

Conflicting Messages Dilute a Bold Sound: Why M.I.A.'s Rhetoric Matters

M.I.A., the Sri Lankan Tamil rapper from London, has cemented her place in the emerging pantheon of global artists with the release of her second album *Kala*. *Kala* was recorded in as many far-flung locales as possible –Japan, India, Trinidad, Jamaica, Australia, the United States—and incorporates a similar number of styles, from Bollywood disco to Brazilian baile to Jamaican dancehall and more (du Lac). M.I.A. uses the genre of rap as the backdrop for the stylistic *mélange* she concocts on every song, a style known for its history of social and political protest, and has positioned herself in numerous media interviews as motivated in her musical career by her background as a refugee of Sri Lanka's decades-old civil conflict. In her music, M.I.A. drops references to her life story, political ties, and other minority stories to straddle a hybridized cultural and political identity that subverts and rejects mainstream Western narratives of gender and politics (Gill).

Through her music, associated imagery and media interviews, M.I.A. has attracted mainstream attention to the country of Sri Lanka, and propagated her experience of Sri Lanka's civil war based on an upbringing that took her from Britain to Sri Lanka to India and back again to Britain as a refugee of the conflict. One major influence in her music comes from her largely absentee father, who was a member of a Tamil separatist group historically aligned with the internationally proscribed terrorist group the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). M.I.A.'s role as a popular musician and a political voice for the Sri Lankan Tamils is characterized by complexity and contradiction. It has been argued that as a musician, M.I.A. should not need to explain why her art contains references to not only the conflict generally but the LTTE specifically. But a recent interview gives new prominence to

her role as a spokesperson for the Sri Lankan Tamil population, and offers a window into the increasing importance of this aspect of her public persona in the global media.

M.I.A. has been enthusiastically received in the world of music, winning album of the year from Rolling Stone and garnering nominations for both a Grammy and an Oscar in 2009 (Smiley). But by the time her first collaborations with Philadelphia-based producer Diplo started to gain attention in 2004 and her first album *Arular* (named after her father) was released in 2005, M.I.A.'s references were already inviting questions. In March of 2005, Scott Plagenhoef wrote in *Pitchfork* that "M.I.A.'s detractors claim her flirtations with terrorism and revolutionary politics reveal the biggest case of sufferer's envy since Joe Strummer but little depth of thought." He then asks, "But if the latter is true, so what? ... An argument can and has been made that her political lip service is unique enough to get those topics onto your tongue or into your brain, prodding listeners to at least examine them."

M.I.A.'s art school past informs her self-created album, video and live show art, which features tigers, tanks, palm trees, and other symbols of the Sri Lankan conflict. The tiger imagery is commonly interpreted as a nod to the LTTE, the only Tamil separatist group to feature a tiger in their name. When asked about these visual references in one interview, M.I.A. responded, "How come people are allowed to say M.I.A. equals a tiger print shirt equals suicide bombing? If anyone else wears a tiger print shirt, it means nothing. Converse has put out a tiger print shoe and I wore it in my video and that means terrorism" (Cosyns). This is arguably a disingenuous avoidance of directly explaining the significance of the reference, as M.I.A. is clearly a politically engaged musician and performer. A tiger print or image, situated within the rest of the visual symbols, becomes harder to accept as signifying "nothing," although it is important to note that the significance is not necessarily positive.

For example, one of her videos features children dancing in front of a tiger, which could be interpreted as a reference to child soldier recruitment, known to have been practiced by the LTTE. However, M.I.A. has declined to acknowledge any signification at all.

Today, it is even harder to make the case that M.I.A.'s references to terrorism and revolutionary politics do not need to be interrogated for deeper meaning, as M.I.A. has become the most prominent Sri Lankan in mainstream media and has also identified herself as "being the only Tamil...in the Western media" and sees it as a "great opportunity to ... bring forward what's going on in Sri Lanka" (M.I.A.). In the same interview, she states, "I've turned into the only voice for the Tamil people...the twenty percent minority in my country." To understand the importance of this role requires a brief foray into the Sri Lankan civil conflict.

Sri Lanka is a small island country with a recently bloody history. A civil conflict along ethnic lines has slowly emerged and intensified since the country gained independence from British rule in 1948. During British rule, a strategy of promoting English-speaking Tamils to leadership positions within the society soon created state, commercial, educational and other professional sectors that were dominated by Tamils (Bowen). In the wake of independence, a Sinhalese nationalist movement combined with laws intended to rectify imbalances created by British policies resulted in widespread discrimination against Tamils, and inspired the Tamil separatist movements of the 1970s (Bowen).

Since then, most of the distinct Tamil movements were destroyed by the LTTE through assassinations of Tamil political leaders who participated in the democratic process or consumed into the LTTE, which then turned to suicide bombing and other violent means to make their case. Today, the war is between the Sinhalese-dominated majority government and the LTTE. By their account, the Tigers are fighting for regional autonomy for the Tamil

population. By the Sri Lankan government's account, which is now dominated by Sinhalese nationals, the LTTE has been terrorizing the country for decades and needs to be destroyed if the country is to move forward. According to a report from the Council on Foreign Relations, the LTTE is blamed for a dozen high-level assassinations and over two hundred suicide attacks (Bhattacharji). The same report estimates that that the LTTE has murdered approximately 5,000 people just since 2006. And in recent months, the LTTE is accused by the Associated Press among others of using Tamil civilians as human shields and firing at civilians as they flee the area (Mackenzie, Nessman).

While one front of Sri Lanka's civil war is being waged on the ground between the national army and the LTTE, another front has been intensifying in a theater with a much larger scope—the media. In part due to its small size and role in the global economy, Sri Lanka has never been heavily or consistently covered by international media services (Gabony). But another factor has been the Sri Lankan government's hostile attitude towards journalists, both international and domestic, which has made it impossible to report from the frontlines. Reports are instead confined to a few sparse details and casualty numbers reported by spokespeople for the LTTE and the government, whose reports almost always directly contradict each other (Buerk 2008). The BBC, the only media source with significant coverage of the conflict is reviled on both sides for its bias in favor of the opposing side (Gabony). With so many lies and half-truths it is near impossible to discern the full story.

It is into this contentious space that M.I.A. offered her assessment of the conflict. On January 28, 2009, M.I.A. appeared on the Tavis Smiley show, a PBS news magazine with a national audience based out of LA and also distributed online. Given the opportunity to educate the primarily US-based viewers of the show, the majority of whom know little to nothing about the conflict, M.I.A. spoke extensively about the plight of the Tamil people in

Sri Lanka, repeatedly referring to the war as a “genocide.” She states that from the time that she left the country to now, “there’s been a systematic genocide” and that “Tamils make up twenty percent of the country and they’re getting wiped out.” In another interview with *The Daily Beast* two days later, she calls the situation “systematic genocide, ethnic cleansing” and compares it to Nazi-Germany. In a recent assessment of that claim by the *New York Times*, Thomas Fuller writes that “M.I.A.’s claims that the government is carrying out a genocide against Tamils place her on the outer fringe of opinion about the conflict.” In the same article Fuller quotes Yolanda Foster of Amnesty International, who observes, “The Tamil Tigers have a long history of child recruitment, hostage taking, forcing civilians to the front lines. It’s complicated to assign blame.”

It is very hard to make the case that the Sri Lankan government has directed a genocide, defined as “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group,” against the Tamil population in Sri Lanka (United Nations), as there are significant numbers of Tamils living in Sri Lanka in state controlled areas without danger—except from the daily threat of suicide bombings by the LTTE. As John Mackenzie of the Mackenzie Institute in Toronto which studies political instability and terrorism writes, “Genocide is not happening in Sri Lanka.... Anybody who takes the charge seriously betrays a highly annoying ignorance about the state of affairs between Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).” In a response to M.I.A.’s interview, Dr. Palitha Kohona, Foreign Secretary for the government of Sri Lanka, notes, “In Sri Lanka, fifty-four percent or more of the Tamil population does not live in the areas controlled by the Tamil Tigers. They live in the south, in and around Colombo, under government control.” At this time, the majority of Tamils who were initially part of the LTTE are now part of the political process in the East and the North belying the claim of genocide.

The Sri Lankan government is not blameless. It has been heavily criticized for its lack of transparency and breaches of human rights. Currently, as tens of thousands of civilians are trapped in the conflict zone, reporters, aid agencies, and humanitarian efforts are banned from entering the area (“last Tamil Tiger town”). The Sri Lankan government claims this is because they cannot guarantee anyone’s safety, but such secrecy weakens their case considerably. In addition, the Sri Lankan army has a lot to answer for in the conflict—in the past, both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan military were accused of engaging in abductions, extortion, conscription, and the use of child soldiers (Bhattacharji).

Although extreme, M.I.A. is not alone in assessing the conflict as a genocide; newly formed Tamil groups in the diaspora have initiated efforts to reframe the conflict as a genocide. Significantly, high profile efforts to have the conflict officially recognized in the US and in India date back to around the same time as her interview. The group Tamils Against Genocide has been in existence at least since August of 2008, when their legal representative Bruce Fein contributed a commentary to the Washington Times comparing the Sri Lankan conflict to Nazi-Germany and the Bosnian genocide of the 90s. In this commentary, Fein introduces Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, Sri Lanka’s Defense Secretary, as a US citizen who should be investigated for war crimes. On February 5th, 2009, the organization Fein represents filed charges with the US attorney general charging both Gotabhaya Rajapaksa and Sri Lanka's Army Commander, Sarath Fonseka, for genocide, war crimes and torture against Tamils in Sri Lanka. On February 9th, Mr. Fein published a second commentary in the Boston Globe on the same topic. On February 20th, the same group organized a rally in Washington DC to protest the genocide. Similar activities have been taking place in India, another major political power that can have a significant impact on the current situation in Sri Lanka. On January 26, Dr. Ramadoss, founder and president of the

Pattali Makkal Katchi party, a Tamil political party in the Indian government, gave a press conference urging the Indian government to recognize Tamil Eelam as the only solution for the Sri Lankan Tamil population (Tamilnet). On February 13th, Dr. Ramadoss described the conflict as “a clear case of genocide” of the Tamil population (“LS Members”). And on February 14, a new NGO was announced, Indians Against Genocide (“English Media Criticized”).

So is M.I.A. part of these coordinated efforts? It is not clear. But she has forged a complicated identity for herself as both a hybridized pop musician and political spokesperson for the Tamil people of Sri Lanka, and she has explicitly acknowledged her power to educate people about the conflict. By scanning music blog postings across the web, it is clear that she is an influential disseminator of information, not just music, to audiences (Bennet, Harthun, Starbury). A recent controversy that distills that power involves another Sri Lankan rapper named DeLon, who recorded a Youtube response video remixing her popular Paper Planes video, juxtaposing violent imagery from the LTTE bombings and other violent acts with images of MIA performing and posing, while rhyming over the melody and asking why tiger imagery is so common in her works if she doesn't support the LTTE. M.I.A. has dismissed his video as “self-promotion” and her label Interscope Records has served DeLon with a cease-and-desist, claiming the video endangers “M.I.A.'s reputation as a freedom fighter” (Starbury). But in the context of her media interviews as a spokesperson for the Sri Lankan Tamils, it is a question that deserves an answer.

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