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TEA TALK

Violent Measures in the Discourse of Sri Lanka's Estate Tamils

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Let me begin my talk with an epigram from Michel Foucault:

> If interpretation is the violent or surreptitious appropriation of a system of rules... in order to impose direction, to bend it to a new will, to force its participation in a different game, and to subject it to secondary rules, then the development of humanity is a series of interpretations. The role of genealogy is to record its [effective]] history; [the history of the event]. [By "event" is meant]., the reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, [and] the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it.[1]

At the most manifest level, this talk is about agricultural and agronomic terminology as found in the discourse of Tamil speaking workers of Sri Lanka's tea estates. My use of the terms "agricultural" and "agronomic" is in this context admittedly idiosyncratic. The distinction I wish to draw is as follows. In the tea estates of Sri Lanka, two kinds of agricultural (in the unmarked sense) terminology are in use, one belonging to managerial agriculture, the other to folk agriculture. But, by and large, the tea estate is the regime of managerial agriculture. I call the class of terms belonging to managerial agriculture, "agronomic terminology,' and reserve the term "agricultural terminology" for the domain of folk agriculture. By analyzing three communicative events that I observed and recorded on tea estates in Sri Lanka, I attempt to show how these two terminological words interact.[2] The nature of the interaction is such that the dominant terminology of agronomy may be seen to be deconstructed by the subdominant terminology of village agriculture.[3]

This talk is also about three other issues. First, and in a sense that is only briefly attended to, this talk is about the accident of colonialism in a certain place and time. Much of academic writing on colonialism has opted to attend to the history of the colonizer and his doings, rather than focus on the effects that colonialism has had and continues to have, in its own peculiarly transformative fashion, on the people it had once overtly subjugated. This talk runs counter to this trend.

Second, in keeping with its sub-title, this talk is not only about certain terms and their link to standards and measures peculiar to the world of tea but also the manner in which they give expression to contained violence. I use "contain" in both senses: to have and to limit.

And finally this talk is a genealogical history, or what Foucault called an effective history, as opposed to an enlightenment historiography.

I shall begin by providing a brief historical sketch of Sri Lanka's estate Tamils, and then move on to explicate two broadly conceived terminological types, the approximate and the precise, as they are used by these Tamils. Next, I shall present and analyze three "communicative events" in which agricultural and agronomic terminology constitute and are constituted by a people's lived experience, a people's world. In conclusion, I shall attempt to pull together the theoretical threads that weave through this talk so as to give its design a measure of tautness as well as greater visibility.

An Abbreviated History of Sri Lanka's Estate Tamils

The first group of Tamil laborers were brought from the villages of South India to the island of Ceylon in 1834. The greater part of the recruiting was done in the villages themselves. South Indian villagers recall that these recruiters tended to be the younger brothers of a village headman or caste-panchayat headman. As such, they were driven to claim, by other means and in other places, the power they were deprived of in their natal villages.[4] Most of the these men accompanied their "labor gangs" in their migration to Ceylon, and there they became labor-supervisors known as kankani.[5]

What these pioneer workers first confronted on the island was not cultivated land ready to be appropriated from the local peasants, but thick, virgin tropical forests. Through the labor of this immigrant group and that of subsequent waves of immigrants, these forests were transformed into coffee and, later, tea estates. The earliest immigrants were exclusively men. In later years, especially after tea began to replace coffee in 1867, women and children joined the men.

From the very beginning, the structure of the society of these immigrants was to be different from that of village India, re-formed to suit the interests and requirements of a capitalist, plantation economy. The multiple crops of village India were replaced by a single cash-crop. Unlike village India, where most of what was grown in the village was consumed by the residents, on the estate almost the entire production of this single crop was to be exported. Caste distinctions that might have been kept clear by distinct residential patterns in village India were threatened and often effaced as all workers were compelled to live in identical, barracks-style linerooms,[6] regardless of caste. Caste-specific occupations

became less important, and in some cases even disappeared, because all the residents of an estate had to work towards the rationalized end of manufacturing coffee or tea at a profit. Even though many other cultural changes followed, the culture of tea estate Tamils lost its sense of continuity with village India.

From Agricultural Approximations to Agronomic Precision

One of the most remarkable changes in the lives of these immigrant workers was that, with a few exceptions, they were not allowed to cultivate any land for growing cereals or vegetables for their own consumption, so the land they worked on did not directly yield their subsistence. This was due less to the unavailability of land for personal gardening and more to the fact that their labor had been leased for the sole purpose of growing tea.. The workers' rice, dhal, cereals, spices, vegetables, flour, sugar and oil, were provided for them by the company shop, known as the Cooperative Store.

Forced to give up the old agriculture for the new agronomy, these Tamils were also subjected to the hegemonic pressures of new agronomic terminology and its attendant discursive practices. This new terminology, they learned, belonged to a rationalized system, which favored precision over approximation, universal standards, and units of measurement over contextualized ones.

The British who owned and operated the tea estates for over a century saw precision as much in terms of fairness as in terms of efficiency. Precise scales were ordered to assure accurate weighing of green leaf and fairness to all the tea pluckers. From the point of view of the British superintendent, it would have been dreadfully unfair to use two unmatched scales in two different weighing sheds. Similarly, precision was imperative in the measurements used to construct living quarters for the workers. It assured uniformity, and uniformity assured equality, and equality guaranteed fairness. The concern with precision was carried so far that attempts by individual workers to expand their living space or even to reorganize it within the prescribed dimensions incurred the management's instant disapproval. In memoranda and letters that these early planters wrote to their subordinates and to their parent companies in England, the words "fairness," "justness", "precision," and "uniformity" are used as if they meant the same thing.

Nevertheless, the precise by no means displaced the approximate in terminology. Rather, the two have continued to coexist, constituting a contradictory consciousness in Estate Tamil culture and society. In recent times, as we shall soon see, one has begun to deconstruct the other in unexpected and intriguing ways.

The Precise

Writing of another place and another time, Foucault reminds us that "precision and application are, with regularity, the fundamental virtues of disciplinary time".[8] On the side of precision, distance is rendered in feet, yards, and miles;[9] area in square feet, square yards, and acres; weight in ounces and pounds; volume in quarts and gallons; wages in rupees and cents; labor power in number of pounds or kilos of tea picked, of trenches dug, of bushes pruned, and acres of field fertilized, and so forth; rainfall in inches or centimeters; and time in minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and years. Accordingly, a trench should be one foot deep, 12 feet long, and 8 feet wide; a line room 100 square feet; the total number of bushes that yield 100 pounds of made tea must be fertilized with 10% nitrogen; 5 ounces of pernox (a chemical) are mixed in 1 gallon water; 18 to 24 laborers are needed for each acre of "hand pruning;' 14 laborers per acre for "skiffing;" and wages of Rs. 12 per day are to be paid for pruning, and Rs. 7 per day for picking tea. Prince among the list of precise items is time. For most women, who have to prepare breakfast and a parceled lunch, the 4.30 a.m. gong at the tea factory signals their time to arise from bed; for the men it could be the 5.30 or even the 6 o'clock bell. *Perattu*, a word unknown to India's Tamils, dominates their attentions in the morning. None of the laborers with whom I spoke with was aware that this word originated from the English word, "parade', so thorough has been its assimilation into Estate Tamil. But what is *perattu?* Is it the lining up at the site in order to receive the day's work-order? It is not clear. In either event, it is a review, "an ostentatious examination.'[10] especially when the superintendent suddenly appears, as commanding officer before his troops. The workers who rise at the gong or the factory bell gather at muster when the conch blows at 6.30 am, break for lunch when the conch blows at 12 noon, return to work when the conch blows at 1 pm, and quit work when the conch blows at 4.30 p.m. The conch is no longer a real conch shell (*sanku*), but the piercing wail of the tea factory's steam-siren. The laborers call it a *sanku* anyway. It is only one of the many means by which "time penetrates the body and with it all meticulous controls of power."[11] The list of precise measures goes on and on, constituting the tone and texture of this new disciplinary regime, this agronomic world.[12] And time is the harbinger of this list and this world.

Guards in khaki, parades and musters, troops of workers, rows of bushes, rows of line-houses, lines of shirkers, lines in books, names on lines, rows of books, columns in rows, numbers in columns, check rolls,[13] roll calls, and conch (bugle?) calls, discipline, punctuality and other discursive units of eighteenth-and nineteenth-century Europe, impel an apparently willing labor force to consent, signifying the militarization and radical remaking of the relations among people as well as between people and land. If the conch announces the beginning of work (or war), for Hindus, it also announces the beginning of prayer. The discipline required in work (and war) finds its "elective affinity,"[14] in the discipline intrinsic to devotion but a devotion robbed of all dignity. The traditional *"namaskaram,"* the Hindu greeting of god and fellow-man, in which palms are held together in front of the chest, is replaced by *"salaam,"* an Arabic word and a European gesture. The gesture is a salute, but a docile one, in which shoulders are drawn in and head appropriately lowered.

The Approximate and the "little extra"

In the extra-agronomic context, as might be expected, there is a wealth of terms employed. In the kitchen, rice and dhal are measured in *chundus* (from the Arabic, *Sunduq* via the Sinhala

hunduva[15]) and *kottu* s (a corruption of quart). A *chundu* is ideally a cigarette tin, not unusually a condensed milk tin, and sometimes a half of a coconut shell, of the right size of course. The Sinhala, hunduva, as token of indigenous agricultural terminology, had always been an approximate measure. The conversion of the precise "quart" into the approximate kottu is an example of the power of "approximation" over the "precise". In fact, assimilation of "quart" in this manner into Estate Tamil is so complete that the primary meaning of kottu is not a unit of measure, per se, but a container of a certain approximate size and shape.

The stores on the estates claim to own a set of the few standardized measuring instruments available. Until about fifteen years ago, the salesman in these stores used a combination of dry measures such as chundus, kottus and bushels, and weights such as ounces and pounds to measure the various kinds of goods they sold. They used dry measures for rice, dhal, and other cereals, and pounds and ounces for such items as suger, tamarind, and incense.

Since the early nineteen seventies the metric system of weights has replaced both the former dry measures and the measures of weights. The salesman likes this change, not only because the new system is more rational than the old, but because the use of a scale as opposed to a measuring container gives him greater flexibility, which in turn gives him greater power. In the case of the chundu and kottu the salesman used to scoop up the grain or sugar and fill the measuring container to overflowing, and then, with the help of a stick, level off the excess. The quantity that he was free to play with in this manner was limited, depending on whether he pressed the stick tightly upon the rim of the container or only grazed it gently. With the scale, he has far greater discretionary power. When a salesman weighs dhal, rice, flour of sugar, he is more likely to underweigh than weigh precisely. He does this by pouring the contents of the scale's pan into the newspaper cone before the pointer of the scale has had time to come to rest. But he is free to-and, more often than not, will-throw in a little extra. The customer rarely demands that he re-weigh the item already in the cone, for he would not trust the scale anyway. He may, however, ask the salesman to throw in a little more of the extra. The salesman might oblige, especially if the customer is one who belongs to the "he may be needed by us" category (*namakku Entyavar*).

One is classified into the needed category for reasons that may range from the immediate to the deferred. An example of the immediate would be when a customer is able to oblige the salesman with a few logs of firewood from the estate's store, which he will "lose" during transportation at a point mutually known to him and the salesman, to be picked up by the latter at a specified time after dusk. To the deferred category belongs a case known to me where the salesman never stinted on the little extra to a certain customer whose son was doing well in school and was considered to have a good chance of becoming a clerk in the estate office and who then, it was thought, would be able to wield sufficient clout to find an appropriate bridegroom for the salesman's daughter, then only ten years old. The dynamic involved here entails, to quote Appadurai, "a logic of cross-reference, whereby one set of objects or phenomena is measured by explicit or implicit measures of other objects or phenomena of [this] world of reckoning."

The little extra[16] is an important cultural category. At weddings and other occasions where gifts are exchanged, it is important that whenever the gift is in cash, the amount be in odd numbers: 51 or 101 rupees. That extra one is symbolic of generosity and prosperity on the part of the giver.[17] When an untouchable places her empty pot at the well to be filled by the woman of a clean *jati* who has access to the well, the latter will invariably pour enough water so that the vessel brims over with that little extra.

When a man's kinsfolk go to the house of a potential bride to initiate marriage negotiations, they are invariably invited to partake of a feast.[18] This feast is most important, among other reasons, for assessing whether or not the prospective bride has it in her to be a *Dhanalakshmi*, the goddess of wealth. The signs taken note of are kinesic ones, observed especially by the women, as she serves her guests. How does she hold the serving spoon? How much rice does she scoop up (it need not be full) ? How many times does she scoop up rice? Does she tap the neck of the spoon on the edge of the container to release the rice that is stuck to the spoon? At which point along the length of the stem of the spoon does she tap on the edge of the serving container ? (A miserly woman will fail to tap her spoon or will tap it in such a way that the stuck rice does not fall back into the vessel and therefore the amount of rice she scoops up afresh will not be as much as it should be. But sticky rice could be a stickier affair. Too much tapping, indicating excessive glutenousness, could raise questions about the young lady's or her mother's cooking skills.) Most importantly, does she place that little extra on the guest's leaf, even after the latter has said, "enough!, enough!?[19] All these signs together, especially the last, indicate whether or not the girl is blessed with the capacity and the gift of being generous and bountiful - Dhanalakshmi. All these signs, if they are to be considered auspicious, must be completely free of any indications of attempts at measuring, especially, measuring precisely.

Agronomic Approximation

Approximate measures have perfused the highly rational ized world of tea estates as well. The factory officer who pays a laborer for tending to his garden on company time (against company rules) will give him a container full of tea (again, against company rules) and a little extra. The gestural language is not unlike that which one finds in village India when the land lord gives his field hands a certain number of *padi* s of grain each, as agreed upon by some tacit contract, in return for their services, and then a little extra. The contextually determined measures and standards true of village India are also true of the agronomic tea estates. Ask the kankani how many men he needs for pruning a given filed. "Ten-twelve" comes the answer. "How many hours will it take?" "Seven-eight-ten hours". Ask the pruner how many inches below the surface he should skiff a bush. "At the right level," replies the pruner readily. "The manual says, two inches below the surface."[20] "We don't carry books and measuring sticks." And any planter knows (having learned from the experienced laborer) that the manual's accuracy is more a sign of agronomic obsessiveness than scientific accuracy. "Some bushes need to be cut two inches below the surface, some three inches, some even four." "What about `cut-across' pruning?" I ask. "At knee level", comes back the reply.

Three Communicative Events in Their Ethnographic Settings

Pruning (*kavvattu vettal*)

If left unpruned, the tea bush will not be a bush but a tree, producing flowers and seeds instead of a flush of pluckable buds. Pruning stimulates growth yet keeps it in a permanent vegetative state. Finally, pruning maintains the bush at a height that lends itself to efficient and productive picking.

One prunes with a quick, precise, and powerful stroke of arm, and wrist using the knife called a *kavvattu katti*. Because this skill requires considerable muscle strength, only adult males prune. A weak stroke results in splitting the stem; too ungainly or too free a stroke could damage stems that are not meant to be cut by that stroke; an imprecise hack could result in a poorly angled cut.

There are three types of pruning: skiffing, cut-across pruning, and clean pruning. In skiffing, according to the manual, the bushes are trimmed two inches from the top with a *kavvattu katti*. As in all types of pruning, the bush is pruned along the gradient of the hill upon which it grows, and yet, each branch that is pruned is cut at an angle (*Sacci vettu*) so that the cut edge faces the center of the bush.

Cutting across is the second kind of pruning and is called *mel vettu* in Tamil meaning an upper cut. The bush is pruned with a kavvattuk katti, at a height of about fifteen inches above the ground, approximately across the middle of the bush. The Tamil laborer describes it as knee level, obviously making ingenious adjustments to varying heights of knee joints, and variously dispositioned tea bushes. The tea planter's manual, on the other hand, specifies with agronomic precision that this middle cut should be made fifteen inches above the ground. Knee level is admittedly approximate, but its approximation tends to be consistently in the best interest of the healthy growth of each tea bush. As in skiffing, the angle of the cut slants inward, towards the center of the bush. Following such a pruning, the bush may not be picked for at least ninety days.

The third and the most difficult kind of pruning, hard pruning or clean pruning, is called *adi vettu* in Tamil. Here, the manual specifies that the bush is pruned either with a kavvattu katti or a hand saw (*Val*), eight inches above the ground, which the laborer measures as one and a half width of the hand (*onnarai Jan*). The hard pruning cut is described in the manual as not angled but horizontal. In Tamil this cut is simply called *pottu vettu*, because the exposed surface of the cut stem resembles a pottu, the auspicious circular mark that Tamil women and sometimes men wear on their foreheads. And any Tamil knows that if a stem is cut at an angle, the pottu will be ablong and not circular as it ought to be.

Communicative Event I: The Story of The Perumal Cut

Most of the tea estates of Sri Lanka are located at elevations ranging from 3000 to 7000 feet. The higher reaches of the estate that Poocchi kankani has worked all his life rises above 7000 feet. In these higher elevations in particular, the mornings have dense fog and are cold.

New superintendents, especially the *chinna dorais* (assistant superintendents-until recently, mostly Britons-) are not sensitive to the time of the day and the tempers of the workers. They learn from whoever taught them, that the only way to get work out of our people is to shout at them, treat them like dogs, pelt them with obscenities.

> Many years ago there was such a chinna dorai. And in those days there was a young lad named Perumal. It was past one o'clock in the afternoon, and Perumal was doing a cut-across prune. The chinna dorai came tearing through the bushes in his khaki shorts, hat and boots. They can run that way because of their boots. It is not good for the bushes to run through them like that. But the chinna dorais don't care. It shows their power. Their authority. They think it scares us when they come rushing down like that. "Give me that knife you son of a harlot,' this chinna dorai said. "Let me show you how to prune a tea bush." Perumal handed the dorai the knife without saying a word. He watched the dorai swing at the bush, shouting "Like this, like this. Fifteen inches above the ground. Fifteen inches above the ground.' It was clear that the chinna dorai didn't know pruning from shaving of pubic hair. The stems were splitting down the middle, and instead of the slanted cut he was performing the (horizontal) pottu vettu. Perumal felt his blood boil and rise to his head. In his stomach was hunger. He held out his left hand, in a gesture of asking for his knife back, saying, "here dorai, please, not like that, not like that. Please, let me show you fifteen inches." The dorai returned the knife to him with contempt, blade-side first, noticing neither the anger in Perumal's eyes, the dangerous sarcasm in his voice, nor that he had asked for the knife with his *left* hand. Like a flash of lightning, Perumal returned the knife's handle to the grip of the other hand, his right hand, and swung at the Englishman with the word, *"ippadi!"* ("like this!") The next thing you saw was the Englishmen's arm, severed from below his elbow, writhe in the drain, spouting blood. It was exactly fifteen inches long.

Ever since, this infamous swipe has been known as the Perumal cut. Estate life is filled with such recallings and retellings, reminding one of Foucault's distinction between enlightenment historiographies and effective histories. The former are typified by their pretensions to examining things furthest from themselves, whereas 'effective history," as in the Perumal story, "shortens it's vision to those things nearest to it especially the body."[21]

"The body, "Foucault remarks, "is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas)... a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history."[22] In Perumal's cut, the implicated body is that of a white man. As metaphor, it has become the body of a condemned man. But the effect is not only that Perumal, as judge and executioner, left his mark on the Englishman's body and shortened its power, but also that this body has become public property, available for useful appropriation by the collective memory of a subordinated people against future oppression.

Communicative Event II: Betrayal

Of the many jatis represented on estates, the *Kallar* and the *Parayans* are the most numerous and, for this reason, have traditionally competed for leadership. In the 1950s, the Kallar began to dominate the trade unions and their dominance culminated in the nomination of their leader, Thondaman, as Minister of Housing and Rural Development in 1977 by Sri Lanka's President, J.R. Jayewardene. The unchallenged rise of Kallar leadership began in the 1950s when the Parayans lost one of their most charismatic leaders, P. Vellayan.

In the riots of 1983, when scores of estate Tamils were killed by Sinhala mobs, many workers saw S. Thondaman, by his very position as minister in a Sinhala government, as having betrayed the Tamils. Some remembered Vellayan, who was a victim of violence, much like the many Tamils who were killed in 1983. The following was a song of a Valluvan (a Parayan priest) which I obtained from an estate in the Hatton district:

Even as throated pedigree grows
Unpruned with the mother stem,
Tell me,
Chanter of Buddhist prayers!
Burst forth will it not in gay profusion
A crown of buds around the pottu of my Lord,
Vellayan,
That uncrowned bush,
Hewn at the base
By a villains knife?

(author's translation)

In Tamil, the poem ends with the words, `tell me gachami'; or rather, `tell me you Buddhists who chant -*Buddham saranamgachami*;' or even more expandedly, `you who claim to follow a non-violent religion, tell me'. The word *thondaiyan* in the second line literally means the throated one (from *thondai,* meaning throat). But to any estate worker, it also sounds like part of the minister's name, Thondaman, even though thondai in the minister's name has nothing to do with throat but means'a great length of time'. Thus Thondaman means 'chieftains from time immemorial', or 'Lord of a long line of chieftains', or 'Lord of pedigree'. The skill of the poet here is to merge the literal sense of the 'throated one' with the ministers name which it evokes through homophony. But no sooner is the name of Thondaman brought into consciousness than he, the 'Lord of pedigree', is brought into the foreground and the throated one recedes to lurk in the shadows. But from there it does its semiotic work. It splits the ministers name into two unintended morphemes: thondai, meaning throat, and *man*, which means deer. Once linked to deer, tontai is no longer merely throat but becomes neck. To secure this meaning, the poet yokes it with 'the mother stem'. To render the first two lines (the third line in the Tamil original) more literally: 'Let the throated one and the mother stem grow together or grow alike'. The mother stem is an unpruned (uncultured) stem whose posture is like that of a proud deer. But an unpruned stem is useless. One cannot pick from it the useful *koruntu*. It has been detected and will be soon cut down. Sound and sense have combined to cast a clearly outlined shadow: a deer, sometimes a pet of the rich, self-absorbed in its pedigree and beauty, with extended neck and veins pulsing, unaware of the rapid shifts in the tones of history. The poet goes on to note that the cutting down of Vellayan did not destroy him, even though the villain who wielded the knife might have expected just that. Instead, what we have is a crown of new leaves sprouting from the rim where once a well-crowned bush was supported. He who was cut down then (perhaps prematurely) is beginning to re-emerge now, and he who has continued to grow proudly long after he should have been pruned is nearing his end, like a deer that has stood still for too long a time, extending its neck, tempting the knife to do its job.

Tea Picking (*Koruntu etuttal*)

Picking green tea leaves constitutes the central and most conspicuous activity in a tea estate. Pluckers pick koruntu, the two tender green leaves at the very tip of a branch and the slightly curled leaf-bud growing between them. This is done with a single nip of the tender stem at the base of the third leaf, held between the thumbnail and forefinger, and a simultaneous slight twist of the wrist.

A bush may be over- or under-picked. A bush may be over-picked in four ways. In the first two forms of over-picking, the bush may not be harmed, but if caught, the pickers will be heavily penalized. The first entails the picking of the third leaf (*kattai ilai*), growing at the base of the koruntu, along with or in addition to the koruntu. The second entails the picking of mature leaves (*karattai ilai*). A *karattai* ilai is not merely mature but also coarse. If, during inspection, the supervisor finds either a kattai ilai or a karattai ilai in a womens basket, he is likely to penalize her by deducting from her total poundage far more than she might have gained from having picked the mature leaves. The picking of a karattai ilai is seen as a far more serious violation than the picking of a kattai ilai. The third and fourth forms of over-picking adversely affect the healthy growth of the bush. In the third, the picker picks the koruntu off the side or peripheral branches (*pakka vathu*). The fourth way of over-picking a bush is to pick the *arumpu,* or an unopened bud. When an arumpu is picked, the stem that bore it, being too tender to support the sprouting of a new bud, withers, turns brown, and rolls back on itself. A new bud can sprout from this stem only after the withered stem is nipped with a knife.

The tea bush, upon which so much of a woman's activity is concentrated, has also become the source of a profusion of metaphors for children, most often that of female children. The similarity between a child forced to work in the field at a very young age and subjected to excessive discipline and deprived of the privileges of childhood freedom, and a bush whose peripheral branches are picked, is obvious to a Tamil tea worker. Such discipline and deprivation are seen as misdirected, the actions of selfish, greedy, or short-sighted parents. To paraphrase one of my informants: the nourishing soil of healthy mystery is exposed to the scorching rays of premature knowledge, which in turn encourage the growth of the weeds of bad thoughts and habits capable of retarding, choking, and even killing the growth of a child and a family with a good name.

The experience of dislocation and displacement suffered by Tamil workers, especially the young, in the wake of land reforms in 1974 and the series of communal violence since then, has been described as 'the picking of koruntu from the peripheral branches'. In this instance the over-picking is attributed not to the parents but to circumstances of fate. Those who never left the estates see the young raised in urban areas returning to the estates for brief visits as hardened and corrupt and characteristically displaying a thorough disregard for the old ways of deference and respect to elders and authority.

Communicative Event III: Rage and Hope

A young girl who had left the estate in 1974 when she was twenty to work as a domestic servant in Colombo returned to the estate of her birth. She was welcomed back by her maternal uncles wife with the words, 'you left us as a koruntu and you come back as a kattai ilai'.

Strung by this unkind remark, the girl's mother embarked upon a bitter tirade against the people and life on the tea estates and proceeded to proclaim to all her plans for leaving the island for her husband's ancestral village in South India. In the following excerpt from her speech, I have attempted to provide a translation of one of the most eloquent orations of rage I have ever heard in any language. Apart from revealing the manner in which she summons agricultural and agronomical images to make her point, I have attempted to highlight, for the reader who does not know Tamil, her use of alliteration by providing, wherever possible, italicized Tamil equivalents within brackets.

> !Damn the third leaf [*katai ilayAvathu*] and damn the stemless [*kAmpAvathu*]. Why dont you who are losing your luster [*mankal* also means dimming wit] such [*Umpu*-obscene-] on the *vanki stem* [sterile and useless protrusion]. This sucking [*Umpal*] and this hell [*Ural*] suits this land just fine. None of this can be pulled off in our [plural possessive exclusive] country [Village India]]. What business does a widow [*kompanAtti*] have with a young virgin [*kumari*] and a tender sprout [*koruntu*]. Cursed saturnine coarse leaf [*karattai ilai*]! Perish here. Go on, eat in silence [also in secret] kilo loads of squeezed rice from the sinhala man's [*cinkalavan*] hand. In the foreign land [*sImai*] where we [*nAnka*, first person exclusive plural] are bound for, there are none of these tea sprouts [looks at daughter while she says this] and kilos [*koruntA vatu kilovavatu*]. [There], ears of rice [*katir* also means rays of sun] and grain [*payir*] will pour [be measured out] in *palam*-loads [an Indian unit of measure]. You who weed five acres to earn five rupees in wages [*kuli*] how big you talk! In my grandfathers field of five *kottais*, for the barber who helps harvest the field for one day they pay him ten *padis*, ...[As for you], you will climb the mountain [*malia*] and look for the level [*mattam* also implies, !lying down like the leveling stick], I shall be on the level [*mattam*] and look at the mountain [*malai*]. Once I board that ship [*kappal*] I shall not even lift my eyes [*kan*] to look back at these rowdy asses [*kAvAli karutaikal*] or this evil eye of a jungle [*kantishti kAdu*].

Apart from being impressed by this woman's remarkable ear for reverberating sounds and rhythms, phonemic metonymy, the analysis of which I must defer for another occasion, I was also struck by the number of agricultural and agronomical images she drew upon. At one level her verbal outrage is directed at her adversary. But at another level it is directed at Sri Lanka in general, and the agronomic culture of tea in particular. I wish to turn my attention mainly to the latter.

The woman (I shall call her Selvi), like thousands of other Tamils of recent Indian origin, was actively planning her departure to India. When the Citizenship Act was first passed in 1948, almost none of the estate Tamils wished to return to India. India was, for most of them, as alien as Italy is to most Italian Americans. They knew India as their ancestral home, but they also knew it to be a land of great hardship, harsh climate, and chronic poverty. From the few who had been to village India they learned that even though their lot on the estates was a difficult one, it was luxury compared to life in an Indian village.

By the time the Sirima-Shastri[23] pact had been signed, the Tamils of Sri Lanka had already been victims of three anti-Tamil riots; and the Sri Lankan government's own attempts to repatriate a section of these Tamils had taken an earnest turn. And yet, year after year, the quota of repatriations was not met. Some who had emigrated to the districts of Ramnadhapuram and Tirunelveli in the late sixties and early seventies re-immigrated to Sri Lanka to escape the severe drought that was consuming Southern India during those years. Many of these 'illict immigrants' were caught while attempting to land on the northern shores of the island and were blackmailed into working for indigenous Tamil landowners as indentured agricultural laborers.

After the events of July 1983, the overwhelming majority of estate Tamils, including many who had opted for Sri Lankan citizenship under the Sirima-Shastri Pact and had thereby given up all claims to Indian citizenship, were attempting to leave for India. For the first time that anyone could remember, India was on the receiving end of illict immigrants.

If we look at Selvi's harangue against this background, we see how she systematically invokes Sri Lankan tea estates agronomic images in order to present, through them, an entirely tenebrous picture of Sri Lanka, a picture which the greater part of the estate Tamil community has come to share.

Selvi finds everything about the tea bush damnable. A bush that these Tamils had treated as a deity had now become a vehicle by means of which she could express obscenities. The piece of protruding stem is no longer a test of her care and attention for the tea bush, a blemish that beckons her to trim it away with her knife. Instead, it has become a withered penis that only her worst and contemptworthy enemy would suck (Umpal) on. Then again, by the metonymic juxtaposition of Ural(hell) with umpal, hell becomes not merely a place of suffering - which indeed Sri Lanka had become - but also one of obscene iniquity. She opens her tirade with the disparaging metaphor -third leaf that her sister-in-law had used on her daughter. She then follows it with a series of undesirables such as kampu

(picked pieces of stem) and vanki koruntu (unpicked, but protruding pieces of stem). All three are, agronomically speaking, of the same order of undesirables. But with the last in that series, she has yoked it with connotations of obscene morality on the part of her adversary. In a quick, cutting sentence Selvi reminds her that a widow like her could not possibly know anything about a kumari (young virgin, like her daughter) or its metaphor, koruntu, and in so doing indirectly restores her daughter to the status of a koruntu. Having done this, she reduces her sister-in-law to *the most* undesirable find in a tea pickers basket of tea leaves, a karattai ilai (a coarse, old leaf). Then she moves on to terminology of measures.

Selvi identifies her sister-in-law's state of being condemned to remain in a hell of an island as being condemned to eat kilo loads of cooked rice, or more exactly, leavings, fromthe Sinhala man's hand. The word kilo comes to bear connotations of servility, bondage, even immoral concubinage. Before she contrasts this with a positively valued unit of measure found in village India, she interjects a transitional sentence in which she identifies koruntu, that most precious product of the tea estate, with the contemptible kilo. The fact that she looks (not very happy) at her daughter when she says koruntu, and the fact that she follows it up with the next sentence, in which she speaks of bountiful katir in India, she is indicating that India, unlike Sri Lanka, will give her not daughters (even if they were koruntu), but sons. (Her sons name is Kadiresan).

Selvi refers to India as simai. Simai has undergone a double-inversion. It is a Tamil word and was originally used to mean something like homeland, or place of birth to which one periodically returns. This usage is still prevalent in South India. Once domiciled in Sri Lankas estate country, this word came to apply meaningfully and conspicuously only to the British superintendents who were, after all, the only ones who could afford to and did return to their homeland, to spend their furlough there. Despite inconspicuous exceptions, the tea estate laborers were [largely] confined - first economically and, subsequently, emotionally - to the estates. Thus, simai came to mean England. Now, in Selvis vocabulary, the word had taken another turn, spiraling up to a new point in its evolution. She calls India simai, identifying India with England's presumed prosperity. In that land, rice and grain will be measured not in kilos but in palams. Quite clearly, a palam, as far as Selvi is concerned, is a unit of measure found in India and therefore it must be a generous one. By contrasting this measure with the kilo of the preceding sentence, she clearly wishes to set this presumed contrast in clear relief. In fact, a palam as a unit of measure is a mere idea, a trace of tradition, and one that has no practical usage among the Tamils of Sri Lanka. Furthermore, it is, ironically, quite small. More agronomical and agricultural terminology follows. This miserly wages her sister-in-law earns are described as kuli, which also refers to a person of servile status (hence, the word coolie, now naturalized into English). Furthermore, she earns these wages by doing one of the lowliest of jobs on the estate, weeding. Even the barber in India who works on her grandfather's fields works in kottais which is not strictly a measure of area but yield of grain. (*8 padi = 1 marakkAl; 12 marakkAl = lalam; 718 kalam = 1 koOtai).* It also means fortress. And the barber is not paid humiliating kuli but in padis of grain, the traditional payment in village India that signifies a traditional bond between the landlord and field hand.

Then comes the comparison of terrain: the flat desirable plains of village India against the arduous mountains of Sri Lanka's tea estates. In India, the mountain is only something to look at and enjoy (or perhaps gloat over if one does not have to work on it). In Sri Lanka, one labors on the mountains and looks down enviously upon the plains. The sentence also implies having to prostrate ones self flat on ones back or belly, like a leveling stick, in the most abject servility, if and when management calls upon one to do so. And the final contrast is between India, the *Ur* (home, the civilized village to which one belongs[24] and Sri Lanka, the *kAdu*, or jungle, which is inhabited by wild animals and is an immense evil eye.

To say that words change their meaning is to utter a cliche. These transformations are not passive records of history but active embodiments of the genealogy of power-relations. The evolution of these terms (even if only by chance, as Foucault would have us see matters) illustrates their embodiment in semeiotic practice in space and time as they came to be articulated as a "metonymical concatenation of deviation from the norm [while concurrently engaging in] a progressive creation of metaphors". [25]

Word has come back that India is not the utopia it was imagined to be. Some have described it as a worse hell than Sri Lanka. Repatriots, the quaint term for those who return and are returned, are swindled and cheated all the way from their first landing off the boat up until they reach their remembered villages. Many repatriots are destitute. Some have become beggars in the streets of Madurai, Madras and other cities and towns in South India; some women have turned to prostitution. The minister and labor union leader, Thondaman, who was sung of as a villain by the poet in 1983, has survived radical changes in the governing party, played his cards deftly, won pay increases and citizenship for his people, and has thereby regained considerable support from them. The view of him as a traitor is retained only by a recalcitrant minority. But the poet thinks something has changed.

The old days are gone. They say the tea bush lives only a
hundred and twenty years. 1867 to 1967. Its over. We
may stay, we may leave. But we wont be tea estate
workers for much longer. There is a factory (pointing at the tea factory). Here is the fire (pointing at his chest).
Bring the two together. Finished!

Conclusion

The history of South Indian Tamil workers who migrated to Ceylon (later Sri Lanka) is one of confinement and limitations upon choices. In recent years, under the forces of anti-Tamil ethnic violence, estate Tamils have been moved to make choices, and in the mid-1980s, many of them are choosing to recover, in reality and in their imaginations, what they had lost in their ancestral village-India. An agronomy that had relentlessly imposed limitations upon the variability of the neutral environment had also, through its colonial agents, attempted to impose limitations on the variability of the cultural environment - sometimes by force, but more often by consent, subtle and complex - by making available a

vocabulary the marked the boundaries of permissible discourse. What may have at first appeared as mere terms, convenient, universal and neutral in value, turned out to be the very signs that contained and carried forth the hegemony of agronomy and its capitalist concomitants through time as signs of history. These terms had become metaphor, metonym and synecdoche, in Hayden Whites sense, of these workers very existence[26]

Consent, so central to Gramsci's understanding of hegemony, is not a simple mental state. Rather, it entails a contradictory consciousness in the subaltern, "mixing approbation and apathy, resistance and resignation". [27] Counter-hegemonic forces find their impulsion in a variety of semiotic pools. In the case of these estate workers, a recovered past of an agricultural world of approximations provides one such pool.

It is commonplace to note that a past thus recovered is inextricably linked to the present. But such a past cannot and must not be understood in purely temporal terms. Rather, what I wish to mean by past and present is more akin to Walter Benjamin's painting of the past and the now in the image.

> It isn't that the past casts its light on the present or the present casts its light on the past: rather, an image is that in which the past and the now flash into a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of the Then to the Now is a dialectical " isnt development but image [,] capable of leaping out (*sprunghaft*). Only dialectical images are genuine (i.e. not archaic images); and the place one encounters them is language.[28]

To call these recoveries signs is also to ask what manner of signs they are, their mode and mood of signification. For this let us briefly turn to the American semeiotician and founder of pragmatism, C.S. Peirce. Peirce described several trichotomous, hierarchically ordered types of signs. The effects of a sign Peirce called interpretants. Alternatively phrased, interpretant refers to the means by which the interpretation of a sign which stands for an object is effected. In one of the trichotomies Peirce mentions the production of three hierarchically nested effects: gratification, action and self-control. He also called these, respectively, the emotional interpretant, the energetic interpretant, the logical interpretant. As in all genuine hierarchies, each subsequent kind of interpretant subsumes the former, but not vicse versa. Thus, logical interpretants contain impulses of (physical or mental) effort and emotions; energetic interpretants, non-conceptual effort and emotions; and emotional interpretants, only a welling of feelings before action or thought take form.[29]

Had Antonio Gramsci had access to Peirces arcane vocabulary and chosen to use it, he might well have characterized hegemony as actions constituted by logical interpretants, the kinds that contain - in both senses of the term - energetic and emotional interpretance. When Peirce wrote of logical interpretance, he had in mind a world constituted by the repose of habit. Of course, Peirce, the ever - sanguine utopian, attributed to humans the habit of "taking and laying aside habits ",[30] the "self-analyzing habit" ,[35] or the habit of self-control.[32] In the world of logical interpretants, reason is expected to exert its gentle force of reasonableness. There are of course lower order habits, wherein matter is not something apart from mind but is merely "mind whose habits have become fixed so as to lose the power of forming them and losing them" .[33] Here we have self-control without agency, as it were. In a hegemonic regime a la Gramsci, this lower order of habits constitute the logical interpretants of the socio-cultural domain or a significant part thereof.

In the communicative events we have considered, we see a deconstruction of the hierarchic encompassment of persuasive reason. In a hegemonic universe, not only do logical interpretants form an intricately linked script that spreads its mantle over underlying layers of emotional and energetic interpretants, concealing and calming them, but, moreover, logical interpretants are also inscribed in the other interpretants in minuscule, though inconspicuously. The conch that sounds for muster sounds for prayer too. In the communicative events we have considered, logical interpretants are dismantled so as to expose and make viable underlying emotional and energetic interpretants. Words and acts linked together in imperceptible minuscules are disarticulated, thrown asunder, scattered about, and transformed into conspicuously quaint - if not monstrous - majuscules.

In language, metaphors and poetry are privileged repositories of emotional interpretants. Peirce also names gratification and recognition as principal attributes of emotional interpretants. Gratification, though, must be seen not only as the fulfillment of desire but also, perhaps more important, as the acute realization of its nonfulfillment, as the realization of what deprivation really is. In recent years thanks to the dismantling of the hegemony of logical interpretants, the Tamils of Sri Lankas estates have a awakened in the grip of such a realization. Recognition is, in Peirce's scheme, an iconic function, literally, of cognizing again. As already indicated, an icon is a sign that resembles that for which it stands. The recovery of resemblances, the, is at the heart of recognition. But re-recognizing is not only cognizing something what was but what might be as well. Such recognitions invoke a past as much as they chart out a future, a future that could subvert and avoid familiar hegemonies. Whether the past in question is real or imagined is only of philosophical interest. Suffice it to note that objects of iconic signs may be real existents or only imaginary entities. Wherein does the power of emotional interpretants lie? Wherein the power to transform?

The word emotion brings to mind a welling of feeling, and overflowing of effect. This is certainly true of the communicative events we have considered. Emotional interpretants find their sources in recognitions as well as re-remembrances, both of which are iconic functions. But the iconic bases of these emotional interpretants provide another insight into the source of their power. As Peirce observed, icon signs are also diagrammatic. Mathematical equations are among the most powerful icons. In their very leanness they reveal connections in the object they represent that, without these icons, would have lain concealed in the amplitude of the object. Likewise, the most effective metaphors are lean and can be mean. Metaphors wrench words from their context. But if they destroy, they reveal. Coarse leaf!

Mimicry is another iconic function. Let me illustrate this with an example from tea estate life. Late one morning, I was taken to the field by a Sinhala tea estate manager. He wished to show me how a Sinhala worker was digging a drain. He had been 'dompiling' all morning. 'He is the govment', clipped the manager in his quasi-British accent, with overdone diphthongs, glottal stop and all. ' Aw the govment does is dompile'. Modes of behavior that are motivated by short-term goals or hedonism are often analogized to digging a drain and throwing the soil down the slope of a hill. Initially, it appears to be so easy and only natural to shovel something downhill. But eventually one brings about either destruction or creates for ones self a staggering amount of work. This action is called down piling.

In recent years, 'down piling', has come to serve as a general description of the work habits of recently hired Sinhala laborers, and a metaphor of the Sri Lankan government's policies toward Tamils of recent Indian origin. Obviously 'dompiling' , to this Sinhalese gentleman planter, was not mere technological terminology, or a description of a state of affairs, but an index. The accent indicated that the speaker belonged to that proud lineage of planters whose ancestral members were British and whose pedigree he wished to be identified with by virtue of his dialect. Down piling as enunciated by our mimic man,[34] our anglicized but not-quite-English gentle-man-planter, is a vestige and metonym of colonial discourse. To be sure, not all Sinhala managers resort to British-English, nor are the Sinhalese managers the only ones to do so. Of the proportionately fewer Tamil and Burgher managers as well there are those who fondly assume such an affectation. Accompanying the assumed dialect is a British style of life: bungalows, men-servants who are addressed as 'boys' , scotch, a desire for 'English-vegetables' , khaki shorts, white stockings, safari hat, and rugger. In an earlier day, mimicry had been an ambivalent fetish of the mimic man, who was at once both empowered and disempowered by the condescending validation of the white man, who thought he had the last word and could say, 'almost as good as an Englishman, but not quite'; or could remark on 'the slippage, the excess, the difference'. [35] However, I have yet to know of a white colonialist or a student of colonialism to have remarked, let alone observe, that the subalterns too see these same slippages, excesses and difference, even though they read them differently. In their view from below, the subalterns have found some comfort and frivolity in seeing mimic man as one of their kind, who regardless of what he might have intended, had also ended up reducing the white man's airs to laughable size. If they found him to be the reassuringly ambivalent repository of mimicry; they also found him to be the embodiment of mockery. Even when menacing, his bark had failed to convey the conviction of a beast. Mimicry of this kind was all too human. In short, mimicry can turn into mockery; mockery to the undermining of hegemonic conceit. Dompiling. Metaphors and mimicry employ the iconic function only to index, to point, to throw into clear relief.

The laying bare of energetic interpretants is likewise the result of dismantling of the hegemonic dominance of logical interpretants, the world of habit. Uncontained by logical interpretants and driven by emotional interpretants they contain, energetic interpretants lead to spontaneous action. Ungoverned by the courtesies of rule-governed behavior, energetic interpretants explored. Their meanings are precipitated, not before, not after, but in the act, the Perumal cut.

I have not presented these communicative events merely for linguistic show and tell or to display the poetic genius of a people. I have presented them as instances of indigenous interpretations, the writing of effective history. I have attempted to capture such interpretations, such writing, in the act. Bearing this in mind, I would like to end where I began, quoting Foucault:

> *If interpretation is the violent or surreptitious appropriation of a system of rules_ in order to impose direction, to bend it to a new will, to force its participation in a different game, and to subject it to secondary rules, then the development of humanity is a series of interpretations. The role of genealogy is to record its [effective] history; [the history of the event]. [By event is meant], the reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, [and] the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it.*[36]

FOOTNOTES

1. Foucault 1984: 88
2. Anthropological fieldwork on which material for this paper has been drawn was carried out in 1971, 1974, 1976, 1983-84, 1987. The most extensive research of 1983-84 was funded by a grant from the Social Science Research Council which is gratefully acknowledged.
3. Carol Eastman (personal communication) directed my attention to the cultural versus nomic distinction in agriculture and agronomy; the former indicating practice-generated behavior and the latter, rule-governed behavior. By extension one may note the nominalist epistemology of agronomy and the realist epistemology of agriculture. The former imposes a name (order) on the world, the latter indicates names as real emergents from the world.
4. Even if primogeniture is not strictly observed in South India, in times of material scarcity, it is known to assert itself.
5. For reasons of simplicity, I have applied to Tamil words the common English from pluralizing, i.e., the addition of an 's' to the end of a word, however, choosing not to italicize the letter.
6. In many estates, a line room consists of an open front porch, a middle-room and a kitchen, the total unit measuring 10 _ 10. One can find as many as 25 such rooms in a single row.
7. Foucault 1979: 150
8. *Ibid.* What may appear as a liberal use of Foucault in this paper is in fact a cautious one. I have been cognizant of the inappropriateness of imposing European problematics into Asian ones. However, the appropriateness of extending Foucault's study of the birth of the disciplinary regime in Europe to facilitate the understanding of the social formations of the 19th century plantations in Europes colonies cannot be minimized.
9. Since the late 1960s the shift has been gradually made to the metric system of weights and measures. Even though the conversion was to have been officially completed by 1970, the adoption of the metric system is uneven in the manufacture of tea. In the manuals and account books (especially as they near the point of export), the metric system has fully replaced the older English system of weights and measures. In the field, however, the English system still persists.
10. Foucault 1979: 188
11. *Ibid.*

12. For an interesting glimpse into this world see the *Annual Reports of the Tea Research Institute*, St. Coombs, Sri Lanka, and also the Tea Research Institutes One Day Course in Tea Production, St. Coombs, Ceylon, 1963.
13. The name given to the huge ledgers in which are recorded the names and productivity (among other matters) of individual workers.
14. To borrow a phrase from Max Weber (Weber 1948: 284-85), who borrowed it from Goethe (1809) who in turn got it from the Swedish chemist Torben Bergman (1705).
15. Both Sinhalese and Tamils have forgotten the Arabic origin of the word; most Sinhalese believing that *hunduva* came from the Tamil *cundu*, and the Tamils believing that it came from Sinhala *hunduva*, but both treating it as a thoroughly domesticated 'folk' measure.
16. The idea of 'a little extra' is not conveyed in a single expression but in a variety of verbal and gestural forms. One of the commoner forms such an expression takes is to be found in the utterance (with appropriate hand gesture, facial expression and head movement), '*cumma konjam pattu potunka*' (literally: just or simply/ a little/look or take note of/ and give.)
17. For more detailed analysis of the symbolic import of the odd numbered gist, see my *Fluid Signs*, p. 131-35.
18 . Material on which this paragraph is based was gathered in the field during my 1973-74 field research in Tamil Nadu.
19. For a more enhanced understanding of the intricate play of signs in the context of food and feasts in a South Indian community that is unrivalled in its celebration of gastro-politics. See Arjun Appadurai (1981: 494-511)
20. For example, see *Johnsons Note Book for Tea Planters*, (1962)
21. Foucault 1984: 89
22. *Ibid.* 83
23. This refers to the pact reached in October 1984, between the then-prime ministers of Sri Lanka and India. According to this pact, of the estimated 975,000 persons of recent Indian origin in Sri Lanka who were stateless, 525,000 (together with the natural increase in their number) were to be granted Indian citizenship and repatriated to India over fifteen years; 300,000 (together with the natural increase in their number) were to be granted Sri Lankan citzenship over the same period of time; the status and future of the remaining 150,000 (and the natural increase in their number) were to be decided on in a separate, future agreememt between the two governments.
24. Daniel 1984: Ch. 2
25. Kristeva 1980: 40
26. 1973 31-33
27. Jackson Lears 1985: 568; Also see Gramsci 1971: 326-327, 33.
28. Bengamin 1983-84: 1-40
29. See C.S.Peirce 1958: 5.474-476.
30. 6.101
31. 5.491
32. MS 6127. Refers to Peirces unpublished manuscripts, identified in terms of the numbers used by The Houghton Library at Harvard.
33. 6.101
34. See Homi Bhabhas essay (1983: pp. 27-42) in which mimicry is somewhat differently inflected but which nonetheless considerably influences my own thoughts on the subject.
35. Bhabha: 1984: 126
36. Foucault 1984: 88

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