

Extended Abstract: Guest Lecture

Visions of God and the Rationality of the Surveillance State-A still in progress

Dr.Francesca Bremner

*Independent Scholar & Adjunct Professor of Sociology
City University New York & Montclair State University
USA*

Summary of Extended Abstract

This presentation captures the flow, the porousness, the multiplicity, as well as the hidden transformational potential of the binary between being, and non being during times of resistance to the Sri Lankan state from the north, and north east between the years of 1990 and 2010. This time period was chosen as it captured a climate of fear due to the increasing resistances from the above mentioned areas which resulted in bombings and killings, and led to changes in the spatial map of the city as the State transitioned into a Surveillance State based on the rationality of checkpoints, identity documents and body searches. This presentation illustrates that the Surveillance State, though embedded in incoherence, used the concept of rationality to break bodies into objects in which they touch the state of non-being. Thus, at the binary between being and non-being lie the dynamics of “truth production” which involves the Rational, Surveillance State and its dynamics. The resistance to this Surveillance State also arises in this same binary between being and non-being as some of those who have been physically broken begin to see visions of God, and the power of this vision awakens an important historical collective memory in the torturer which unsettles linear narratives of State power. Thus, this binary between being and non-being in the above context opens a crevice into the processes of State power and collective memory, thus illustrating that binaries are fluid, porous and rich with historical processes, struggles for power and future transformations.

The non-being in this presentation lies at the margins of bare life in a state of embodiment, which is also present in the larger cultural imagination.

Extended Abstract

The young men and women of the north and north east who were fleeing from the war into the city, as well as to other countries were forced to navigate the checkpoints and barricades since the only airport, and passport offices were situated in the city. Thus, the State became a Surveillance State which rested on the rationality of identity and other documents to excavate a partial truth of whether any of the young men or

women were “terrorists”. The rationality of the checkpoints lay in the premise that only terrorists need to fear these checkpoints since the rational methods of surveillance produced a partial truth. The “whole truth” would be made visible when those who were deemed suspicious were then moved into secret enclaves of detention, and their bodies made visible to the State through torture.

This surveillance apparatus had different meanings for the Sinhalese and Tamils. For the Sinhalese, the checkpoints were performative of the Rational State which ensured their security. Thus, the State received legitimacy from the Sinhalese. For the Tamils, the checkpoints were based on an unstable encounter between the military and the Tamil body which in itself was “out of place” in the city and marginal, its use being to legitimize the surveillance state to the Sinhalese majority. Thus, the interpretation by the military at the site of the encounter played a heavy role in the detention of a person as demonstrated by my interviews.

Another complex layer of surveillance was added by the recruitment of a civil force from Sinhala and Muslim villages who were also used in the city to aid surveillance. This civil force inhabited the lowest rungs in the hierarchy of the police, and supplemented their income by kidnapping Tamils from the north, and holding them for ransom. Therefore, interpretation, subjectivity and the profit motive played a role in the surveillance apparatus, though the State was viewed as producing its own objective truth in revealing if one was a terrorist.

Thus, the truth producing rationality of the Surveillance State rested on its own incoherence, and in the everyday performance of such incoherence as rationality.

This partial “truth” produced at the checkpoint was viewed as one step in the progression of truth in its revelation of the terrorist body. The next step in this progression was the forcible shifting of this body to a secret enclave where the revelation was confirmed during the torture of the detained body. During this time the full power of the State penetrated the detained body to produce a “terrorist”. Such secret enclaves dotted the island, especially the city. Thus, “truth” was produced within the confessional of these secret enclaves as the Surveillance State broke down the body of the citizen into an object, a non being whose sole redemption was in his confession.

The terror of being taken by the State was even more horrifying since those who were taken were either blindfolded, or had a covering forced over their heads. Thus, they could only guess at the hidden cartography of the pain ridden confessional. Those who were not taken knew of the existence of these spaces through the information network between Tamils, thus an imagined cartography of terror was imposed upon

the topography of the city. Those who had been taken knew the pain, and those who were not taken, imagined the pain. The distance between the experiences of the Tamils and Sinhalese sharpened the divide between them.

It was to the expertise of the torturer to keep his victim alive as a trophy, and as a symbol of State power to evoke new cartographies of terror in the imaginary of those who heard about the torture. Thus, though the tortured touched death, he/she was still alive. Therefore, the binary between being and non being had its own entry and exit points within the tortured body, with one category containing the potential to slide into the next. Thus, this State produced binary is fluid, and contains within itself the performative rationality of the State which legitimizes itself with the majority by its surveillance methods on the minority.

Elaine Scarry described the body in pain as one to which language is lost, along with the power of conceptualization and imagination. Thus, according to Scarry, the body in pain moves past the point of culture, and into a void which is the point in which the known world comes undone.

As a person who had been tortured recalled:

“I was beaten and kicked until I felt myself dying. The last kick lifted me off the ground and took me high, and I knew I would not survive. White light filled my vision, and I saw her, my Amman.”

Thus, as their life hung as a fine thread, some of the tortured were pushed into a more ethereal realm, that of the non-being, as I illustrated above. At the intersection of torture and the State, some of those who were tortured mentioned seeing apparitions, others went into a trance, yet others behaved in ways which resemble descriptions of spirit possession within the culture. Some described this experience as being inhabited by a God.

Historically, the theme of visions or inhabitation of the body by non beings have been disciplined into rationality, and viewed as superstition. I wish to avoid such a negation of experience. Another theory points to the austerities practiced by mystics as they disoriented the body through extreme practices such as starvation which brought on visions. An examination of such theories is beyond the scope of this presentation. Instead, I focus on the manner in which this new binary brought forth new negotiations and accommodations between the torturer and the tortured.

The practices which followed the inhabitation of the divine or other non being were recognized by the torturer since the torturer too, shared in the same belief system. Those who were inhabited by a non being were sometimes aggressive. Even a tiny

person would take on the strength of the non being, and could fight off many people at the same time. Some of these visions involved the mother Goddess. Both cultures, Sinhala and Tamil, paid homage to the mother Goddess, and understood her power, and her sense of justice which sought revenge. Thus, the inhabitation of the non being brought forth new re-cognition of the tortured body which had now expanded to become a sacred space. A physician spoke of having witnessed captured men going into a trance at which point two of the military men took to their heels in fear.

The binary between being and non being unravels to link the torturer and tortured within the same world and belief system which understands that the revenge of the Goddess is more powerful than the power of the State.

This Goddess of vengeance was not confined to the inhabitation of tortured bodies. She continued to inhabit spaces within the war zones, thus creating an imaginary fear within the military. One example is of a rumor that a soldier laughed at a statue of the Goddess who was also the healer of skin diseases. And the whole military camp suffered an outbreak of chickenpox after which they constructed a shrine for the goddess beside their camp. To this day motorists pay their respects to the Goddess as they drive past by stopping their cars to say a prayer, and sometimes share this narrative. And thus the narrative continues to circulate, and to be a part of the collective memory of the north east. This is only one such narrative of the power of the Goddess.

The narrative of the Goddess of is also linked to the culture of the curse. Sinhala youth were kidnapped, disappeared and murdered by the State during the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna uprising in the late 1980's in the south of Sri Lanka. The method of creating such terror differed from the rationality of the checkpointed Surveillance State, and is beyond the purview of this presentation. The collective movement of the mothers used public space as a performative arena to march to the temple of the Goddess to ask for justice. They broke coconuts as part of the ritual and entreated the Goddess to shatter the skull of the then President Premadasa as punishment for the horrors inflicted on their tortured and murdered children. The President was killed by a suicide bomber, his skull scattered only a few months later. This event is coded into the collective memory of both the Sinhalese and Tamil people. Thus, the power of the God/Goddess is understood and normalized. However, this power does not form a backdrop to the State, but enters into a relationship with the State by challenging State power at one of its most legitimizing centers, which is that of a torture chamber.

Methodology

I have conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the war torn north, and north east from 2005-2009 during the three months of summer every year, and in the post war

zones until 2014, once again, during the summer months. This presentation arises out of a collage of oral narratives drawn from my fieldwork, combined with interviews specific to the subject. I have used a snowball sample for the interviews due to the sensitivity of the subject.

Bibliography

Dobson, J. E., & Fisher, P. F. (2007). The panopticon's changing geography. *Geographical Review*, 97(3), 307–323.

Ek, Richard. (2006). Giorgio Agamben and the spatialities of the camp: An introduction. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 88(4), 363–386.

Feldman, A. (1994). On cultural anesthesia: From Desert Storm to Rodney King. *American Ethnologist*, 21(2), 404–418.

Feldman, A. (2009). Deterritorialized wars of public safety. In B. Kapferer (Ed.), *State, sovereignty, war: Civil violence in emerging global realities* (Vol. 5, pp. 16–28). Berghahn Books.

Feldman, A. (2009). The structuring enemy and archival war. *PMLA*, 124(5), 1704–1713.

Gordon, P. E. (2008). The place of the sacred in the absence of God: Charles Taylor's A Secular Age. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 69(4), 647–673.

Hofer, M., et al. (2022). *Towards a paradigm of mystical maturity: A synthesis of Teresa of Avila's Interior Castle with James Fowler's stages of faith* (Doctoral dissertation, The Catholic University of America). Catholic University of America.

Jeganathan, P. (2004). Checkpoint: Anthropology, identity, and the state. In V. Das & D. Poole (Eds.), *Anthropology in the margins of the state* (pp. 67–80). School of American Research.

Kodikara, C. (2024). Disappearances, dissident memory and magic: Sandya Ekneligoda's struggle for justice. *Memory Studies*, 17(3), 531–546. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980241241591>. (Original work published 2024).

Kotef, H., et al. (2015). Between imaginary: Violence and its justifications at the military checkpoints in occupied Palestine. In H. Kotef (Ed.), *Movement and the ordering of freedom: On liberal governances of mobility* (pp. 27–51). Duke University Press.

Macías, T. (2014). "Tortured bodies": The biopolitics of torture and truth in Chile. In S. Perera & S. Razack (Eds.), *At the limits of justice: Women of colour on terror* (pp. 309–328). University of Toronto Press.

Márquez, X. (2012). Spaces of appearance and spaces of surveillance. *Polity*, 44(1), 6–31.

Monahan, T. (2011). Surveillance as cultural practice. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 52(4), 495–508.

Passavant, P. A. (2007). The contradictory state of Giorgio Agamben. *Political Theory*, 35(2), 147–174.

Pechilis, K. (2016). To body or not to body: Repulsion, wonder, and the Tamil saint Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār. In K. Pechilis & B. A. Holdrege (Eds.), *Refiguring the body: Embodiment in South Asian religions* (pp. 199–228). State University of New York Press.

Roosa, J. (2008). The truths of torture: Victims' memories and state histories in Indonesia. *Indonesia*, 85, 31–49.

Tiemeyer, L.-S. (2008). Through a glass darkly: Zechariah's unprocessed visionary experience. *Vetus Testamentum*, 58(4/5), 573–594.

Turner, V. (1980). Social dramas and stories about them. *Critical Inquiry*, 7(1), 141–168.

Turner, E., Turner, V., & Bruner, E. M. (1992). Seeing spirits. In *Experiencing ritual: A new interpretation of African healing* (pp. 170–177). University of Pennsylvania Press.

Weber, D. (1995). From limen to border: A meditation on the legacy of Victor Turner for American cultural studies. *American Quarterly*, 47(3), 525–536.