

Report: Online Archives Days 2021 – Day 2

Report by Abirami Chandrakumar

Introduction:

The meeting started with a moment of silence for all those whose lives have been destroyed and lost during the atrocities of the civil war and the continuing structural genocide of Tamils in Sri Lanka.

Tamil Youth Organisation (TYO) – Norway branch gave Zoom technical support for the two days event. Sivanja Naguleswaran from DsporaA Tamil Archive narrated the event on 13th June 2021.

DsporaA Tamil Archive: welcome speech

A warm welcome to all, and a happy international archive day. You are all contributing to the preservation of Tamil stories and culture for future generations. May your future efforts be just as successful.

DsporaA Tamil Archive was created in 2020 due to a need for the preservation of the stories of Tamils living in Norway.

Documentation is not a new concept among the Tamil people and has been practised for centuries. However, the destruction brought on by invasion, war, displacement, and migration has made it necessary to inform the general public of the importance of documentation.

Archivists in Eelam were invited to take place in this event, but due to the social situation, they were not able to participate. Nonetheless, we continue this event in hopes that it will make a positive impact on the whole community, including those who could not participate.

In yesterday's meeting, the challenges of heritage institutions in Eelam were discussed. Two main problems were the complications and oftentimes resistance to the documentation of Tamil stories and the latter was how there was a lack of understanding of the importance of such documentation for future reference.

Nalayini Indiran: Copyright and source criticism

Copyright and evaluating information

I am a librarian and by no means an expert, but I would like to share the knowledge that I have on the subject in hopes of it being useful in some way.

Within the Tamil community, we have become quite skilled when researching documentation, but we tend to fall into potholes, especially with the rise of technology and the vast expense of information available at our fingertips.

Copyright

What we must be aware of is how to handle the different types of intellectual property, meaning intangible unique thoughts. The 4 most important types are patent, which is

ownership over an invention; industrial design rights, meaning ownership over the visual appearance; trademark, which is ownership over the unique design by one trader of a product which is distributed by many; and finally, copyright, which is giving the creator, the sole rights to their product.

For various types of media, there are different copyright rules.

The rules that are important to be aware of is what copyright means, what it protects and how long it lasts. For the same types of media, these rules vary from country to country. Several countries have had the copyright for 70 years from the death of the creator or the creation of the work.

Copyright is not something that you have to apply for, it automatically is put into place from the date of the distribution of media. If the work is accompanied by the creators' name, it is protected by copyright. It is extremely important to find out who the creator of a work is, and research the copyright laws, before using it.

The challenge nowadays is how to include digital copies of media on digital platforms without infringing copyright.

Source criticism

Evaluating the information you find, is something which is now taught in schools as a basic skill. We who have not grown up in a digitalized world should also educate ourselves on this. Upon discovering any information, it is a crucial step to evaluate its credibility.

The tools we can use to determine whether we should use a source are:

Currency: How long ago was this published or updated. Remember to also check the age of any sources used. Is the content still relevant now or can any of the information be outdated?

Relevance: If the source is substantial enough to contribute to your research. Is the information too broad or too focused? Be aware of biased amongst the creators of the work, especially if the content lacks several perspectives on the matter or a reflective approach.

Authority: The credibility of the author themselves and how qualified they are to be writing about that topic.

Accuracy: How much of the information stated is correctly cited and free from logical errors. Do several sources have similar information and are the used sources reliable?

Purpose: Does the author have any personal interests behind releasing this information or is it solely to make information on a subject more available. If their use of language is less formal, or their statements are not backed by arguments, one should be more sceptical.

Many of us are using these tools effectively and doing effective research which will be of benefit for us all.

Sri Kathirkamanadan Veeravagu: History of exile Tamil families

I have been working for over 30 years now as a phycologist in Denmark's public hospitals. My focus has been on the trauma experienced by refugees of war and conflict. Through my job, I have conversed with several refugees of the Sri Lankan civil war. The first wave out from Sri Lanka were young people. Most of them were sent out alone, in the hopes that at least some from the family would survive and continue the family legacy. It is our duty as older generations to educate these youth about their roots.

In some countries, there is a tradition of family trees or records where family members and relations are documented. Our people must realize the importance of this. Some countries which have generations of emigrants have created establishments where these emigrants can come back and go through courses where they learn about their country and culture.

The danger in not educating such emigrant people about their own culture is either that they completely forget their roots, or that they are stuck in a limbo of not identifying with one or the other. It is first when they have a full understanding of their own culture, that they can live harmoniously alongside another.

Descendants of immigrants nowadays often pay genealogists to research their roots and origins. I am therefore sure that if we keep a record of our family history, it will be useful for our descendants. We can't rely solely on government records to tell the complex details of our struggles and journey in which we created a new life for ourselves.

Sivarusi. Sasikumar Tharmalingam: Journey of a Tamil physical archive

For people to not lose themselves in this vast world, archiving is vital. I came to Switzerland as a 13-year-old boy and established myself here.

In a meeting with The Dalai Llama, I told him that the Tamils, like his own people, were aimlessly around this globe in search of refuge. The Nobel peace prize-winning man asked, but Tamils didn't come to Sri Lanka before they were sent to pick tea there by the British right? I corrected him saying that we are the native people of the country and that we had been there before other groups like the Sinhalese. The fact that such a renowned diplomat like the Dalai Llama knew so little of our ancient people, disturbed me.

We now have in our temple in Swiss, 3 million Tamil documents and artefacts. There are also records of 30-years of the Tamil liberation struggle.

Several attempts at creating independent countries for ethnic groups are underway, take the Jews in Israel. In the meantime, we are spread out all over the world, and our ethnicity is slowly fading away.

It is therefore vital for us to preserve documentation so that we don't fade away. We here in Switzerland have but one worry, our lack of financial stability makes it hard to do this work.

Who are we? why did we come here? These are questions we should keep asking.

Question time:

Selvarajah:

I have a question about the Swiss archival attempt. 3 million documents are an extreme number. I frankly would be overjoyed to see such a mass of Tamil artefacts and records. How do you have the capacity to store all this? Is there any way we can validate that you have this amount of documentation? If so, this news must be broadcast to Tamils all over the world.

Participant in Switzerland was not able to answer as they had to leave the meeting due to prayers at the temple.

I must ask Kathirkamam from Denmark. There was a person I had contact with who also lived in Denmark. He was doing genealogy work regarding Tamils in the country. There are several projects like this, for example in Malaysia. There is for example a publication regarding the 125 years' worth of history in Malaysia. They were the first government workers and therefore it was easy to gather information about them.

Kathirkamam:

What should we do about the problem that several of such Tamil refugees have been lost along the way or stuck in the middle and therefore are hard to find information on?

Selvarajah:

I think through genealogy you can find the missing links by asking others or creating such a network where we can link people together.

Have you heard about graveyard tourism? People from Europe are visiting India to learn about family members that went there as colonists. I think that Europeans and especially Christians have a well-practised tradition of keeping family trees. They know their family history back by several generations. For us, we start stuttering when we're asked about anything further back than our great grandparents.

Anonymous question:

A question to phycologist Kathirkaman. As you said, our family history is mostly passed down orally and there is a great need to document it. Do you have any ways we can engage the first-generation emigrants to create such records?

Kathirkaman:

This idea came to me in the first place because we have used family trees as a coping mechanism in my workplace. Several refugees have this feeling of being cut off from their family, culture and people. They lose their sense of belonging and fall into depression. Therefore, when they start researching their family history and contact relatives, they are automatically healed of this depression.

Baheerathy:

This is relieving to hear, but several people are very scared to start such family research for fear of something happening.

Kathirkamam:

This is an anxiety that is very prevalent because people fear the unknown and the worst outcome. They might have seen something on the internet about such research gone wrong. I advise them to start in their inner circle because that is better than nothing. If they feel comfortable, they can slowly expand.

It is also an idea that we preserve documentation for further generations so that they have something like a foundation. An example is how Palestinian refugees have taken care of their house keys from their home countries and the story of how they were kicked out and forced to flee. This story, along with the object, has been passed down through generations.

Baheerathy:

To Nalayini ask about copyright. Digital resources are continuously being published. There are both positive and negative consequences to this. Do you have any such important negative consequences to share?

Nalayini:

We often forget copyright complete in the fervour to compile research. This can be extremely unfortunate as the creator will lose their ownership and their means to earn money through their work. By preserving and widely distributing a work digitally we also reduce the number of physical copies bought.

Baheerathy:

Many documentations don't have owners due to war and genocide. Many of these are now under open ownership. How can we use these resources correctly?

Nalayini:

There is a law in Sri Lanka that says all media should be registered in the national archive. Naturally, this was not kept fully during the war. Even though no one has claimed over this media, there is time left until it officially becomes part of the public domain. There are individual laws for this in each country. If we nonetheless publish it as a digital resource, we can come under this scrutiny later. I do not have a very precise answer for this special case.

Selvarajah:

Can I propose an answer? There is a law that asks us to consider if the creator will be negatively impacted in any way. We cannot decide this ourselves but on the website for the national archives of Sri Lanka, each work's copyright is stated. We must also be aware that before work is put in the public domain, it can first be put in the international domain. Due to such arrangements, we must research each work individually. There must be a way to use works without infringing copyright because if that weren't the case, we would never be able to use any media or work ourselves.

Anonymous question:

In the creation of such a family tree, how can one avoid the infringement of personal information safe?

Kathirkamam:

You don't need to include all the facts about a person, but their year of birth is common information that can be shared. For further information, their consent should be attained.

Sivanya:

How can you fact check this? It is a challenge to know if the information given by a said person is correct.

Kathirkamam:

We can't individually fact-check everything but in such a project it is everyone's duty to both check the information published about themselves and those they know.

Nalayini:

There is a need to establish something called community and heritage archives in the UK where we in our community can access and add on to an archive.

Kathirkamam:

The governments can establish such archives but in Scandinavian countries, we must attain consent from the person to access information about them.

Selvarajah:

Extracting information on current living people will always be a sensitive topic but I think the ripe time to create such a database is today. Our children are marrying into different ethnicities, something which is inevitable. So further on, such family ancestry work will be more of a challenge

Saranya:

In Canada, we have public directories where we can find names and addresses but individual consent is not obtained for this.

Nilayani:

I was going to inform you that we also have an ancestry database in the UK. We have the option to make our information private to which that the government has access, but others can't find it. We can thereby protect ourselves but still make the information available for future generations.

Saranya:

Yes, so our database is automatically updated so it will show individuals with the searched name in Canada, the UK and the US.

Nalayani:

This shows that it is important to connect our databases with national establishments for this purpose.

Anonymous:

It is one thing to create a family tree with names, but how can we document the stories and history of Tamils now living outside Sri Lanka. The privacy policy in Norway is such that we must have consented to both have information on a person and publish it. Therefore, it isn't

more complicated than getting the consent of the person. So, if they fear for their safety, they can permit it to be kept private until they pass away for example.

Kathirkamam:

It is also possible to register such information in the national ancestry and heritage archives to further protect it.

Selvarajah:

I want to show you The Tamil Plutarch by Simon Casie Chitty. He passed away in 1860 and wrote small paragraphs about the Tamil poets at that time.

I have a question which why we should fuss so much about the things that can go wrong with this. Why can't we just opt out of those that don't want to give consent, and rather focus on those that do? All we need to focus on is that a family tree should only contain information that is common such as a name and year of birth.

Kathirkamam:

I am very grateful for being able to share the idea of documenting the history of exile families with all of you.

Thank you to all those who have spoken, participated and asked questions.

DsporA Tamil Archive: thank you speech

Thank you to the resource people who gave a speech, the Norwegian branch of the Tamil Youth Organisation for technical support, those who enriched the event with other resources, and all those who joined us and raised many good ideas and questions.

