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Courses of Conflict: Transmission of Knowledge and War’s History in Eastern Sri Lanka

Ariel Sánchez Meertens

After three decades of armed confrontations, the Sri Lankan civil war ended in May 2009 with the military defeat of the liberation tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). To sustain the war for so long, mechanisms of knowledge reproduction were used legitimizing violence and assuring the conflict’s transmission across the generations involved in it. Drawing on ongoing fieldwork in the island’s Eastern Province, this article addresses the processes through which Sri Lanka’s war-history has been taught and learnt, empirically linking the multiple sites of knowledge transfer. It suggests a trajectory moving from the institutional (policy and textbooks) to the defiant (specific schools and armed movements) spaces of transmission, while comparing the attitudes, memories of violence and transmission strategies of educators, students and former combatants. The data are embedded within the broader discussions on social change and the cultural reproduction of war, a process illustrated with the help of a new concept: semantic alliances.

Keywords: Sri Lanka; War; History; Conflict; Transmission

Introduction

After more than three decades of systematic violence, the civil war in Sri Lanka was declared over in May 2009. Once a war is fought over such an extended period of time most of those directly engaged in violent practices—and many of those indirectly concerned with its impact—belong to a generation born after the initial outbreak of violence. This implies that a repertoire of practices and social mechanisms were required for the conflict’s continuation, thereby transmitting the necessary knowledge.
to guarantee its permanence or induce its transformation. The current post-war context calls indeed for a closer look at the cultural processes that sustained the Sri Lankan armed conflict for so long; but it also demands an assessment of the desired engagement vis-à-vis the violent past and the social memories that may reach the generations ahead.

Certainly the structural and cultural elements of the Sri Lankan conflict have received attention in both the domestic and the foreign academic literature (Spencer 1990; Tambiah 1986; Kapferer 1998; Frerks and Klem 2004). Consideration has in fact been devoted to the links between education, youth and conflict; to that of historiography and violence; and to the more specific connection between history education and conflict (Tawil and Harley 2004). Authors like Brigitte Sørensen have even brought to the fore the tension between the official discourses of textbooks and the social memories of the minorities (2008, 423); while in the field of practitioners a significant body of literature has emerged on Peace Education, Human Rights Education and Conflict Resolution. However, this overwhelming production has not resulted in a systematic analysis of the complex processes through which the Sri Lankan conflict is transmitted, sustained and transformed through the generations involved or affected by it.

The purpose of this paper is therefore to address the transmission of the armed conflict’s knowledge nurtured by four features encountered prior to and during fieldwork: First, in spite of the amount of literature about the Sri Lankan armed conflict (causes, actors and history), there is a lack of scholarly discussion on issues pertaining to the modalities of its transmission, to the teaching and acquisition of (historical) knowledge and concrete practices of war. Second, if and when addressing the pedagogical practices, the multiple spaces of transmission of knowledge are neither empirically nor theoretically linked. Third, the (learning) experiences of ex-combatants and of unarmed civilians are generally dealt with as isolated phenomena rather than as connected social fields. Fourth, debates dealing with education and conflict are generally detached from the larger discussions on discourse and social change, remaining weak in articulating cultural reproduction to the understandings of the sustainability of violence.

To overcome these gaps, I propose the following guiding question in this paper: How is the knowledge of the conflict’s history transmitted to—and acquired by—the different generations in Eastern Sri Lanka? This resonates with Argenti and Schramm’s inquiry on how an accepted and coherent body of knowledge collectively recognized as legitimate and representative can coalesce out of individual experiences of political violence often devoid of structure or narrative sense (Argenti and Schramm 2010, 1). These authors focused, however, on how memories are passed from the “original generation of victims and perpetrators” to their children, whereas in this paper—concerned with the sustainability and transformation of armed conflict—attention extends to inter-generational transmission in moments of transition, where all generations have been exposed to violence and conflict directly.

The emerging findings will account for the process through which symbolic control (as well as symbolic resistance) is realized, upholding the conflict by transforming
power relations into discourse and discourse into power relations (Bernstein 2000).
While it is true that power relations are not external to discourse, they are nevertheless analytically distinguishable. The distinction is particularly useful in the explorations of the transmission process: The teacher—student correspondence is, for instance, a power relation referring to distinguishable social positions which are actualized discursively through communicative modalities related to—among others—discipline. It is precisely in this pendular motion between power as “spatialized” social positions and power as communicative exchange that symbolic control and resistance occurs.

To account for this process, the initial contours of a new concept will be sketched in the latter part of this paper, referred to as semantic alliances; a notion explaining the sustainability and transformation of armed conflict based on a network of symbolic exchanges.

The basic methodological strategy implemented is that of tracing the movements of knowledge about conflict, navigating from the more institutional spaces of transmission towards the more informal or defiant ones. Accordingly, the first trace presented is the education policy’s approach to conflict together with its place in the official history and citizenship education textbooks. The second trace revolves around the memories and attitudes of principals and teachers towards the teaching of a violent past. The third step leads to high school students as the embodiment of a new generation and expected recipients of the transmitted knowledge. At this stage, the students’ perspectives will be contrasted with some insights into the transmission process experienced by former combatants.

The data gathered so far are the product of ongoing field research in Sri Lanka’s Eastern Province, a region offering the opportunity to include ethnic and religious variations in the analysis due to a specific demographic balance. With nearly 1.5 million people, this is the most diverse province of Sri Lanka inhabited by Tamils (Hindu and Christian), Moors (Muslim) and Sinhala (mainly Buddhist), each constituting roughly one-third of the population. Furthermore, the Eastern Province has been the theatre of a fresh political transition of a collective actor embodying a new generation involved in violence and politics. Such is the case of the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (Tamil People Liberation Tigers) (TMVP), an organization that emerged in 2004 when thousands of cadres under the leadership of Karuna Amman defected from the insurgent liberation tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and started a paramilitary cum political movement eventually working with the Sri Lankan Government. TMVP’s emergence marked a new cycle in the armed conflict (transformation), while its members constitute a new “cohort” engaged in violence, the majority of which were born after the initial outbreak of war (transmission).

It is useful to point out that transmission is understood here as some body’s provision of forms of conduct and knowledge (as procedures for engaging with and constructing the world), which is then acquired by another body (Bernstein 2000, 78). On the other hand, the premise is that violence needs to be imagined (Schimdt and Schröder 2001), that people need to talk themselves (Apter 1997) and others into committing it; and that the wars within which violence occurs are immersed and co-constructed in and by knowledge systems (Jabri 1996). If this is so, then knowledge
transmission is a prerequisite for violent action, which is not to say that all agents of transmission engage in violence; rather, that no violence comes without epistemologies of armed conflict being construed and transmitted through institutional settings (education), witnessing (lived experience), indoctrination by warring parties, older generations’ storytelling (parents, teachers and elders) and/or media imaging. What violence actually is deserves a discussion beyond the scope of this exploration. Suffice it to say that violence is—in line with Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois’ views—a productive, destructive and reproductive continuum (out of other possible ways of manifesting conflict) going well beyond its physicality (2004, 1).

Trace 1: Policy, Textbooks and the Official Narratives of Conflict

To explore the transmission of knowledge about conflict requires the recognition of the pedagogic practice as a primary social context through which cultural production and reproduction occurs (Bernstein 2000). By no means can such pedagogical practice be reduced to educational institutions, but they certainly constitute a fundamental state apparatus through which a national identity aspires to be created, or—as will be shown—often also challenged. Accordingly, this exploration of the pedagogic practice of conflict and violence holds the educational field as the analytical gravitational centre but will occasionally move away from it.

Frequently, education is cited in Sri Lanka as the cause of conflict, mostly focusing specifically on access to education. Others highlight the mismatch between education and employment, while occasionally education is considered as one of the casualties of war itself—destroying or limiting access to schools, diverting funds for education to war (Winslow and Woost 2004; Roberts-Schweitzer, Greaney, and Duer 2006; Amarasuriya and Hettige 2009); and still others discuss the extent to which educational institutions are themselves quite literally the battlefields of war (Hettige and Mayer 2008). There are also discussions regarding the content of education itself, particularly centred on history education, by far the most controversial of all subjects (Tawil and Harley 2004). Finally, in the few occasions when education is considered as a reproducer of conflict the focus is on the reproduction of structural inequalities, cultural biases and historical manipulation—all crucial indeed—but not on the phenomenon itself, the Sri Lankan war as a historical construct.

Interestingly, conflict made its first appearance in educational policy in the reforms of 1997, fifteen years after the major turning point in the civil war fought in the North and East (1983), and twenty-six years after the first People’s Liberation Front (JVP) insurrection in the South (1971). After the 1997 reforms other policy documents have been prepared and smaller reforms have been put forward.2 In addition, some NGOs and multilateral organizations have been increasingly analysing the structure of education in the context of identity politics (Colenso 2005; Roberts-Schweitzer, Greaney, and Duer 2006); yet in none is there a clear call to dedicate part of the curricula to teaching the violent past. Nonetheless, as we shall see below, the Sri Lankan armed conflict is not entirely absent in the official textbooks, the production of which is largely in the hands of the central government. As the island’s education
system heavily rests upon the State (about 95% of schools are public schools), and its official textbooks are distributed free of charge throughout the country even among the relatively few private schools, it becomes clear that such texts are meant to be crucial tools for cultural reproduction, the consolidation of national identity and symbolic control. Among the different subjects for which textbooks are written, two need to be explored for the purpose of this investigation, albeit in a very concise manner: History and Citizenship Education.

**History Textbooks**

How to deal with a violent past in schools’ history curricula has been a topic of important and often heated debate most notably in countries such as Germany and Japan after World War II, but also in Israel, Spain, Cyprus or Northern Ireland. Elizabeth Cole argues that “History education, especially textbooks (...) can be construed as a part of the official acknowledgement of past injustices or can show the lack thereof” (2007, 123). However, it has not come that far in Sri Lanka yet.

The Sri Lankan official history textbooks currently being used deal with issues occurring up to the year 1979. Notably, Sri Lankan independence was obtained in 1948, meaning that about half of post-independence history is not included. Additionally, in spite of such exclusion, by 1979 several critical incidents of violence had already occurred: anti-Tamil riots had taken place, the first armed insurrection in the South had already occurred and militant Tamil movements had emerged in the North, including the LTTE. None of this is to be found in the history textbooks.

However, the lack of explicit mention of armed conflict and violence does not imply that there is no attempt to shape ideas about the Other and the nature of the conflictive relationships. There is no room here for a comprehensive analysis of ethnicity and politics in textbooks, but it is, nevertheless, worth highlighting that issues of identity, nationhood and the ancient past are indeed fashioned in such a way as to legitimize a certain stand on ethnic relations and civil war. One example is the way in which Tamils are referred to in the Grade 7 history textbook in which the word *Tamil* appears only six times (Muslims or Moors are not mentioned once), each time alluding to that community in terms of either traitors or invaders (EPD 2007a).

However, silent reproduction of conflict is not relegated to the form and contents of the textbooks. Another suggestive endeavour is to explore the ethnic balance in the text production by looking at the textbooks’ panel of writers. As an example: out of the thirty-one writers of four citizenship textbooks, only one is Tamil, while of seventeen writers from three history textbooks only two are Tamil (with Muslims absent). This is consistent with what educators have expressed in the Eastern Province arguing that the textbooks are written by Sinhalese in Sinhala, with the participation of Tamils or Muslims only in the translation. Other studies also highlight aspects that arguably have an impact in the silent reproduction of conflict, such as the lack of problematization of ethnicity or the fact that the way history is portrayed is prescriptive rather than encouraging multiple interpretations (Tawil and Harley 2004, 406). All these debates have been dealt with and quite sophisticatedly so in Sri Lanka’s historiography, but
there has been no spill-over into official textbook production. Some argue that this is due to the fact that Sri Lankan historiography often polarized group animosities (Tawil and Harley 2004, 405), thus hindering the re-conceptualization and rewriting of history as a school subject. A proposed solution yet failed in its execution has been that of offering a multiple textbook option, but even if it had worked it was likely to simply reinforce the isolation of readings and readers. It is anyhow clear that historiography has both facilitated and framed the discussion of ethnic relations using symbolic transformations (or as I would call it semantic alliances) to define ethnic polarization of the present in terms of past rivalries (Tennekoon 1990, 209).

The fact remains that there is no specific mention of post-independence inter-ethnic violence in the school history textbooks. Therefore, if we are to understand the educational system as the fundamental locus in which a country’s official history is sanctioned, then it can be stated that armed conflict is categorically absent in the authorized national narrative of Sri Lanka. One has to go to the citizenship education textbooks to find some meagre references to the civil war.

Citizenship Education Textbooks

Indeed, a Grade 9 textbook from 2007 mentions the Sri Lankan armed conflict in the last chapter entitled Current Problems, saying: “At present you as a Sri Lankan experience [sic] the tragic result of an ethnic conflict” (Karunaratne & Sons 2007, 59). A series of assignments follow asking the student to mention a conflict, examine its causes, actors, outcomes and the lessons learnt. Although avoiding a specific narrative, this book does open a path for students to engage with the history of the conflict. This is, however, one of the few books that came out as part of the multiple-book option, deviating from the standard. None of the schools visited implemented it or performed its assignments.

Nevertheless, in the last chapter of the standard Grade 10 Citizenship Education and Governance textbook (used by most national, provincial and private schools), while discussing ways of resolving conflicts, this is what is stated: “It will not be possible to find a solution to this conflict, so long as the Sinhalese community clings on to the concept of unitary government and the (...) LTTE (...) clings on the idea of a separate state” (Educational Publication Department [EPD] 2006b, 92).

And a few paragraphs further:

Most conflict resolution processes in the world (...) have failed (...). The best example for this is the Indo-Lanka accord of 1987 (...). In this context, the main party to the conflict, namely the LTTE is seen running away from the Indo-Lanka peace Accord gradually, rendering the conflict even more serious. (EPD 2006b, 93)

These extracts reflect the context in which this book was written, namely the Cease Fire Agreement (2002–2008). Once again there is no intention of presenting the history of the conflict; yet they do characterize a fundamental aspect of the struggle and provide a partial glimpse exposing one of the more critical attempts at a political negotiation: the Indo-Lanka Accord of 1987.

That last quoted paragraph is all that is officially transmitted through textbooks about the history of conflict to the students up to their Ordinary Level (EPD 2006a,
After grade 11, students can follow different streams towards their Advanced level exams and possibly enter university. Among the options is the subject of Political Science the syllabus of which does not include The Sri Lankan conflict either, but in practice many teachers do explore ways to transmit certain features of war and violence.5

Trace 2: Principals’ and Teachers’ Attitudes in the Eastern Province

During the initial stages of fieldwork several people posed three recurrent counterarguments to the research question which demand careful consideration. They were: (a) “The history of conflict is not taught”, (b) “The new generation doesn’t know anything about the history of conflict” and (c) “The history of conflict is not learned but experienced”. I argue in this and the next segments that these counterarguments can be falsified by exploring the perspectives of the institutional transmitters of knowledge (Teachers and principals) and their receivers (students) on the origin of conflict, their personal experiences with violence, their process of knowledge acquisition about conflict and their opinion on teaching the conflict’s history.

Lived Experiences, Transmission and Conflict’s Origin among Educators

After interviewing thirty-five teachers and principals in the Eastern Province the most common answers referring to the origin of conflict were education policy followed by language and communication problems.6 These answers are in tune with the scholarly discourses on the causes and are also commonly part of the insurgent’s indoctrination narratives. In that sense, it is possible to assert that the interviews reflect a certain collective—not monolithic—discourse on the causes of conflict.

The vast majority of the principals said to have experienced violence directly, while several teachers refused to answer that question. Similarly, when talking about the ways in which they learnt about conflict, teachers provided general answers such as from the family, the media or from daily life; whereas principals brought instead their life experiences into their replies. In fact, as we shall see in the following paragraphs, several alternative spaces of transmission and images of conflict emerged from their memories. The difference in reaction between teachers and principals could be explained by the hierarchical differentiation limiting teachers’ sense of freedom to voice their opinion and by the principals’ lesser vulnerability to reprisals for speaking their mind due to the protective character of their authority and social visibility. However, in this case, this is likely also because several interviewed principals are members of the clergy, giving them a separate status altogether.

Three of the interviewed Tamil principals actually heard the blast that killed thirteen soldiers in Jaffna and transformed the conflict into a full-scale civil war in 1983, intertwining thereby their personal lives with the perceived origins of conflict. They emphasized that their knowledge about the dynamics of violence was nurtured by the rumours that reached them, but most notably by the radio. Often though, those sources of information would be re-valued within the university premises, a crucial site of transmission of knowledge about conflict from its very onset. There, transmission occurred mostly
outside formal classes, in seminars and group discussions organized generally by the militant movements themselves (personal interviews EP001, EP002, EP003, October–November 2009).

The earliest memories of some principals vividly illustrate the emergent symbolization of conflict. For one of them, the first image of violence came when he witnessed the eruption of violence during the elections of 1977 that resulted in his brother being injured and family property burnt. Those days—as he and others recall—Tamils from other areas seeking refuge (particularly after the incidents of Black July 1983) were made into key sources of information and socialization of violence becoming critical agents in bringing a perspective beyond the local disputes (personal interviews codes EP002, EP003, November 25–29, 2009).

For one Muslim principal of a provincial school in the Eastern Province, 1983 was the year in which he realized that there was a conflict: He was 17, sitting in the only TV hall in town, when he suddenly heard a blast. The following day he went to the location of the explosion and there he found the shoe of one of the six soldiers that perished in a landmine detonation. It was then that he realized a war was going on; the shoe became the symbol of that awareness (personal interview code EP005, December 10, 2009).

A few years earlier in a town nearby a thirteen-year-old boy (decades later appointed school principal) became aware of the armed conflict when one of his teachers came injured to school. It was his teacher’s injury that taught him first about violence. However, soon armed actors would go to his home with propaganda, while promoting an unusual type of war economy: “three pots of curd were given to the family in exchange for three members going to military training” (personal interview code EP006, December 11, 2009).

In yet another town in the East, a former teacher recalls how his first realization of conflict occurred during his son’s birthday. He failed to buy him a present because shops were closed after a dead body was displayed in a junction of town. Since then—the teacher relates—a nearby catholic church “became a refugee camp at least once a year”, being a sacred space of survival, but also a site of knowledge transmission on the conflict (personal interview code ET019, December 10, 2009).

Finally, principals illustrate how funerals became yet another key site of transmission too: “soldiers don’t come to funerals, no? So people talked freely” explained one, while another recounted how almost an entire school went to a student’s funeral during which they learnt the context in which to place her death. Similarly, masses, poojas and Jummah prayers grew to be key rituals for the socialization of episodes of violence and the history behind them as exemplified again by a Muslim principal who remembers learning about LTTE’s first execution in town through discussions in a mosque (personal interviews codes EP003 and EP005, November 29 and December 10, 2009).7

Schools as Spaces of Transmission

The knowledge transfer experienced by teachers and principals as they were growing up also highlights the school as a specific setting for transmission, regardless of the conflict’s absence in the curricula. As a principal recalls, when he was a student one
teacher would explain the reasons for the armed struggle, except he would do so in the afternoons while students had to perform small tasks such as painting the school fence (personal interviews codes EP005, EP006 and EP009, December 2009).

Schools were a favoured venue by many of the militant movements to hold meetings and “educate” the people about the conflict. Several Tamil principals recall attending many of those meetings when they were students. Schools were then the theatre of formal institutional knowledge transmission by day, and the stage for subversive knowledge by night. These seemingly clashing trends would coalesce all along the years of war as the LTTE regularly went to schools demanding the principals to gather the students in the assembly room to show them an LTTE “promotional” video featuring several of their military operations and historical readings of war (personal interviews, December 2009–March 2010).

A former LTTE combatant recalls how it was in school where he obtained the necessary knowledge to find and join the armed movement; how he would a few years later set up meetings in schools as part of his work within the political wing of the organization; and how he would intercept new recruits coming from schools in his area of operations (personal interview code EC001, December 2009). Indeed, principals had to witness how several of their students were forcibly taken to attend LTTE meetings in their camps. Yet the problem was not always about students being taken away. One principal remembers how “one time a student came to an extracurricular course wearing the cyanide capsule around his neck and a grenade in his hand with the [sole] intention of showing off” (personal interview code EP005, December 11, 2009).8

Besides often being the scene of direct violence, the symbolic front of war often found its battlefields in schools as well. A principal recalls, for example, how he had to face a formal inquiry by the LTTE for having hoisted the National flag in school (personal interview EP007, February 2010). A mirrored illustration is the memo received by principals ordering them to celebrate the recent Government’s victory hoisting the flag but also by inviting members of the security forces as special guests to the schools.

With these experiences in remarkable contrast with the silence of the textbooks, I wondered if they felt the history of conflict should be officially taught in school. Among teachers only one answered yes, while only one principal thought it was better not to teach it for it would create more resentment. Another said it should be taught but considered it impossible unless Tamils “get their independence” (personal interview code EP002, November 25, 2009). All others reckoned it should be taught to avoid repeating the conflict’s history.

Transmission Streams and Meaning Production

Overall, the life histories of the transmitters would indeed point to the fact that the armed conflict has above all been experienced, as one of the counterarguments suggested. The problem with such a statement is, however, threefold: first, saying that the conflict is experienced, not taught, seems to disregard that violence is often meant as a pedagogic device by those engaged in it. Thus, to a certain extent having experienced it is having it taught (to others). Second, experience and socialization are not mutually excluding
processes: You can experience conflict and have it taught to you through a different process. Third, the thousands of lives affected by violence do not create in isolation a collectively shared symbolic horizon in which the private incidents can be framed.

It becomes clear—meandering through principals and teachers’ memories—that the history of conflict is taught, experienced and learnt outside—but also in school, around it, through it. Teachers and principals serve as reproducers of a knowledge established by policy at the centre, transmitting a very eloquent silence. Additionally, within the institutional space but outside the institutional time, armed actors became direct agents of knowledge transmission in schools. Finally, teachers and principals also articulated their experiences with the students and with the events that made schools theatres of violence. It is through the intertwining of these streams of knowledge transfer that the foundation of a fragile and unstructured—but nevertheless present—collective symbolization of war emerged.

There is, however, a suggestive paradox: Whereas schools are generally seen as spaces of—if you will—domestication of ideology, it seems principals, teachers and their schools in the Eastern Province (the agents of the state’s silent transmission and symbolic control) were reproducing a power structure with its officially sanctioned history and concurrently resisting and subverting it.

Trace 3: Students, Ex-combatants and the Transmission Process

The explorations into the knowledge transfer took place soon after Sri Lanka’s Eastern Province entered a crucial transitional phase. In 2007, the Sri Lankan Government forces managed to drive the LTTE out of the Eastern Province. This was partially achieved due to the 2004 defection of alias Karuna—till then the military wing commander of the LTTE—and the subsequent formation of his paramilitary cum political party—TMVP. To legitimize his defection, Karuna accused the LTTE leadership of discrimination towards Eastern cadres; of greed, and of a lack of interest in peace. Because of this split, the LTTE lost at once nearly half the territory under their control, more than a third of their manpower as well as their main area for new recruitments. His defection also represented the biggest intelligence leak in LTTE history and an enormous symbolic blow. In fact, the most valuable reference in the insurgent discourse, Tamil Eelam (Tamil Homeland), was now broken and the repressed intra-ethnic tensions among the Northern and Eastern Tamils came to the surface again.

Fieldwork took place with these transformations still fresh in everyone’s mind. Before dealing with the findings, it is important to highlight three crucial issues. First, the linkage in conflict settings of formal education and other forms of transmission of knowledge are seldom explored. Second, when examining discursive practices, focus should include text production, distribution and consumption (Fairclough 2008, 71); yet, the full chain is rarely studied in the context of conflict analysis. Third, within the literature on conflict there is a tendency to segregate the analysis of non-combatants’ experiences from that of armed actors. Surely, they are distinguishable social domains, but at least in Sri Lanka’s Eastern Province they are by no means isolated social spaces.
To overcome these issues, the first thing that needs to be done is to identify the actual repertoires of transmission by checking which sources the youth actually claims to use in order to obtain knowledge about (the history of) conflict. To that purpose, surveys and interviews were held with 144 school students mainly from grade 10 and 11 and with a small but selective group of former Tamil (child) combatants. The interviewed and surveyed students are Sinhala (30), Muslim (32) and Tamil (82), studying in schools in Trincomalee, Valaichennai and Batticaloa.

The Spaces and Sources of Students’ Knowledge of Conflict

Questionnaires were presented to students with twenty-six open questions dealing with media consumption, personal context, knowledge and opinions on conflict and war. The results were complemented with participant-observation in some classes and informal interviews.

Although it seems predictable that media (46%) and family (15%) were the top answers among students regarding their claimed sources of conflict-related knowledge, there are some worthy annotations to be made. For one, among the different media, newspapers came on top above TV, radio or the Internet. Family on the other hand, although certainly a critical site for transmission of knowledge too, mainly served to relate incidents of violence meant to convey the history of a feeling, the history of their suffering. Though a less straightforward grammar of the conflicts’ past, such transmitted suffering is also culturally constructed and has particular significance in the relations between memory and history (Hodgkin and Radstone 2003, 103).

Furthermore, Teachers—embodied institutional transmission—constituted only 8% of the responses referring to student’s sources of knowledge about conflict, putting them in a distant third place just above friends (7%). The most surprising absences regarding the sources of knowledge were armed actors and politicians: Soldiers was mentioned once (by a Muslim student), The Tigers once (by a Tamil student) and Politicians were considered only twice. Yet we know armed actors visited many of the schools even in recent years and imposed in the East a rather effective “one combatant per family policy”; while politicians clearly do influence students’ perspectives, as discussed later on. These omissions highlight the importance of including distortions or mismatches between formal categories and ground realities as part of the analysis. For example, given the aforementioned “one combatant per family policy”, categories such as family and armed actors are not always distinguishable spaces in Eastern Sri Lanka, allowing knowledge about the conflict to circulate from one domain into the other. One should realize that when a student says he learns about the conflict’s history from family members, this might occasionally overlap with armed actors.

Ex-combatants as Sources and Subjects of Transmission

In many cases, (child) combatants were not only direct agents in violence but also functioned linking several spaces of transmission of knowledge. They had thus a significant role in the chain of production, reproduction and transformation of cultural meanings.
of violence and war. Indeed, from former child soldiers’ accounts it becomes clear that there were *para-institutional* mechanisms to transmit knowledge about the history of conflict running within the armed organizations. However, the interviews also revealed that many of those once-child soldiers were transmitters themselves, narrating their own experiences as they came home or, more systematically, providing information in terms of propaganda and indoctrinating new recruits (personal interview, EC005, March 2010).

Life taught these combatants about violence, but how did they learn about its (alleged) reasons and the history behind it? Only the eldest interviewed got the chance to study up to Ordinary Level. According to him—who voluntarily joined the *Tigers* at the age of fifteen—the fundamental site of transmission of the conflict’s history was the armed movement itself through a course in *Political Science* received during his recruitment. It turned out, however, that his uncle was a member of one of the first armed movements in the region and so too were the girls that used to help him with his homework before he took up arms (personal interview, Pillayan, December 10, 2009). This is then a mirrored example of the overlapping fields of family and armed movements in the transmission of conflict.

The other boys interviewed were initially members of the LTTE, later becoming/joining the TMVP, except the youngest who was forcefully recruited by TMVP in 2006. The latter is the only one that did not receive training in political science; instead, his indoctrination was done focusing on a more immediate necessity which was the justification of the split highlighting the “tyranny” of LTTE leader Prabhakaran in contrast with the alleged “benevolence” of TMVP’s head, Karuna (personal interview codes EC004 and EC005, March 30, 2010).

However, how was this knowledge transfer done within the TMVP if they offered no political science course? After all, the discourse technologies implemented for the consolidation of the split are some of the most critical factors in the defeat of the LTTE, radically transforming the Sri Lankan civil war. Research is still ongoing, but available accounts reveal that the main technologies of knowledge transfer within the TMVP were direct speeches of their leaders, video footage of Karuna and the publication of a free paper that circulated beyond the direct members of the movement—*Tamil Allai* (Tamil Waves). Furthermore, some of the interviews suggest that there was a political science course offered within the TMVP, but it was only provided to the area leaders in sessions held in Colombo (personal interview with Sivagheeta Prabhakaran, April 2010). In addition to those mechanisms, two music CDs were released which served as indoctrination, motivation, propaganda and legitimization strategies.

*Transmission Process and Content*

The practice of describing conflict is politically significant and constitutive of relations of power (Jabri 1996) whereby violence is woven into narrative, symbolic and societal forms (Das 2007, 86–87). Having this in mind, I attempted to establish students’ expressions of causality, their attribution of responsibility of conflict and the transfer mechanisms implemented by them, inquiring about the issues presented ahead.
A total of twenty-seven different answers were given to the question *When did the conflict start*, ranging from “A long time ago”, “from the time Kings ruled Sri Lanka”, all the way to “2007”. The highest single answer was *I don’t know* or did not answer the question (17%). In second and third place came 1990 (14%) and 1983 (9%), respectively, the former being a critical year for the East particularly for the Muslim population as 147 were killed in the Kattankudi Mosque massacre; whereas the latter (1983) is commonly perceived as the turning point in which scattered violence turned into civil war.

With such results, the initial impulse is to give validity to the counterargument presented earlier, claiming that the new generation does not know the history of conflict. However, that would disregard the fact that the outbreak of (armed) conflict is always a disputable matter and that 83% of the respondents *did* claim to know (out of which at least 54% of the answers one could justify in terms of the history of conflict). Furthermore, ambiguity in the replies does not necessarily mean ignorance. What it does mean, however, is that the more or less cohesive collective discourse on conflict retrievable among principals and teachers appears to dilute or diversify in the knowledge transfer to a new generation.

The proportion of *no responses or I don’t know* replies to the question *Why did the conflict start* is far smaller (6%) and the answers easier to categorize in larger groups, with *rights, discrimination or inequality* on top. Thereafter, the most common answers were those reflecting Tamil–Sinhala relations (in terms of war, differences or misunderstandings).

Ex-combatants’ accounts reveal that within the armed movement instead of *why did the conflict start*, the relevant question became *Why is there a need for Tamil Eelam (Tamil homeland)*? The answers here pointed again to the education and language policies of the Sinhala-dominated government, the repeated aggressions against Tamils, but also to the need to preserve their own culture in a demarcated homeland. Some younger ex-combatants answered in more general terms arguing that Tamils were enslaved by the Sinhala or more locally by explaining conflict in terms of specific military targets, that is, “they [we] were fighting to capture the Trincomalee harbor” (personal interview code EC004, March 31, 2010). Nonetheless, they would all ultimately converge on the need for a separate Tamil homeland.

As a question providing suggestive insights into students’ characterization of the armed conflict, I asked who they considered the main actors to be. Surprisingly, *former politicians* came on top, above *Sinhala vs. Tamils (2nd)*, *the Sri Lankan Government vs. LTTE (3rd)* and *Racists (4th)*. Perhaps the most interesting feature of these results is that by giving politicians the top position respondents were indirectly granting discourse a primary role in conflict, above preconceived bio-social identities or discriminatory material practices. The second most common answer on the other hand (*Tamils vs. Sinhala*) seems to suggest that politicians do have a great impact on students’ perception of conflict after all, for it is most often during their rallies that people are led to believe conflict is among the communities as a whole. Imagining the conflict as Sinhala vs. Tamil is of course also a discursive construct, but when students identify politicians as the main actors they are *themselves* referring to the
politicians’ mobilizing capacity (a discursive force), whereas when they signal Sinhala vs. Tamil they are alluding to ethnic categories. The fact then that politicians was the top answer suggests a shift in the perception of conflict in which communal categories are no longer conceived as the source of dispute but rather the manipulation of those by some agents through discursive practices.

Other sites of transmission of conflict should be taken into consideration besides the ones suggested by the students and ex-combatants. The abundance of transmission loci cannot hide, however, that there are significant voids in the new generation’s acquired knowledge about the history of conflict. This is explained by the lack of institutional attempts at constructing a multi-voiced narrative of the conflict history; by the imposition of silence by the different armed actors; as well as by the pervasive effect of protracted war in a generation born in it. However, this is not to say that the youth in Eastern Sri Lanka does not want to know about it; in fact, 69% of the students consider that the history of conflict should be taught in school. Surprisingly, among the different groups of students the Sinhala favoured its institutional teaching the most (76.7%). Thus, regardless of their ethnic background the majority of the new generation seems to see in teaching the past violence a possibility for “preventing new conflicts”, “hating war” and create an “amicable and prosperous future”, as several of them argued.

Traces Intertwined: Semantic Alliances and the Sustainability of Conflict

Within the questionnaires and interviews, I included two questions to contrast personal memories of violence and the inter-subjective memory of conflict, by asking on the one hand for particular incidents they remembered, and on the other their knowledge about an event of particular symbolic density occurring before the respondents were born: Black July, 1983.

Eighty-two per cent of the respondents remembered a particular incident of violence. However, among the students only 43% claimed any knowledge about 1983. In spite of the disquieting gap, the responses, nevertheless, show a significant level of awareness of the conflict having started before their observed reality.

Teachers and principals on their turn blur the boundaries between private and social memory when discussing 1983, as they almost unequivocally combine the individual recollections with the collectively engineered meanings attributed to that event. Indeed, incidents within one’s own lifetime are impossible to remember “without seeing them in the framework established subsequently of what a given decade or event means” (Hodgkin and Radstone 2003, 5). Autobiographical and historical memory are fused and charged with emotional meaning having the direct experience of a few creating local and private knowledge, nevertheless, emotionally shared by entire groups in the Eastern Province. As suggested by Young, “the biographically and historically generated pain may never be entirely separable” (in Cappelletto 2003, 256).

Former Child soldiers on the other hand, born—as the students—after 1983, learnt about that year’s incidents in remembrance sessions organized by the LTTE during
which emphasis was placed on the martyrs of the movement and on the indiscriminate killing of Tamils as a justification for Tamil Eelam (personal interviews, December 2009–April 2010).

Therefore, what can this exploration into the chains of knowledge transfer—from policy-making to students and ex-combatants—tell us about the symbolic mechanisms that uphold conflict and war?

The sustainability of (armed) conflict in the East of Sri Lanka (as in any other part of the world) was immersed in knowledge systems creating the possibility of war as a transformative vehicle (Jabri 1996). These systems are nurtured by partially shared historical discourses and emotional memories circulating among different social domains. Surely, any civil war contains in it a myriad of (minor) conflicts—private and collective—and an even larger set of interpretations of them. Nonetheless, actors and commentators alike always fall back to a (referential) unitary sense of “the civil war”—even if contested and fluid—as some kind of shared symbolic construction through which communication—or even radical disagreement about it—is structured. How then is that sense of an all-encompassing symbolic reference of “the armed conflict” maintained if there is such diversity in readings, experiences, knowledge and motivations along variables of time and space?

To explain the dynamics and variation of violence in civil wars, Kalyvas suggested the concept of alliance based on an exchange of resource and manpower among supra-local and local or individual actors by which the interests of all are met (Kalyvas 2006). His perspective opened the space for a—if you will—discursive counterpart to that process. Building on Kalyvas’ instrumental approach but trying to bring it closer to discursive perspectives on conflict (Jabri 1996; Apter 1997; Schmidt and Schröder 2001), I want to seal these explorations into the transmission chain by sketching a new concept capturing the cultural mechanisms of sustainability and transmission of conflict: I am referring to a symbolic transaction I call Semantic Alliances.

Fieldwork suggests that inter-subjective and inter-generational knowledge about conflict is reproduced and sustained by a range of (unstable) liaisons between meanings produced in different discursive domains. To illustrate this, we can look at the concrete ways and contents through which the history of conflict was transmitted to principals, teachers, students and ex-combatants, as well as to the specific incident that recently transformed the Sri Lankan conflict and the everyday dynamics in the Eastern Province: Karuna’s defection of 2004.10

In our case, the level of discursive structuring appears dependent on the phase of conflict in which a society finds itself. The interviews and the surveys among principals, teachers, students and ex-combatants show that neither a static nor monolithic discourse about the conflict, its history and its reasons is maintained and shared over time and space. At best a somewhat structured historical narrative was operational when violence as a transformative vehicle needed to be legitimized (teachers & principal’s generation); but once violence is already there (students’ and former child combatants’ generation) historical consciousness was contained by the armed actors, while educators—caught between the official discourse at the centre and its local defiance—transmitted above all that existential ambiguity. Nevertheless, it is by a network of
semantic alliances connecting relevant—albeit malleable—signifiers, *that Black July, a shoe or hoisting a flag* can all become interconnected symbolic references transmitted to conceptualize, imagine and experience something that is trans-generationally (and trans-locally) conceived as the Sri Lankan Armed conflict.

Instead of rigid texts, the key to the transmission and sustainability of conflict appears to rely on fragmented knowledge held together (or rearranged) by a network of semantic alliances construed at different levels. This multileveled semantic exchange is at least threefold. First, the alliances offer social relevance to—and beyond—personal experience. Social significance is provided in exchange for individualized exemplifications of injustices. The memories of the former child combatants presented earlier are a good example. Their narratives of suffering were absorbed by the LTTE helping to justify the movement through their stories. In return, the movement provided the reasons for war formulated as the need for Tamil Eelam, thereby giving the children’s experience its social relevance and justifying their future as combatants. Among individuals the alliance is done exchanging violent incidents in return for a collectivized inclusion of suffering. This is exemplified by the peer sharing among students at school, socializing the experiences of violence beyond the intimacy of home, thereby extending the repertoire of recurrent communal grievances.

Second, semantic alliances provided a Utopia (*Tamil Eelam*) in exchange for the possibility of ideological dissemination and control. The potency of this alliance is illustrated by a principal’s reply to my question of whether or not Tamil Eelam was still possible now that the war was over. He said: “No (…). The defeat of the LTTE is also the defeat of the Tamils (…). Is the government prepared to give equal rights? No. Then we have lost” (personal interview code EP006, December 11, 2009). The semantic alliance whereby a Utopia was provided by the armed actor in exchange for exemplifications of discrimination was so strongly consolidated that without the armed group it was inconceivable to put a stop to discrimination in this principal’s mind.

Third, semantic alliances between an armed movement, its cadres and the civil population endowed people with empowerment after humiliation in return for people’s selfish driven impulse to fuel the war. In other words, passive and isolated victim self-images were transformed by the armed actors into either a spirit of “I’m a fighter” or “they are fighting for me”, obtaining in return a repertoire of personal revenge, jealousy and greed. In such exchange, private motivation is thus translated into commitment for a collective cause. *Marko*, a former child combatant whose narratives were presented earlier, serves as an example: His participation in armed action was achieved by framing his personal drive of revenging his father’s death within the collective endeavour of the inexorable achievement of *Tamil Eelam*. This once again mentioned homeland was clearly the most powerful structuring reference shared by principals, teachers, students and ex-combatants—a hegemonic signifier if you will—around which most semantic alliances occurred.

However, the strategic manipulation of the alliances’ instability may provoke transformations in the discursive domain leading to a new phase in conflict or a complete new social order. Take, for example, the semantic alliance articulating individual
narratives of discrimination (signifier 1) in return for the discursively constructed Tamil Homeland (signifier 2), perhaps the basic semantic alliance sustaining the armed struggle. When in 2004, the same initial signifier (discrimination) was used by a powerful broker (Karuna) to emphasize this time the North and East differences (a previously unused signifier 3), the fundamental alliance carrying the legitimacy of LTTE’s insurgency was irreparably destabilized. As a consequence, the symbolic common reference of Tamil Eelam was split into two and bereft from all its power. In its place a new alliance emerged in which a section of civil society provided discursive inputs to equate internal tensions of the armed organization (LTTE leadership in the North vs. LTTE manpower in the East) with those of the community (Northern Tamils vs. Eastern Tamils) and so articulate any possible private motivations of Karuna (self enrichment, internal persecution, personality clashes with Prabhakaran), with a social justification.

The former hegemonic alliance (discrimination/Utopia) implicitly expressed a clash of social categories (Tamil vs. Sinhala). However, with Karuna’s break, suddenly the history of the conflict could be read not as a fight of ethnic identities but as the manipulation of leaders. Tentatively then, the restructured semantic alliance of the revolt was what enabled many among the students to conceive politicians as the main actors of conflict, not ethnic identities as shown in the responses presented earlier.

Semantic alliances are exchanges temporarily reified as texts. Often it is an interaction of sorts, albeit usually a deferred one. Consider the example of previously presented material: a collective actor—the LTTE—(discourse producer A) makes a narrative available of Tamil discrimination as imperative for violence (discursive product a). Then, an individual—say an Eastern Tamil student—(discourse producer B) stores as a personal narrative the lived experience of watching his teacher arrive with a bleeding head to school (discourse product b). Producers A and B never actually sit together to form an alliance, but the semantic exchange is, nevertheless, made between one actor (A, B) and the other actor’s discourse (b, a). The full exchange (semantic alliance) is then Ba/Ab, which is not simply—as commonly expressed using the concept of framing—a matter of putting one within the other, but of a full symbolic exchange. It is a procedure constantly transforming power relations (for example position of authority of LTTE vis à vis Tamil civilians’ subordination in the East) into discourse (we are fighting for you/they are fighting for us). The reverse is also true, which is perhaps best visible when semantic alliances are reengineered: The possibility of Karuna’s defiance of LTTE leader’s dominance within the insurgent structure (power relations) came about by first transforming the power relations of disparity between Northern and Eastern cadres into a discourse of Northern Tamil/Eastern Tamil differences. Achieving this semantic alliance (discourse) then paved the way to physically (militarily) challenge the LTTE leader’s authority (back to power relations).

More substantial evidence corroborating this semantic reengineering co-constructing Sri Lanka’s social and political transition will have to be presented in forthcoming work. For now, however, the data do seem to support the statement that symbolic control and resistance are translated into power relations (and vice versa) through the performance of semantic alliances, the articulation and instability of which
endow conflict and violence with its complex, sustained but ever-changing dynamics. The pedagogic practices on war explored above are full of such semantic alliances transmitting and transforming the meanings of conflict.

Conclusions

As mentioned there is a comparatively weak discussion on the teaching and learning of the Sri Lankan armed conflict. In the academic literature, the gap manifests itself in that there is a lack of focus on a process—that of the transmission of conflict—whereas in the official educational production dealing with history and citizenship the gap appears in terms of content—that of the history of conflict itself. In a sense, within the institutional space for the transmission of knowledge par excellence there is emphasis on Peace Education and on Conflict Resolution; but the expected link between these two is missing: that which one might call Conflict Education.

If we were to make a tentative attempt at intertwining the most commonly mentioned spaces of transmission, we could say first that the evaluative family narratives engross an emotional discourse of suffering. They are in turn re-contextualized by the media into a politically oriented discourse, reorganizing suffering in terms of power relations. The family produced discourses are, furthermore, recurrently evaluated within the school premises. In fact, schools articulate several spaces of transmission beyond their own production/reproduction process, becoming as it were, the focal points of semantic alliances in which formal education is just one among several streams of meaning production.

In spite of its absence within institutional settings, the history of conflict is taught in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka and the new generations do know about it. The history of conflict is in fact learnt and experienced, learnt through experience, and experienced through learning. Furthermore, particularly principals and students consider that its history should be taught within the institutional boundaries.

The absence of the civil war in the official textbooks of Sri Lanka does not come as a surprise. There seems to be a common assumption among both scholars and policymakers that teaching the violent past is a relevant instrument for reconciliation only in the aftermath of war. Yet, if we know that the institutional silence offers only more space to extreme views, one may wonder if that violent past should not be taught precisely during unrest, using conflict’s own history as an antidote for violence.

The representations of past violence are the most important resources for an ideology of violence, wars being often fought from—or over—memory trying “to establish one group’s view of the past as the legitimate one” (Schmidt and Schröder 2001, 9). However, teaching those representations under certain circumstances can also become about transmitting a sense of accountability. All those memories of principals, teachers, students and ex-combatants might demand a space in the national consciousness, for it is by re-memorizing the conflict and by a collective redistribution of sorrow that the symbolic reversal leading to a new national identity might be achieved.

This paper has sought to answer how symbolic control is realized transforming discourse into power relations, and how the linkages between past and present-day
violence works (Schmidt and Schröder 2001). These questions were addressed by exploring the sites and contents of transmission while putting forward the concept of semantic alliances as the critical mechanism for the sustainability and transmission of conflict to take place. History and memory are always sites of struggle, certainly so in the aftermath of a war where as Spencer argued “oppressive remembrance” has been imposed entrapping some communities in an eternal present of violence (Das 2000, 135).

Curriculum change alone is unlikely to contribute to peace and social cohesion (Sørensen 2008) as sole strategies in dealing with the past. In fact, we first need to better understand how conflict’s knowledge is transmitted to sustain war, something to which this research hopes to have contributed. However, this study also suggests that besides the aforementioned academic exercise, once the multiple discourses on the conflict’s history are institutionally made available, the same mechanism of semantic alliances that sustained the armed conflict could now potentially generate new symbolic formations to reinvent the Sri Lankan polity and perhaps thereby change the courses of conflict towards durable reconciliation.

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Notes

[1] Sri Lanka is 73.9 % Sinhala, 17.8 % Tamil and 7.4 % Moors (Muslim). The war was ethnically framed under the argument that the Sinhala-dominated government systemically discriminated Tamils; thus a Tamil homeland was a necessity.


[3] Textbooks examined were from grades 7 (only for History) 9, 10 and 11; published in 2006, 2007 and 2010.

[4] In 2004, a multiple book option was provided within the education policy framework, but its implementation failed. Twelve different schools across the Eastern Province and five renowned schools in Colombo were visited.

[5] Besides a Social Harmony Component was included in the University Grants Commission. The department of Political Science at the Eastern University has a seminar on the Sri Lankan Ethnic Conflict.

[6] The interviewed educators were Tamil (22), Muslims (9) and Sinhala (4). Among them there are Hindus, Catholics, Muslims and Buddhists.

[7] Poojas are a Hindu form of worship. The Jummah are the week’s most important instance of worship among Muslims.

[8] LTTE cadres were given a cyanide capsule to commit suicide before being questioned.

[9] Among them 1870 (Buddhist revival), 1921 (unbalanced ethic representation in New Legislative Council), 1956 (Sinhala Only Act), 1972 (new discriminatory constitution) and 1976 (emergence of LTTE).
Though Karuna’s defection was not openly discussed with the students it was part of the conversations with teachers and principals, with former combatants and other members of the community. This is the topic of forthcoming work.

References


