaran’s 2008 Annual Heroes Day Message**

The LTTE propaganda and rituals associated with Maveerar Naal (Heroes Day) were directed at several layers of the Tamil population, including Tamils living within the LTTE-controlled area and elsewhere within Sri Lanka, as well as the Tamil Diaspora who had migrated to other parts of the world, the Tamils of India, and anyone else who might sympathize with the Tigers (Roberts, 2005). Central to our analysis of the 2008 Heroes Day speech is the assertion that the fantasy themes have escalated beyond those of struggle and oppression to more explicit images of Sinhala waging war and genocide against the still-peace-loving Tamils.

**Fantasy Themes and Types**

Examination of the 2008 Heroes Day speech reveals that the fantasy themes and types identified in the Vaddukoddai Resolution are clearly echoed and extended. Prabakaran alludes to the fantasy theme of the historical claims of the Tamil state by stating that “from time immemorial, from generation to generation the Tamil people lived on this land” (para. 7). He further states that “Ancient Tamil civilisation stood long and firm in this land. . . . Our ancient kings built kingdoms and dynasties and ruled from here” (paragraph 12). The fantasy theme and the main rhetorical vision of the right of self-determination also echoes the rhetoric of the Vaddukoddai Resolution: “From the day British colonialism was replaced with Sinhala oppression, we have been struggling for our rights…. The political struggle for our self-determination has extended over the last sixty years” (para. 13). Later, Prabakaran reaffirms that self-determination for the Tamil people is justifiable on the grounds of historical claims to the land, as well as Sinhala oppression: “It was when state oppression breached all norms and our people faced naked terrorism that our movement for freedom was born as a natural outcome of history” (para. 13). Here, as in the Vaddukoddai Resolution, oppression of the Tamil people by the Sinhala state continues as the prevalent fantasy theme in the Tamil rhetoric. However, reflecting the novelty principle, Prabakaran heightens the pitch of this struggle by specifically referring to the struggle as a “war” 24 times in the speech. In contrast, the Vaddukoddai Resolution uses the word “war” only one time, and then as an historical fact rather than as a characterization of the Sinhala. The recurrence of the 1976 fantasy themes are sharpened into a much more strident tirade against the Sinhalese in order to continue to attract new members.

The fantasy type identified in the Vaddukoddai Resolution on the acceptance of the international community of the Tamil State attains pre-eminence in Prabakaran’s rhetoric, reflecting the increased stridency of the Tigers. The Vaddukoddai Resolution alluded only briefly to this fantasy: “This convention an-
nounces to the world that the Republican Constitution of 1972 has made the Tamils a slave nation ruled by the new colonial masters, the Sinhala” (para. 16). This identification of the entire world as the audience for this declaration was significant because the words suggest that the Tamil separatist struggle had been concerned about world opinion since its inception. Thus, 32 years later, Prabakaran lashes out at the international community as new villains in the ongoing drama: “They put us on their blacklist and ostracized us as unwanted and untouchable. Our people living in many lands were intimidated into submission by oppressive limitations imposed on them to prevent their political activities supporting our freedom struggle” (para. 18).

Nevertheless, Prabakaran also goes on to reaffirm that the Tamils still seek the approval of the international community:

Our freedom movement, as well as our people, have always maintained cordiality with the international community…. Cordially I invite those countries that have banned us, to understand the deep aspirations and friendly overtures of our people, to remove the ban on us and to recognise our just struggle. (para. 24)

The favorable opinion of the international community is vital to the survival of Tamil separatism in Sri Lanka because of the significant funding provided to the movement by sections of the Tamil Diaspora based in the West (DeSilva, 1991). Therefore, an international community well-disposed towards the cause of Tamil Eelam is essential for the group.

Since the fantasy theme of oppression has escalated to war, a new fantasy theme emerges of the valor of the fallen Tamil war heroes: “The sacrifices they [the heroes] made have no parallel in the history of the world. No country but ours has at any time encountered such wonderful dedication as expressed in the actions of our valiant heroes” (paragraph 6). This fantasy theme may be self-evident by the nature of the occasion of the speech. In contrast, since the Vadukoddai Resolution initiated the movement, it could not invoke this theme. However, 32 years later, it seems only natural that the valor of past heroes of the movement needs to be glorified in a fantasy theme to sustain consciousness of the cause and to construct the vision of a patriotic war. The fantasy theme of oppression by the Sinhala state is given greater prominence through the repeated use of the word “genocide.” Whereas the 1976 Resolution used a much more softened term “cultural genocide” only once, the 2008 Heroes Day speech invokes “genocide” or “genocidal war” in six places (para. 9, 17, 18, 19, 21, and 30), which clearly paint the bloody backdrop for the sacrifice and valor of the Tamil heroes. This violent heroism is one-sided, however, in that it does not acknowledge the Sinhala and other victims of the LTTE terrorist acts. The increased use of the word “genocide” in this speech also invokes the international community’s heightened awareness and concern about genocides around the world in the intervening 30 years. Thus, the repeated labeling of the Tamil struggle as “genocide” may invoke a greater sense of guilt among international onlookers.
Playing on this guilt, Prabakaran expresses his appreciation for the support given by sections of the Indian population (para. 24-26). Consequently, India’s acceptance of the Tamil struggle figures prominently in the fantasy type. Although Prabakaran notes that Indian involvement in the Tamil struggle was “injurious to the Tamil people,” he exonerates them by noting that this was solely due to the “intrigues” and conspiracies of the Sinhala state who sought to create friction between the LTTE and the Indian government of the time (para. 25). The populace and leadership of the Indian state of Tamilnadu and India are typecast as heroes who were misled by the villainous Sinhala state. Prabakaran calls for further support from Tamilnadu:

I would cordially request them to raise their voice firmly in favour of our struggle for a Tamil Eelam state, and take appropriate and positive measures to remove the ban which remains an impediment to an amicable settlement between India and our movement. (para. 27)

Therefore, Prabakaran reaffirms India’s support for the Tamil cause as vital to the survival of the separatist movement, calling upon Tamilnadu to promote Indian governmental support for the Sri Lankan insurgency. Consequently, great expectations are placed upon the state of Tamilnadu and India as potential heroes to take up the Tamil cause and save the LTTE from further defeat.

The words “united strength of our people” may once again be labeled a fantasy type in the Heroes Day rhetoric. Prabakaran may well be calling upon the support of members of the Tamil community living around the world to sustain the dreams of a separate Tamil nation, through concentrated efforts on all fronts. Similarly the Vaddukoddai Resolution also calls upon the support of the “Tamil nation and youth to throw themselves fully into the sacred fight for freedom” (para. 20) in its initial call for achieving a separate state. Though the initial Vaddukoddai Resolution may not reflect such obvious rhetoric of calling for concentrated efforts on all fronts, the reference to the “Tamil Nation” (para. 20) may reflect this fantasy type. Consequently, the unity of the Tamil nation has become more important in the Heroes Day speech than in the Vaddukoddai Resolution and has risen to become a dominant fantasy type in the group’s rhetorical vision.

**Other Elements**

In the Heroes Day speech, the three competing master analogues come into play. The righteous analogue in the rhetoric emphasizes that the Sinhala state has unilaterally escalated the struggle to a war: “The Tamil Eelam nation does not want war, it does not favour violence; it is the Sinhala nation that has waged war on our nation” (para. 30). Prabakaran’s emphasis on the history of peace negotiations engaged by the group further reaffirms his use of the righteousness analogue (para. 30) while at the same time ignoring or excusing the Tamil terrorist activities.

To appeal to the wider international audiences, the LTTE invoked other discourses of liberation (e.g., Buddhism, civil rights, and Marxism) to legitimate their claims of the righteousness of their struggle (Hennanayake, 2004). Sinhala
are traditionally Buddhist, a fact which Prabakaran exploits in his speech in two places. In the opening, he cites a traditional Buddhist outlook of “All human suffering springs from unbridled desire. Unless one extricates oneself from the clutch of greed, one will not free himself from the fetters of sorrow” (paragraph 7). “Suffering” is a key Buddhist concept (Keown, 1996), which Prabakaran exploits by mentioning “suffering” eight times in the speech, compared to no mention at all in the 1976 Resolution. Thus Prabakaran cleverly paints the Buddhist Sinhala as evil hypocrites: “In a country that worships the Buddha who preached love and kindness, racist hatred and war-mongering vie with one another . . . from politicians to spiritual leaders . . . their voice is raised only in support of the war” (para. 28). In contrast, Prabakaran paints the Tamil Tigers as a “freedom movement” seeking “our just rights” and “seeking[ing] a peaceful resolution”—while excuses their terrorist activities as being “forced upon us by history” (para. 12). Thus, the 2008 Heroes Day speech forefronts the righteous analogue by poising the Tamil Tigers as more peace-loving than the Buddhist Sinhala who have been waging this war.

The other master analogues are present but not as prominent. The social analogue appears in the statements emphasizing the “potential” of the Tamil nation. Prabakaran claims that the Sinhala nation has implemented a policy of “suppression” for the past 60 years (para. 32). Therefore, the Tamils as a nation with their distinct language, cultural heritage and history should be entitled to develop their characteristic individuality without any hindrances by the Sinhala state (para. 33). The emergence of the pragmatic analogue is seen through statements that the Tamils have faced bigger crises and “superior” powers, but have been able to withstand these efforts. Therefore, the current challenges the group is facing will be overcome through the “united strength of our people” (para. 11). The Vaddukoddai Resolution gave equal weight to all three master analogues, while the Heroes Day speech principally promotes the righteousness analogue, while ignoring its own terrorist activities.

SCT Extended

Olufowote (2006), noting the weakness of SCT to explains why humans dramatize and share fantasy, has suggested that Weick’s sensemaking theory (1995) might be used to expand SCT’s treatment of this issue. According to Weick, sensemaking constructs rather than interprets the past in an attempt to explain the present. Olufowote suggests that a rhetorical vision is thus a dramatization of sensemaking, presented to construct the past in order to support the present predicament. The addition of this sensemaking lens promotes the concept that a shared rhetorical vision may be consciously constructed to manipulate the present audience’s view of the past in order to garner support for future actions. In the present study, the continued fantasy themes of these two proclamations clearly demonstrate how Tamil leaders purposefully cast the Tamils as righteous heroes oppressed by the villainous Sinhala who have continued their oppression over decades. During 32 years, the recriminations against the Sinhala became more shrill, with claims of a one-sided war aimed at genocide. By invoking the emotionally and politically laden word “genocide,” Prabakaran pro-
motes the Tamil cause as so righteous that the “armed violent path” (para. 12) was warranted, while never acknowledging that this path included undisputed incidents of suicide bombings and reported kidnapping/recruiting of child soldiers,—in short, “terrorism”—an equally loaded word.

The fact that Prabakaran promoted his one-sided, Tamil-as-victim-speech, even in the face of looming defeat, demonstrates that the prosocial bias enjoyed by SCT may be unwarranted (Olufowote, 2006). The prosocial bias suggests that rhetorical convergence is positive or desirable for a group, but such is not always the case. By inflaming the sense of injustice and oppression through a simplistic construction of the past, the Tamil leaders continually provoked their followers to terrorism, without advocating for a more nuanced approach. Through repeating this vision in 32 years of rhetoric, the LTTE silenced any expressions for a more peaceful approach. A rhetorical vision, dramatized in public and advocating violence, may effectively squelch any temperate voices, and thus may not be desirable. Sharing a rhetorical vision may unite a group in ways that may eventuate in harm to the group and failure to achieve the group goals.

A related criticism of SCT is its apparent egalitarian assumption that a shared rhetorical vision is beneficial to all in the group, when in fact the speaker alone may benefit significantly from the vision (Olufowote, 2006). This inequality may be particularly true of terrorist groups whose leaders are insulated from direct harm, protected by the buffer of young people willing to blow themselves up for the cause. In the case of the Tamil Tigers, countless unnamed Tigers died in the 32-year long struggle. But eventually Prabakaran did have to enter the fray directly, and his assassination in May 2008 facilitated the Tiger surrender and peace negotiations.

Olufowote (2006) also criticized SCT as too narrowly characterizing membership in a rhetorical community as primary to an individual’s identity without recognizing that group members are also members of other groups. Thus, the promotion of a specific rhetorical vision may serve to repel members who must balance their personal values with membership in other groups. The Tamil Tigers’ public outreach to the international community, and particularly the Tamil diaspora, ignores the widespread and undeniable public view of the Tigers as terrorists. Few governments, public figures, or wealthy donors want to be associated with supporting terrorism. Prabakaran notably addressed how the international community was being misled to believe that Tamils were terrorists. He continued to assert the peace-loving nature of the Tamils, highlighting the oppression, treachery, and hypocrisy of the Sinhalese, while simply ignoring the terrorist acts of the Tigers. The continued rhetorical vision of brave, noble Tamils defending their homeland against Sinhala usurpers may actually serve to drive away the potential donors and supporters it was designed to attract.

Conclusion

This analysis of the Tamil separatist movement in Sri Lanka employed symbolic convergence theory to identify the persuasive rhetoric used by the movement, focusing on two seminal texts, the Vaddukoddai Resolution of 1976
and the 2008 Heroes Day speech given by Velupillai Prabakaran. The Vaddukoddai Resolution emphasized three main fantasy themes: (a) historical claims to the existence of a Tamil state of “Eelam,” (b) oppression and discrimination of the Tamil people by successive Sinhala governments, and (c) the right to self-determination for the Tamil people; this fantasy theme was also the rhetorical vision of the movement. A fantasy type relating to the acceptance of the Tamil state by the international community was also identified but was not yet fully utilized.

Velupillai Prabakaran’s rhetoric of 2008 reemphasized these three main fantasy themes employed in 1976. In addition, a new fantasy theme also emerged regarding the valor of the Tamil heroes who sacrificed themselves. The rhetorical vision of 2008 remained the same, albeit linked with two dominant fantasy types: the “united strength of the Tamil people” and the acceptance by the international community of the Tamil struggle for self-determination—a 1976 theme that was significantly expanded upon in 2008. The fantasy chaining began in 1976 and continued throughout the movement, but escalated in its polarizing characterization of the “peace-loving” Tamils and the “genocidal” and villainous Sinhala. Consequently, the process of fantasy chaining was observed in the rhetoric of 2008 and culminating from the 1976 rhetoric which was influenced by events that occurred over a period of 32 years.

The emergence of the three master analogues—righteous, pragmatic and social—were observed in both texts. However, the Vaddukoddai Resolution was more balanced in addressing all three analogues than Prabakaran’s 2008 speech, which gave heavier emphasis to the righteous analogue, with seemingly less emphasis on the social and pragmatic analogues. The emphasis on the righteous analogue seems to be in direct response to the international labeling of the Tamil Tigers as terrorists, which was countered principally by directing attention to the hypocrisy and oppression of the Sinhala.

The strengths of this study are three-fold: First, we have demonstrated the applicability of SCT across cultural boundaries. As a theory developed by Ernest Bormann, a scholar from the West influenced by Western ideologies, the theory’s demonstrated applicability into an “Eastern” setting is noteworthy and thereby enhances the validity of the theory. Bormann (1980) claimed his theory reflected a universal form of human communication, and this study validates his claim. The second strength of this study is that tapping the universal applicability of SCT enables communication scholars and others to systematically analyze and compare terrorist rhetoric across cultures. The final strength is that we have also incorporated some of the criticisms of SCT to demonstrate how the theory can be used to create a more nuanced understanding of the power of shared rhetorical visions.

The LTTE has surrendered in Sri Lanka—a military surrender, not a redress of grievances. There continue to be rumblings of unrest among the Tamils (see daily postings on Tamilnet.com). The identification of the three initial and later four dominant fantasy themes and the two fantasy types in the rhetoric of the LTTE may prove useful in comprehending the ongoing persuasive rhetorical power of the group. The identified themes may serve a dual purpose. These
themes may offer insight into how to counter or soften the ongoing separatist rhetoric, while at the same time illuminate grievances of the Tamil community that must be addressed. This would especially hold true for the fantasy themes on oppression, the right to self-determination, and the valor of the Tamil heroes who have sacrificed their lives for the Tamil cause.

The principle of mirror image fantasies may be particularly useful in understanding terrorist rhetoric. Opposing groups that form mirror image rhetorical fantasies polarize their conflicts and leave little room for cross-cultural understanding. Rather than promoting a mirror image fantasy, understanding the messages in an opposing group’s rhetorical vision may lead to a different approach. Under the present circumstances (and since the surrender), do the Tamils continue to feel oppressed in this multi-ethnic democratic society? Is self-determination still an option for the Tamil people if oppression ceases and their legitimate aspirations are met? Is violent suicide terrorism really the answer to a community’s problem? How is Sri Lanka repairing its image as an attacker and oppressor and creating a new image congruent with its Buddhist roots? These would be issues which could be expanded upon in producing counter rhetoric to continue the peace in Sri Lanka.

Further, the two fantasy types remain important to the peace and healing process in Sri Lanka. The LTTE called upon the international community to support the right to Tamil self-determination and reached out to the united strength of the Tamils worldwide. Are Sri Lankan Tamils continuing to lobby abroad in order to gain recognition from the international community on the legitimacy of their aspirations? Is the movement trying to galvanize the extended Tamil community, i.e., the Diaspora and Tamils in South India, for enhanced cooperation in order to achieve their fantasy of a separate Tamil state? It will be worthwhile to analyze these issues further. Consequently the study may provide impetus for further comprehensive research into the persuasive rhetoric employed by similar movements worldwide.

References


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