



***COOKING THE WAY TO MY HERITAGE***

**Dr Arththi Sathananthar**

During this past year of lockdowns and self-isolation, the kitchen has become a focal space in many of our homes. While some have been baking up a storm or beginning their sourdough journeys (both of which I am guilty of), I have also been using food to reacquaint myself with my roots. This journey began when my partner gifted me Prakash K Sivanathan's & Niranjala M Ellawala's *Sri Lanka: The Cookbook* (2017).

The husband and wife co-authors are Sri Lankan Tamil and Sinhala, respectively. With over 100 recipes consisting of mains and desserts, the cookbook is a visual delight packed with stunning images of not only food but Sri Lanka's people and landscape. The cookbook includes a detailed glossary of spices and herbs. I was pleasantly surprised by the wealth of vegan and vegetarian recipes which are reflective of a diet rich in grains, legumes, coconut and root vegetables. The authors are chefs by trade, but their recipes are reflective of hearty home cooking. Being a Malaysian Sri Lankan Tamil myself, I can attest to the authenticity of the Tamil recipes in *Sri Lanka: The Cookbook*; some are staples found in my mum's and aunties' kitchens back home.

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The authors pay homage to their homeland through culinary expression. The cookbook includes heartfelt introductions that convey the importance of documenting oral food histories in order to preserve their distinct gustatory cultures. This cookbook got me thinking about my transnational and transcultural roots as a third generation diasporic Sri Lankan Tamil during this last year of the pandemic.

Certain foods are associated with nostalgic recollections, but what about the food tied to your ancestral heritage that is riddled with socio-political turmoil? Those who are not well acquainted with Sri Lanka's history might only conjure up images of its idyllic beaches and lush tea plantations. However, the country has a sombre history of civil conflict. The Sri Lankan civil war 'officially' ran its course throughout 1983 to 2009. The turmoil that began in the middle of the twentieth century has resulted in the mass refugee crisis of Sri Lankan Tamils in the twentieth century.

### **My Return**



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In 2014, I made my inaugural homecoming to Jaffna in the north of Sri Lanka. I visited the villages and locations of the former houses of both my maternal and paternal grandfathers. Sri Lanka was just recovering from its decades-long civil war and this was evident in the ramshackle sites of the houses my grandparents left behind. A hill of rubble stood on my paternal grandfather's plot of land that had been left desolate for decades as a civil war raged through the state.

My grandparents left the country at the dawn of the twentieth century as subjects of the British Empire, an empire which sought to colonize and monopolize the national resources in South East Asia. My grandparents left Ceylon for Malaya; the pre-independence names for Sri Lanka and Malaysia. Over a century later, I was returning to post-independence Sri Lanka from Malaysia. These places have emerged out of colonial rule and formed into new nation states, but what remained constant was my family's ancestral link to both countries. My own crossing to my grandparents' village was tainted by the contemporary reality of the Sri Lankan military policing the borders, and by the demarcation of the North and South of the island through checkpoints.

Although my family and I visited many places throughout the island and tasted numerous delicacies in Colombo, Kandy, Nuwara Eliya and Galle, what remains embedded in my memory are the home cooked dishes that we ate in the humble homes of my distant relatives. From the *odiyal kool* (a seafood stew) in Karainagar to the vegetarian medley in Vavuniya, our long lost relatives welcomed us through their food. I was struck by the stark socio-economic differences between these families and myself; to think that, if my great-grandparents and grandparents had not emigrated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, I could have been living under civil war and military occupation in the North.

This experience of return shaped my understanding of my own diasporic subjectivity and privilege as a by-product of the sacrifices made by my grandparents to leave their country of origin and build a future for their descendants. My contemplation of my own ancestral history ignited in me a flame to research similar histories of diasporic narratives of departure and return set in a context of conflict zones, which formed the subject area of my PhD thesis.

## Dispossession, Uprootings, Erasure



As with any other ex-colony, Sri Lanka's ethnic tensions trace back to the [legacies of Western imperialism and empire; the tried and tested divide and conquer model](#). The longstanding ethno-religious frictions between the Sinhalese and Tamils would explode into a disastrous tug of war between the insurgent Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), more widely known in the media as the terrorist Tamil Tigers, and the Sri Lankan Sinhala army which erupted in July 1983, known as 'Black July'. The Tamil Tigers sought to declare independence in the Tamil concentrated areas of the North and East due to decades long discrimination, marginalization and persecution of Tamils under the Sinhala majority government which only intensified especially since the country's independence from the British in 1948.

Although my immediate family and grandparents had left Ceylon two generations earlier, our extended relatives who remained were unhomed as the war raged on, ultimately

becoming victims of the state as they were uprooted and arrived as refugees in the 1980s across the UK, Germany, Switzerland, Canada and Australia.

While such tensions and narratives of ethnic cleansing are not unique to Sri Lanka (see the Palestinian, Kurdish, Hazara and Rohingya genocides in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan and Myanmar respectively), the government's lack of accountability remains the underlying issue. This includes [the government's persistent refusal to comply with international pressure from the UN to investigate its violation of human rights abuses and war crimes against civilians which include abductions, massacres and sexual violence.](#) There is no official death toll (though records show that the war claimed over 150,000 casualties on both sides of the divide). However, Tamil families have remained in the dark for decades as family members remain missing. Although the civil war 'officially' ended in 2009, the sectarian divide remains paramount.

To add insult to the injury of Tamils having been dispossessed of their homes and uprooted from their homeland, the Sri Lankan government is erasing Tamil identity within the country. This erasure operates within the parameters of the ['Sinhalization'](#) project that seeks to erase and replace Tamil spaces with Sinhala sites such as the change of street and village names and road signs, as well as the erection of Buddhist monuments over Hindu/Tamil sites. Although it has been over a decade since the end of the war and the Tamil genocide, the Sinhala majority government is still actively promoting the silencing of Tamil voices. [Where the government has impeded Sri Lankan Tamils' rights to take to the streets to protest against the decades of injustice,](#) alternative arenas to speak up have also been impeded. Diasporic Sri Lankan Tamils have expressed outrage in recent months over the pressure from the Sri Lankan government to [ban the use of #TamilEelam on social media](#) which resulted in Instagram, Twitter and Spotify removing the hashtag from their sites. This has been further exacerbated by the physical destruction of Tamil memorial sites. While 18<sup>th</sup> May 2021 marks the 12th anniversary of the [Mullivaikkal Massacre](#) (the mass killing of Tamil civilians on a no-fire zone in 2009), these erasures continue. In light of this context, [Tamils in Sri Lanka and in the diaspora are still seeking reparations.](#)

### What's Cooking



Where memorial sites are threatened or erased, we can look for alternative routes of memorialization through culinary expression and preservation. My Sri Lankan relatives are dispersed across Europe, North America and Australia, yet our culture survives through our stronghold over our culinary heritage. As long as recipes are passed on generationally or widely shared among friends or circulated on the internet, this facet of our identity cannot and will not be erased. On the countless times I have visited my Sri Lankan relatives in London, I have ate many a mutton roll, *kottu roti* (flat bread in mutton/chicken curry) and *katrika paal kulambu* (aubergine curry).

Food is not just a form of sustenance but is also a marker of cultural traditions. I came to discover this as I was researching and writing about the significance of food culture among diasporic communities. Exiles, refugees, migrants, expatriates – however you want to classify us diasporic persons – may leave our homes behind, but what travels with us is our food. Every  
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time I return to my home country, Malaysia, my suitcase is filled not with clothes but with British biscuits (McVities digestives), chocolates (Flakes, Galaxy, Mars bars), and even meat (Cumberland sausages)! On the other hand, upon my return back to England, my suitcase is filled with spices (chili powder, mustard seeds, cumin seeds), local herbs (*pandan* leaves, curry leaves, kaffir lime leaves, lemongrass), fresh tamarind, *kerisik* (roasted shredded coconut) and *ikan bilis* (tiny anchovies). I like to fashion myself as a 21<sup>st</sup> century merchant.

Although I have been cooking Malaysian food over the last 4 years living in England to assuage my homesickness, cooking Sri Lankan Tamil food became an act to reassert and reclaim that identity. Unfortunately, I did not grow up speaking Tamil so the food of my forbearers allowed me to take ownership of my ancestry that was submerged under my Malaysian identity. As I move onto the next chapter of my life and switch adopted homelands, I am making a concerted effort to carry both my Malaysian and Sri Lankan culinary traditions to Germany.

Food has become a gravitational pull to my diasporic lineage as it is the axis between my heritage and myself. It has been immensely rewarding to taste the rich culinary heritage of Sri Lanka as well as eye-opening to learn more about the socio-political situation in Sri Lanka. *Sri Lanka: The Cookbook* has not only brought me closer to my ancestry, but the text acts as an embodied space to unite both Tamil and Sinhala culinary cultures. I am not sure the same can be said for Sri Lanka at present, but hopefully the more we break bread with our neighbours and share our food, one can hope that what we prepare, serve and eat can influence empathy and reconciliation.

Image credits: [SBS](#), [NYTimes](#), Arththi Sathananthar

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**Arththi Sathananthar** is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Leeds Arts and Humanities Research Institute (LAHRI). Her areas of research expertise include contemporary literature (20th – 21st centuries), postcolonial theory, world literature and comparative literature, Middle East studies, diaspora studies, life writing, memory studies, studies on home, gender studies, and cultural studies. She also works at the Institute of Colonial and Postcolonial Studies (ICPS) at Leeds and is a British HEA (Higher Education Academy) Associate Fellow.

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