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Locating the community in a study on immigrant context: The case of Sri Lankan Sinhalese immigrants in Australia

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Abstract

Capturing the sense of community in an immigrant context is an arduous task, as it is visually absent, yet ideologically present. Consequently, it is represented in text as absence presence and its meaning is concealed unless the focus is community. Thus, the researcher's challenge is not only collecting data but also reflecting and writing upon that data. In other words, it is about constructing our analysis, in terms of locating, experiencing, and narrating the meaning of 'community' in an anthropological pursuit. Based on two years of fieldwork with Sri Lankan Sinhalese transnational immigrants in Darwin Australia, the paper argues that the sense of community is an experiential entity for the researcher and informants. Also, it is imagined and fragmented yet subject to reproduction.

Introduction

In 2014, I reached Darwin, Australia to start my doctoral studies on the Sri Lankan immigrants of Darwin. My objective was to understand the settlement of Sri Lankan immigrants under the notion of 'home' where the idea of community in the study was one implicitly entangled conceptual category. However, the idea of community was puzzling as a result of the contradictory experiences that occurred at the initial stage of the research. On the one hand, the sense of community constantly emerged in the utterances among Sri Lankans in most events called 'community events' or activities and discussions with the researcher. However, there was no visible community to experience, as they were scattered, and lacked visible culture or materiality. The idea of community as an 'absence presence' is a result of the multi-cultural nature of the society. This initial experience led me to explore an appropriate methodological exercise to examine the idea of community in the context of migration research. Thus, the aim of this paper is to contribute to the methodological knowledge in migration research through the expansion of knowledge on community in research process.

Irrespective of thematic approach, no research on migration and transnational studies is possible, without deeply reflecting on the idea of community. This is as sense of community is implicitly or explicitly tied to themes such as culture, religion, ethnicity, etc. Further, the meaning of community, for a researcher in a multi-cultural setting, is quite misleading and concealing, as Oudenhoven and Benet-Martinez (2015) propose, when people demonstrate shifting cultural practices. Concealment of its meaning occurs in the nature of the way community is presented to the researcher. If the general idea of community is about a group of people who are confined to a certain geographical proximity, bounded by shared interests and traditions (Blackshaw, 2010); such types of community cannot be seen in a multi-cultural landscape in the transnational immigrant context. The orthodox meaning of community is rendered obsolete by three different characteristics:

First, there is no confined geographical/physical proximity in such context, as it is being shared by dozens of other ethnic categories; Second, although a particular immigrant group shares a common interest and tradition, their ethnic traditions are no longer visible and fully practiced; and Third, consequently, an outsider cannot see visible cultural symbols, such as architectural patterns, monuments, and identity markers. In that sense, the Sinhala community in Darwin does not demonstrate any characteristics sufficiently to be recognized as Sinhalese. If so, what possible methodological and theoretical exercises can be proposed to comprehend the idea of community? Despite of the existence of different conceptual and theoretical expositions, what does community mean for both the person and the researcher, particularly those who live and work in transnational and multi-cultural settings?

This paper was constructed upon the experience of defining the idea of community in relation to Sri Lankan transnational immigrants in Darwin, Australia. Our question was how do we define the 'Sri Lankan Sinhalese community' and conceptualize it within the rapidly changing global system? In this paper, we confined our analysis to 'Sinhalese' for two reasons. Firstly, despite the reasonable degree of interactions with Tamils from Sri Lanka, Sinhalese in Darwin desired to be recognized as a separate ethnic entity. Secondly, if the sense of community is based on 'shared culture' with a common consciousness, Sinhalese cannot be evaluated with the rest as they demonstrate a distinctive type of cultural ideology.

The sense of community in a multi-cultural setting

Anthropological research has changed over the last few decades due to the widening scope of the ethnographic orientation (Marcus, 1995; Rapport and Dawson, 1998). Despite the new anthropological turn, which focussed more on individuals (Jackson 2013; Rapport and Dawson 1998) and the plurality, over boundaries and space (Appadurai, 1996; Fischer, 2018; Marcus and Fisher, 1999), the question raised here is: how the sense of 'community' evolves in a transnational multi-cultural setting as both transnational and multi-cultural forces encouraged migrants to celebrate their own cultural practices while being exposed to diverse communities. The existence of multiple communities not only dissolves the identification markers of the idea of community as a single entity, but also are complicated by the circulation of cultural practices across communities. Recognition of Darwin as a multi-cultural city is justified by its multi-ethnicity and cultural pluralism. The emergence of multi-culturalism in Darwin is not necessarily a choice, but an inevitable result of Australian developmental policies.

In this context, the idea of authenticity is highly problematic in comparison to other homogeneous communities. Even if Gupta and Ferguson (2007, p.338) argued that multi-culturalism is a feeble concept for acknowledging cultural differences, in ethnographic practice in relation to space, the idea of multi-culturalism also helps to problematize the formation of distinctive cultural consciousness or identities particular to any society. Historically people might have struggled to confine themselves to their own communities: to protect their cultural values from other cultures. However, such efforts are no longer valid in highly diverse social spaces, mainly due to rapid global expansion. As Oudenhoven and Benet-Martinez (2015) observe, globalisation may offer the option to switch between identities to frame intercultural identities. The idea of cultural homogeneity and its contradictions intersects at each moment. Thus, as a space, Darwin is a contact point where other cultural values and cultural symbols are met and reshaped by each other. In that context, how do we identify and define the idea of community to talk about a particular group, the Sinhalese, in this context?

The widely used idea of community was based on Tonnies (1955) famous distinction between *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*, which used to define the social organism and its distinction between countrymen and the village. According to him people were bound by a common spirit, yet this had distinct features peculiar to the city and the village. Thus, at a rudimentary level, the community was recognized as a group of people who shared common morals, values, norms and culture, in a distinctive landscape or space. Gusfield (1975) identifies the use of community in two forms, namely both the territorially bounded concept and the relational that describes the human quality. The idea of shared values and culture, as well as fixity of boundary, has been challenged by Cohen (1985). He argued that community was a 'meaningfully constructed' entity by people using their symbolic prowess and resources (Cohen 1985, p.38). Blackshaw (2010) points out at least four categorical models of community: namely actual, imagined, symbolic and hermeneutical.

However, such understanding of community is troubled by emerging ideological forces such as multi-culturalism which enable people to recognize and share their cultural practices, as well as the sense of citizenship (Jayawardena, 2023). Circulation of cultural practices across community boundaries compel people to redefine their ethnic or communal identities beyond the constructed myths of past. Particularly in an immigrant context, the practice of own culture is regulated by national policies and the accepted ideology of 'recognizing other'. Multi-cultural attitudes in Australia should be understood in this context. The historical and ideological exposition of multi-culturalism in Australia was best explained by Castles (1990, 1999; see also Jupp, 2007; Lopez, 2000; Mann, 2012). According to them, multi-culturalism emerged in the 1970s as a proposed basis of national identity. Signs of multi-culturalism appeared during the Whitlam Government and it was officially announced and financially initiated by the Fraser Government (Mann, 2012, pp.492-494). In that sense, modern multicultural policy was the end of the long-lasting battle of defining and defending a white Australian ethnic identity against non-British immigrants, as reflected through the policies of 'white Australia', and its later modifications – the 'assimilation perspective' and 'integration policy'. Castles (1990) and Jupp (2007) discuss this evolution. As the above literature suggests, the face of Australian multi-cultural policy evolved throughout the post-war period.

On one hand, the development of Australian multi-cultural policies enabled hundreds of immigrant communities to bring with them their cultural practices, but under the rubric of institutional regulations recognizing others. For instance, building a temple or mosque as they wish is not possible, as its construction must a rigorous process evaluated by the local council and the relevant planning ministry. Nor can days-long celebrations with loud noises be held, since those activities are subjected to control. Likewise, building their own ethnic regions is not possible, as hundreds of other migrant categories cohabit the same territorially bounded entity. Such materiality and expressions are the visible markers of culture of ethnic community.

In a rapidly changing world, the concept of community in fieldwork has been subjected to continuing investigation (e.g. Alleyne, 2002; Hannerz, 1980; Marcus and Fisher, 1999; Talai and Rapport, 2002). The earlier romanticisation of community – which had been considered a moral community with shared common values and ethos - has been critically examined. Alleyne (2002) argues that, in recent decades, the concept of community in anthropological explorations has been overlooked and requires self-reflexivity to reevaluate. In Hannerz's (1980) contention, it has taken a hierarchical downturn to denote the marginalized people in villages and towns. Much of this avoidance derived from researchers' struggle to locate and conceptualize the idea of community within their writings.

The same question, we ask here, has been raised and discussed by Talai and Rapport (2002). While Rapport (2002) finds a solution within the liberal legal framework and individuality, where individual rights are asserted, Talai (2002) is looking for other viable solutions such that individuals are not forged to migrant identity but 'might yet accede to community belonging'. Yet the question is that though some people move out of their own ethnic enclave as an individual liberal person or find other alternative forms of belonging within other groups, in the migrant context, an increasing number of people return to their own community and struggle to uphold it, even in a fragmented and imaginary form. The question we must address here is: where are the gaps between our own conceptual conundrum and dissatisfaction about the community and peoples', in which actual practices of community emerge? In other words, if one essentially needs to write about a particular community what should be his or her approach?

I argue that the idea of community is an experience for people who are being together and sharing the same culture, rather than a conceptual category imposed upon them. As we argue, the distinction between the communities as actual, as was described in early anthropological practice, or 'imagined' (Miller and Slater, 2000) is irrelevant. This is because it falls into the categorical model of comprehending the world in a dichotomy. The experience of community encapsulates the actual and the imagined. The imagination itself is an existential experience, because one cannot imagine without 'being' in that particular moment. In other words, imagination is a psychological response to the unfolding experience of a persons' environment. As shown in this paper, the idea of community appears in many different instances,

sometimes as a conscious deliberate enunciation and at other times as an indirect pronouncement. Both submissiveness and liberation (Rapport, 2002) is part of the experiential process of embracing community. Such complexity stems from the nature of the space that immigrants inhabit. Our task is not to mystify the experience of community with the excessive baggage of conceptual clarifications or through essentializing the idea, but to explore how it unfolds through peoples' experience.

Data collection methods and analysis

This paper is based on the finding of my Doctoral studies where the fieldwork was carried out in Darwin from 2014 to 2017. In the research, I looked at the settlement process of Sri Lankan immigrants in Darwin and their sense of home. The idea of community was a recurrent theme throughout the research. Based on the participant observation method, I lived within the community over a three year period, attending their community events, individual gatherings, and residing with them on different occasions. I explored thirty life histories, distributed among three categories of migrants, temporary residents, permanent residents and citizens and during dozens of other interviews, in which I looked at how the sense of community emerged in various contexts.

The challenge was to capture how the idea of community is practiced in the context of Sinhalese immigrants in Darwin, Australia. Firstly, I looked at the contexts within which the idea of community is being referred to or may exist. Then, I explored the ways in which individuals perceived the sense of community and how that evolves in the multi-cultural setting. Secondly, I studied how the sense of community gains visibility in the larger social domain. To do so, I explored shared activities of individual gatherings, which those immigrants identified as 'community work' or 'community events.' Accordingly, I noticed that the idea of community existed in two domains; the individual and the public. In the moment it was classified, different scales of data began to emerge. Then I analyzed both domains comparatively, to form the immigrants' idea of what it meant to be a community. Accordingly, the meaning of community to researchers is ontological, in juxtaposition to how the immigrants defined the term community. Table 1 below shows the types of data that were gathered from the two scales of social domains.

Table1. The types of data gathered in the study.

Individual Domain	Social or Cultural
Individual narratives	Representations at public and administrative scales, such as in documents, official addresses (e.g., by the Mayor or a parliamentarian attending a community function and referring to them as a specific 'community'); as well as a group of Sri Lankans performing or representing their culture in a cultural festival other than their own
Materiality at the personal (household) domain – Artefacts, souvenirs and particular domestic items.	Materiality at the community scale – the community hall and its material culture, including artefacts
Celebrations of rituals and festivals such as the New Year and the Vesak by the household	Community events and celebrations – New Year festival, Vesak, Poson and Christmas - (religious events) – Sri Lankan Independence Day celebrations,
Emotions and experiences	Social events take place in larger social and cultural settings – multi-cultural events, and transnational practices.

During the analysis I noticed that these two sets of data merged, and a third scale emerged. This I identified as the socio-individual scale, where individual and social or cultural domains co-existed. The emergence of this third space revealed the process of individuals' attempts to narrate their sociality or culture. These social and cultural domains include the forces of multi-culturalism and transnationalism.

During the analysis, I treated the data at individual and social scales separately and then collated it. It was noticed that two important aspects of the sense of community, at the individual and social levels, were exhibited. I saw a rupture and discontinuity of the practice of the sense of community, but reproduction of the sense of community at the individual and social levels. The process of reproduction occurs in two different contexts: reproduction of the idea of community by the individual and social interactions, and through the alterations of practices resulting from intermeshing two different cultures as a result of being in a multi-cultural setting. Thus, I concluded that community in multi-cultural and transnational context could be defined as a self-defining group of people who are bounded by a set of imagined and reproduced customs and practices. The process of self-definition is experiential and hence existential, which encapsulates the sense of belonging through actual and imagined experience over fragmented cultural entities. This will be explained with findings in following sections.

Community in individual perception

As a source of information, individual narratives play a significant role in constructing the sense of community, as the informant who ultimately objectivises the world (Rabinow, 1977). The sense of community in individual perception is not explicit but part of their being.

Field data demonstrate three categories of people who perceive the sense of community in three distinctive ways. One set are an ardent believer of their belonging to a particular community and upholding and practicing its virtues. They practice the idea of Sri Lankness or Sinhalese in their domestic life and engage in all community activities fervently. Their kids attend Sunday Dharma schools and try to inculcate a Sri Lankan ethos. At Independence Day celebrations, they sing Sinhala songs or act out verses that depict the golden age of Sri Lanka and its national heroes, despite the fact that they might not have proper sense or emotions of the verses or songs they perform. Also, their children attend traditional Sri Lankan dancing classes run by the community. At the domestic level, spatial organization within the house, food preparations and consumptions are all arranged similarly to the practice at 'home'. Hence, the existence and visibility of the idea of community and communal practices are results of this group.

The second category are the opposite to the previous and they do not demonstrate such attitudes. There are variations among this category. Some do not strongly believe in the importance of community but might follow the inherited cultural practices within the domestic space. For them community activities are mere practices they learnt and were accustomed to, being born into a particular community. Hence, they do not attend any communal activities. The other variation of this category is the group of people which completely disavow the idea of binding to a particular community. They live in an expanded network of people, recognised under the idea of bridging in social networks. As one person mentioned, *'we came to Australia to enrich our life and that cannot be done without we overcome these parochial attitudes'* (Hansi, thirty years old immigrant, personal communication, October, 2015). Their network relations re extended to other ethnic categories and they attend their cultural and social events, attempting to be 'Australian' in a broader sense, rather than being 'Sinhalese'. Some in this category were part of the Sri Lankan community at the initial stage of their immigration and left with personal experiences or tension raised during networking or issues related to their personal lives.

The third category of people demonstrate much softer and moderate attitudes towards the sense of community. They are neither ardent activist of upholding the spirit of community nor rejectionist. They believe the importance of having common identity and self-recognition as 'Sinhalese' or 'Sri Lankan' but are not limited to one culture. As Parakum expressed, *'having a sense of common identity is useful to anchor your life, but at the same time, being exposed to other cultures and societies give much expansive attitudes towards the world'* (40 years old immigrant, personal communication, February,

2016). These people practice Sri Lankan cultural practices at mundane life, support community events more empathetically but their events are not short of having guests from other communities. Also, they attend other cultural and community events along with their friends. Following Brown (2018), this group can be recognized as potential to be the category of cosmopolitan. There are variations within this category of people: those who are not keen on extending their social networks with other communities or practicing other cultures but also not strong supporters of Sri Lankan communal activities. They support such events moderately and are much more isolated in their lives.

This information at individual domains include individual narratives, life histories, individuals' collections of artefacts and memorabilia, as well as functions and events organized by individuals at their houses. The sense of community appears in many different forms according to their location and his or her engagement with the outside world. For example, within a personal conversation, most often, individual might reflect upon his or her experiences in the home country, childhood memories or experiences at host country. In such an event, a person might bring artifact or memorabilia to the conversation in order to articulate their personal experiences. In an individual gathering, such as family events or a party with friends, the word community may be replaced with '*ape aya*' or '*ape kattiya*' (our people). For instance, if they are asked who else is attending the event or gathering, the organizer says '*kawuda itin, ape kattiya tamai*' (who else, it's our people). The word 'our' refers to the people from Sri Lanka and community refers to a larger homeland context. In contrast, if the idea of community is discussed in a personal gathering or at a community event, his or her idea of community is significantly shaped and altered by the opinion of others.

Accordingly, the meaning of community for individual Sinhala immigrants in Darwin is contextually relative. Most often respondents identified themselves as a member of the Sinhala community in Darwin or in Australia. Such identification relied on at least two different domains: individual and public. At the individual domain, the sense of community appeared most often in their sentiments and the identification process we call identity or self-recognition. For example, much of the personal reflections by respondents about life back at home contained positive sentiments towards the home country and their current experience of being isolated as a Sinhalese in Australia or in Darwin. When the individuals expressed their fond memories or practices, they recognized those practices, particular to their own culture or custom, as being transferred from previous generations. At this moment, the sense of community operates in two different ways. First, my respondents distinguished themselves from other communities in Australia. They distinguished the shared practices and characteristics of the Sinhalese community. Secondly, they envisaged these customs as something to be continued or preserved through practices. The sense of community entails the characteristic of 'becoming' through practices, which Wen Li et al. (2014) recognize as a process of building history. Therefore, the idea of 'continuity' is an important aspect of evaluating community.

Essentially, individual informant' narratives, collections and emotions are shaped by the reality of the external world, as interviewees embody the 'place' (May and Lewis, 2019). We identify this as the embeddedness of the public level – multi-culturalism and transnational dynamics – into the individual level. Isolating individual utterances as independent experiences and imaginaries will misdirect the researcher's analytical process. I argue that any individual's sense of community in their immigrant context is a result of that individual's experiences, as shaped by the overall social and cultural forces occurring within their multi-cultural setting, as well as a result of the transnational social practices.

By careful scrutiny of those narratives, it was evident that their sense of community oscillated in different contexts. In addition, the intensity of the sense of community changed at different times. These changes were the result of the immigrants' immediate interactions with the larger social world (Wen Li et al., 2015). For example, after a community event, religious ceremony, or a national day gathering, the spirit about the community increased sharply. Similarly, the level of spirit might drop during a lengthy interval between such events. As one of our respondents noted during the New Year celebrations.

It is our duty to perform these events here to teach our kids about the richness of our culture. Look what they have here. They have nothing. I still remember how we gathered during New Year festival. They cemented our relationship to our people. I still miss it. (Abey, personal communication, March, 2016)

During the 2015 Cricket World Cup tournament between Sri Lanka and Australia at the Sydney Cricket Ground, many Sri Lankans travelled from Darwin to support the Sri Lankan team. As one of them noted:

We must go to cheer for our boys. It is our country playing against Australia. We must support them. (Sanjeewa, personal communication, March, 2015)

When the Sri Lankan National Anthem played, tears rolled down some people's faces as they sang it. This demonstrated emotional support and connection to the community (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). In discussion with the same individual in different context of cricket, about whom he was going to support if the match was between Australia and some other country, without missing a beat he replied, '*I will support Australia because it is my second home*' (Sanjeewa, personal communication, March, 2015). In both these contexts, respondents situated their sense of consciousness of identity and belonging within the emotional backdrop as a member of the Sri Lankan community. In the first two instances, respondents drew a line between Australia and Sri Lanka. The distinction is made based on the shared values and the sense of belonging drawn from ethnic and cultural categories. However, each individual's experience of being a Sri Lankan out of Sri Lanka is completely different from being a Sri Lankan in Sri Lanka. Being a Sri Lankan (consciousness of a shared values/belonging) in a non-Sri Lankan context is imagined and actualized by drawing a community boundary as a Sri Lankan within the non-Sri Lankan ground. In other words, respondents experienced being both a Sri Lankan and non-Sri Lankan simultaneously. In the third instance, the same respondent extended his sense of belonging over geographical boundaries, identifying Australia as his second home. In this context, the ethnic character is neglected and sense of belonging is much more relaxed.

These types of responses cannot be analysed as mere individual utterances and imaginaries. Each of the above responses demonstrate embeddedness within the overall social structure – in the host country, as well as in the effect of transnational elements. Informant, Abey's, intention of transporting his cultural values and practices to his children and emotional reminiscences are charged by social actions (e.g. New Year festivals) and emotions generated from missing such experiences at home. At the same time, such overall experiences are situated within the Australian multi-cultural social setting, informants' experience of dislocation and the isolation resulting from being away from home. Similarly, responses and charged emotional experiences are situated in extravagant global social events (Cricket World Cup), where individual respondents are placed between their home and their host country.

Community in groups and individual gatherings

Researchers who work in migration and transnational research are eager to collect information from individual gatherings. Most often, such information is treated equally to the data coming from other public scales. This is an analytical issue in the research of migration and transnational studies. These are usually more concerned about the idea of 'community' because the sense of community in such contexts is shaped by complex social, political and cultural forces in the society. I argue that individual gatherings should be treated as a distinctive category. It is a category in between the macro and micro levels of the society. Individual gatherings might in size be close to the macro level, but in quality they are closer to the micro level. These gatherings might not be large, like community gatherings, but also not as small as individual units. Gatherings may vary from 3 to 15 people. More than the number, it is the objective of the gathering that defines the scale to which it belongs. For example, some individual gatherings might consist of fifteen people but they might have gathered solely to celebrate someone's birthday, or to celebrate an individual's achievement, or share someone's grievances. These circumstances fall into the individual domain, rather than that of the community.

However, the problem with analyses related to migration and transnational studies is that researchers often forget the social forces that shape these individual gatherings and treat such data at face value. I contend that the information collected from individual gatherings belongs neither to individual units nor to social and cultural factors. It is the space where the sense of community is rejuvenated or reconstructed at the primary level. Also, it is the space where individuals share their experiences - and reflect the larger scale of community actions. The events and functions organized as individual gatherings, and the relationship and experiences developed during such occasions, may reshape individual attitudes towards the community. Individual stories and sentiments felt after a successful community gathering had an immediate effect of shaping positive attitudes towards the community.

In 2019, Sinhalese of the Darwin Buddhist Society, which is comprised of Vietnamese, Burmese, Thai and Cambodian immigrants, won all the Society's administrative positions except the position of treasurer. The Darwin Buddhist temple was established by the Sri Lankan Sinhalese, Thai, Burmese and Vietnamese communities. According to our respondent, one Sinhala person in the previous committee was making trouble in its operations and later was campaigning to transform the main Buddhist shrine into a community hall. His proposition was gathering support among some members and he was intending to stand for the presidency in the forthcoming election. Although, Sinhalese were taking a leading role in running the temple, their official membership was low compared to the other ethnic Buddhist groups. Since some Sinhalese were supporting the idea of transforming the temple shrine into a community hall, the majority of the Sinhalese reacted against the danger of losing the temple, not only for the Sinhalese but also for the other Buddhists. Taking this incident as a threat to its religious practices, a few Sinhala youngsters decided to contest the election. They campaigned among friends and asked non-members to take up membership in the Buddhist society. In 2019, they increased the Sinhalese membership by 400. The group explained the situation to the other communities. Except for one Burmese member, who obtained the treasurer position, the Sinhala group successfully contested all the other position, as the other communities had withdrawn from the election. Most of these discussions has taken place at small individual gatherings. In further discussion our respondent claimed that the temple had virtually become the temple of Sinhala Buddhists, although the temple formally remained open to all the Buddhist communities (personal communication with Dineth via WhatsApp in April, 2020).

The above example demonstrates the ways in which the sense of community oscillated between own community members, as Sinhala, and other ethnic communities, as Buddhists. Throughout the episode, the sense of community was redefined. First, the Sri Lankan community member and his supporters wanted to transform the main shrine into a community centre, thereby eliminating its religious character, which other ethnic groups did not favour. At this level, the sense of community was defined at a more secular level. However, most other temple members, including members from the other ethnic groups, disavowed that proposition and fought against it. Consequently, at the official and organizational level, ethnic character became a dominant fact in the context of this Buddhist Society election. The members retained the temple's multi-ethnic and religious character but, in official functions over the next year, the Sinhalese community took a leading role in organizing temple matters. Secondly, and more importantly, the entire process was inspired by private informal gatherings. The striking factor here is that these individual gatherings played a role of redefining the concept of community between the individual and social levels.

Representation of community in public domain

In the public domain, the idea of community manifests at different levels, such as in public documents, officially recognizing a particular community. This is how it is seen in public gatherings with communities other than their own. Hence, we see the Sinhala community being defined in a representational sense at Indian or Greek community events, or in their own community gatherings. On all these occasions, the idea of community appears differently. At the official level the meaning of community is as an identifier, to facilitate policy planning and the distribution of resources. In public gatherings, identifying people as a member of the Sri Lankan community might create a particular sentiment in them. Such

a sense of belonging is useful to remind them that their lives are more meaningful in a collective (Itzhaky et al., 2015). Sometimes, it provides them with a demonstrative identity. This demonstrative character of identity is emotionally important and reminds them that they are not an isolated individual in a heterogeneous society.

In this context, multi-culturalism should not be seen as a negative force that restricts immigrants' cultural distinctiveness. It enables them to rethink their own traditions. Ideologically, multi-culturalism incorporates the meaning of cultural pluralism and co-existence. It is the core value that demonstrates their attachment to society and other entities, geographically or otherwise (Davidson and Cotter, 1986; Nasar and Julian, 1995). Thus, multi-culturalism encourages people to be open to other cultures while offering a glimpse of their own traditions. Godfrey (1988) and Wen Li et al. (2014) notice this as a culture of civility, which ascribes to multi-culturalism resources and potentials rather than threats to any encompassing society. Such moments can be seen in dialogues where immigrants compare their cultural traditions with others. For example, dancing groups from the Sinhala community perform their traditional dances at many cultural events, such as the Mindil beach market, Harmony Day, and at the Darwin International Food Fair. Some people attended those events specially to see the Sri Lankan dance performance. For our respondents, such occasions stimulate their sentiments about Sinhalese. On these occasions it is suitable to compare their dances with other groups' performances. As some respondents commented, *'that was the most beautiful dance item among others'* (personal communication, August, 2016.). A common observation was that our dance items show the richness of our culture.

Did you notice the huge applause our dancers received after the performance? Our dance was not like the dances performed in Bollywood films. (Tharindu, an immigrant from Sri Lanka, personal communication, August, 2016.).

They argued that:

India has a rich dancing traditions. But see what happened to them; these youngsters always perform Bollywood. We should be happy; our children are in touch with our tradition. We can be proud about our community. (A respondent, personal communication, August, 2016.)

For these respondents, in Australia, community is a marker of identity that distinguishes them from others. Moreover, it is something to be proud of and to celebrate as a Sinhalese in another country.

However, the important characteristic of the term community in a multi-cultural setting is its appearance in many different forms and functions. More importantly, this incipient dualism incorporates the tension between pushing people towards others' cultures and pulling them back to their own practices. This contrasting quality of multi-culturalism reproduces one's own cultural tradition – the sense of community – but as shaped in the multi-cultural setting. It becomes a reproduction, as it is not the same as it is in the home country. It undergoes transformation. First, the visibility of the cultural or traditional presence in architectural forms is almost absent, except for one or two architectural representations displayed in the temple. Cultural events and celebrations are largely confined to that small geographical space. The best example of that is the Sri Lankan New Year celebration in Darwin, the *vesak* or rainy retreat celebrations in the temple. These were confined to that small geographical space and did not include the elaborate public marches featured in Sri Lanka (Pathirage, 2018). In addition, events are performed in scaled-down or attenuated forms, due to the confinement of the geographical space, as well as lack of materials that enable devotees to perform such events or festivals (Pathirage, 2018). This may be true for other ethnic groups with similar religious practices.

The sense of community in transnational social space

The sense of community is also shaped by the effect of transnational practices. Transnational practices allowed people to forge strong connections between home and host societies (Portes et al., 1999; Levitt, 2001; Glick Schiller, 2005; Wen Li et al., 2014). The effects of these connections have already been explored extensively (Appadurai, 1996; MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2000; Glick Schiller and Fourn, 2001) yet; very little attention has been paid to understand its impact upon the idea of community. Such lacunae exist because researchers generally focus on changes occurring at macro-level social scales, and generally take community for granted. That oversight can be rectified by incorporating an emotional dimension into such analysis. Here I propose the importance of paying attention to the ways in which transnational forces reproduce individual emotions towards the construction of the local sense of community.

During our study, we often observed immigrants bringing traditional cooking equipment, ritual items, and various other materials from Sri Lanka. The objects from the home country are not mere tools but a materiality that interfaces human emotions (Miller, 2008) and has meanings embedded into it (Appadurai, 1986) and links two geographical locations. In other words, this materiality assists the construction of the feeling of home, or the sense of belonging, providing shared ethnic and cultural identity missing in the host community.

These objects are an unconscious motif for recognizing their sense of identity. By re-working this materiality, they reconstruct or re-remember their sense of community. These tools, utensils and other equipment, travel between households in the host community through borrowing. For example, one respondent invited me to dinner and to share some traditional sweets called *kokis*, which are mostly prepared during the New Year. The equipment used to prepare the sweet was brought to Darwin from Sri Lanka. Eventually, the equipment started to travel among his friends' households. Through these borrowings, materiality forged a sense of community presence.

In May 2019, the Sinhala Buddhist community in Darwin has put up a giant pandall to commemorate *Vesak* (the commemoration of Buddha's birth, enlightenment and *parinibbana* - death) festival (personal communication with Dineth via WhatsApp in April, 2020). To construct this, they brought large digital prints of pictures and digital electric systems from Sri Lanka. The participants expressed their proud feelings of being a Sri Lankan. Some of those people usually were not diligent practitioners of Sinhala identity. To understand this emotional adjustment, we must look at the data as it emerges from two different analytical perspectives: data that represents macro-level social structure – transnational activities, its operation in the host community – and how that effects individual emotional lives. As in the example of the Mindil beach event, even in transnational contexts, the sense of community changes according to circumstances.

Also, transnational connections and long-distance relationships over the phone and internet reinforces the sense of community. It was evident that long distance connections with family members and friends engendered simultaneous feelings of loss and belonging (Baldassar, 2007; Skrbis, 2008; Svasek, 2008; Maehara, 2010). As one informant stated, on some occasions, he felt a sense of guilt for not being able to stay with his family members. Sometimes, the availability of cheap flights allowed many people to join their families on special occasions, such as wedding ceremonies or when the parents were ill. It suggests that these connections always reminded them of their identity and belonging. Such feelings of belonging allowed them to reconfigure the sense of community in their imagination.

By providing ethnographic evidence from different scales of social and cultural systems, it is evident that the idea of community operates in different individual emotional domains. It is both real and imagined. In other words, people operate in fragmented emotional domains as well as in extended physical domains – between their home and host countries. Hence their utterances about the sense of community cannot be treated as just individual perceptions, or experiences located in a single domain of time and space, nor the representation of fragmentation, due to physically scattered occupancy within the host country.

Conclusion

The concept of community in ethnographic practice is a central conceptual category and cannot be avoided, particularly in research on migration, immigration and transnational practice. In a similar vein I postulated that the concept of community, and its presence in multi-cultural and transnational contexts, has been taken for granted, muted or overly-criticized and rejected. Using ethnographic examples, the methodological process employed to constitute the concept of community within the Sinhalese in Darwin was explained. It reveals its actual presence, operations and dynamics. Representation of the different scales of data suggests that the concept of community appears in different modes.

Hence, the concept of community is essentially an existential phenomenon which oscillated between the actual and the imaginary. In fact, the concept of the imaginary has an emotional dimension gained through actual immersive experiences. These emotional experiences work as a currency to recall and practice. It is the imaginary that is carried by these individuals in their consciousness. Therefore, the practice of community is imaginary, and is reshaped by the world they live in. Feelings of inclusion in the community may increase or reduce, depending on factors within the social domain, such as the experience of living in multi-cultural settings and transnational networks. For a researcher it is important to explore how these different forms of data work in different domains - individual, social and cultural - as well as the co-existent domains of the individual and the socio-cultural.

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