

LIFE BEYOND SURVIVAL:

Social processes in post-tsunami, war-affected Batticaloa, Sri Lanka.

Based on anthropological fieldwork in eastern Sri Lanka, this research explores social forms of coping in the aftermath of the tsunami and in the wake of yet another phase of armed conflict. It concentrates on daily life processes in camps and transitional shelters and asks how women and men come to terms with the massive bereavements and daily insecurities. The focus is on the variety of social, economic, political and ritual ways of dealing with the personal and collective crisis and of establishing social life amidst life-threatening events. The analysis of practices and field discourses delineate patterns of continuities and discontinuities in the pre- and post-tsunami social contexts. More specifically, it reveals how gender relationships are transformed in the negotiation of present options and constraints.

The devastations caused by the tsunami mobilised an unexpected amount of international monetary and human resources. Different to the physical infrastructure, the socio-political formations were not simply washed away by the waves in the affected areas; if anything, rivalries for political control may have been intensified in Sri Lanka in the following months. My research project is situated in this very context framed by the dynamic interplay between humanitarian respectively developmental efforts and diffuse power relationships related to more than twenty years of armed hostilities in the region. It looks at the everyday life situations of women and their families and at how they organize, however temporarily, their survival in transitional quarters several kilometres away from their former fishing village. Thus, it explores how 'actual' people deal with past and present threats and losses and how they create moments of hope and happiness. How do they go about in their daily lives, what options are open or barred to them, utilized or rejected? What societal resources are of relevance and in what ways? How are social relationships established and nurtured after the disruption of former ties and when displacement and relocation entails new settlement patterns? Such analysis leads to further reflections on how the relationships among and between women and men are negotiated and transformed in the course of interaction. Finally, the questions revolve around how people achieve, if at all, a sense of normalcy in their everyday worlds, and what in turn, makes up such "normalcy".

Feminist anthropology - with its concern for intersecting power-relationships, the agency of socially embedded actors and reflexivity throughout the research process - as well as ritual theory approaches guide the analysis of field data. The latter has been generated primarily through participant observation, while the specific field context required improvised approaches that shall be further discussed in the interpretation of the material.

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