



Nostalgia of Thaipusam celebration during the Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Nostalgia is an emotion that has meaning associated to a group or community of people. Similar to other type of emotions, nostalgia is learnt and interpreted through social relationships. Nostalgia is associated with the recollection of the past; often something with special meaning to a person or a group of people. Nostalgia is often associated with past positive experiences that brought joy, pleasure, or happiness. It may bring happiness or sadness, but studies have shown that it brings more positive emotions compared to negative emotions. This article focuses on the nostalgia of participating in Thaipusam prior to the pandemic. Thaipusam is a Hindu festival celebrated mostly in places where there is a large group of Tamil Hindus. In Malaysia, Thaipusam is not merely a Hindu festival, it is attended by people of various religious background and culture. This is a qualitative study with data collected by interviewing five women living in Kedah who have attended Thaipusam in Penang for more than four decades. There was no celebration of Thaipusam in 2021 due to the pandemic. For the first time in their lives they were not part of this important festival. Their experiences shows both collective and individual nostalgia. Sharing nostalgia is seen as a way of going through a lonely period in their lives. They also shared how they used online darshan to go through this difficult period. Their experiences may be expressed as personal, but it is often related to their collective identity as a Malaysian Indian and as a member of a minority community.

Keywords: Hindu, minority, nostalgia, Tamil, Thaipusam

Introduction

Historically nostalgia referred to a medical condition referring to extreme homesickness. However, this definition changed after the late 19th century. The meaning of nostalgia moved from a medical condition to an emotion. One's nostalgic memories can bring both happiness and sadness. The recollection of good experiences in the past may bring happiness while the fact that they are removed from the past may trigger sadness (Wilson, 2005). Therefore, it can be a confusing emotion and full of paradoxes because it can trigger pain and joy at the same time (Wilson, 2005). However, scholars have emphasized that nostalgia induced much higher level of happiness

compared to sadness (Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Routledge, 2008; Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt, & Routledge, 2006). Wildschut et al. (2006) identified that nostalgia strengthen social connectedness. They explained that loneliness increased feeling of nostalgia for significant others and often reflected on nostalgic events in their lives.

Scholars differentiate nostalgia with ‘reminiscing’ and ‘sentimentality’ because the effect of nostalgia on emotion is much more profound than sentimentality and has a more lasting effect on the emotion. When comparing reminiscence and nostalgia, reminiscence does not involve comparison with the present or the yearning to return to the past. Even though nostalgia is related to past events, it can improve people’s future lives (Fiorito & Routledge, 2020) because nostalgia includes both appreciation of the past and hope for the future. Hence, it may become an inspiration for future lives.

There are two types of nostalgia: personal and collective. Personal nostalgia refers to ‘sentimental longing to one’s past’ while collective nostalgia refers to ‘sentimental longing for events that occurred as part of a group with which one identifies’ (Dimitriadou, Maciejovsky, Wildschut, & Sedikides, 2019). Dimitriadou et al. (2019) explains this using Americans as an example. According to them, people who identify as Americans would identify important past events such as the moon landing and Barack Obama as the first black US President as part of their nostalgia.

Similar to other emotions, nostalgia is associated to group life. It is often learnt and interpreted in the context of social relationships (Snyder, 1991). According to Davis (1979), sociology of nostalgia is "concerned with tracking down the sources of nostalgic experience in group life and determining what general relevance and meaning nostalgia has for our present life and, somewhat more abstractly, what consequences it has for society as a whole". Furthermore, studies have confirmed that nostalgic reverie often focused on close others (family, friends), momentous events, and settings (Sedikides et al., 2008).

In line with Davis’ (1979) perspective, this study explores the meaning of Thaipusam as a source of nostalgia among a group of Malaysian Indian women. Tannock (1995) highlights the importance of nostalgia for all social groups. Taking this into consideration, nostalgia among minorities is something important to be explored as minority groups often struggle in expressing their identity particularly in a multi-cultural society. Therefore, this study focuses on Thaipusam as a source of nostalgia during the Covid-19 pandemic because of the significance of Thaipusam as a cultural and religious festival among Malaysian Indians. This is discussed in detail in the third section.

Malaysian Indian

Malaysian Indians are an ethnic minority group in Malaysia. Malaysian Indians are people of Indian origin who are Malaysian citizens. Malaysia’s population in 2020 was 32.7 million (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021). The current ethnic composition among Malaysian citizens in the country is as follows: 69.3 percent Bumiputera, 22.8 percent Chinese, 6.9 percent Indians and 1.0 percent are of other ethnicities (Department of Statistics, 2021). Most Malaysian Indians are Hindus, but there are also some Malaysian Indians who are Christians, Sikhs, Bahais, or Muslims.

Malaysian Indians are mostly descendants of migrants from South India, particularly from Tamil Nadu (then Madras Presidency). The biggest migration from India to Malaysia (then Malaya) happened during the British colonial period. Most migrants were brought to Malaysia to

work in rubber plantations. There was a smaller number of migrants who worked as professionals or in the civil service (Sandhu, 1993). There was also a thriving business community in major cities in Malaysia.

Thaipusam

Thaipusam is an annual Hindu festival. It is usually celebrated in the month of *Thai* (mid-January to mid-February) by Tamil speaking Hindus in Tamil Nadu, India, Sri Lanka and diasporic Tamil community around the world. When we look at the celebration of Thaipusam in the diaspora, Thaipusam in Malaysia has a special significance. The biggest celebration of Thaipusam in Malaysia happens in Batu Caves, Selangor, Malaysia followed by the celebration in Penang, Malaysia. It is also celebrated in a large scale in all major cities in the West Coast of Peninsular Malaysia (Kent, 2004) where majority of Malaysian Indians live.

Thaipusam is unique in Malaysia because it involves hundreds of thousands of Malaysian Indians not only Malaysian Tamils or Hindus. It also involves the participation of Malaysian Chinese in the rituals and celebration. It also attracts devotees from India, Indonesia (Tamils from Medan) and other parts of the world as a pilgrimage site to fulfil their vows. Thaipusam is also seen as a major tourist attraction in Malaysia and is an important event in the tourism promotion of Malaysia.

Being a minority community, Thaipusam for Malaysian Indians is much more than a religious event. Thaipusam is the biggest gathering of Indians in Malaysia; therefore, it is an expression of the Indian identity in Malaysia. Kent (2004) argues further by emphasizing that the meaning of Thaipusam goes beyond this. According to Kent (2004, p. 82), Thaipusam in Penang is

...not only a declaration of Indian incorporativeness, but, by embracing the willing participation of the more economically and numerically powerful Chinese community, it also becomes an assertion of non-Malay unity in relation to a bald symbol of "otherness," something "other" than the master vision of national unity--with its privileging of Islam--constructed by the Malay leadership.

Kent goes on to add that the inclusion of non-Indians in the celebration is also a statement about openness and universality in the cultural resource. This not only shows the uniqueness of Penang Thaipusam but shows how cultural and religious events often evolve in the diaspora with adaptation of other cultures and inclusion of the wider local community.

Thaipusam has been celebrated for more than hundred years in Malaysia and 2021 was the first time the celebration was cancelled. For Thaipusam 2021 some rituals were performed by temple committee members without the participation of other devotees (Mok, 2021). This makes Thaipusam an important event for the exploration of nostalgia among Malaysian Indians, a minority community in Malaysia.

Methods

This is a qualitative study involving five Malaysian Indian women living in Kedah between the ages of forty to fifty years old. The number of participants was decided based on the saturation of data and the limitations due to doing fieldwork in the pandemic. All participants have the

experience of attending the Thaipusam celebration in Penang for more than forty years. They were selected using a convenience sampling technique due to the challenges of conducting data collection during the pandemic. They were all known to the researcher, through their shared experience of growing up in the same town. The researcher can be seen as an insider in this study because she shares similar experiences as the participants in being part of the Thaipusam celebration in Penang. Being an insider gives some advantages in this study because the researcher is able to understand the languages spoken by the participants particularly some terms used to describe various rituals during Thaipusam. The researcher also planned the main questions and probing questions to be used as part of the interviews which has been suggested as a way to reduce bias as an insider in qualitative research. She also refrained from sharing much information regarding her own experiences except when asked by the participants (Fleming, 2018).

Data collection was done in two stages. In the first stage, the participants were interviewed individually. The interviews were conducted via telephone calls and recorded using a voice recorder with the permission of the participants. The interviews took about 45 minutes to an hour to complete. In the second stage, all participants joined in a focus group discussion with the researcher via WhatsApp video call. This took about 90 minutes to complete. The calls were recorded, transcribed, and the researcher went through the interviews before the coding process. The initial coding process involved manifest coding i.e., the researcher focused on what was explicitly discussed by the participants. Further coding was done to explore the experiences of participants during Thaipusam and the meaning Thaipusam held in their lives. The codes were combined into themes and three themes are discussed in the next section. All the names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

Findings

The findings section is divided into two major parts i.e., demographic profile and experiences during Thaipusam.

Demographic profile

All the participants in this study have been attending Thaipusam celebration in Penang for more than forty years. The celebration of Thaipusam in Penang is done at the Hilltop Temple area, Georgetown, Penang which is located not too far from the Penang Botanical Gardens. The location is more than 30 km from their house in Kedah. Participants' profiles are described in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile of participants.

Name	Age	Job
Meena	47	Home maker
Kala	42	Home maker
Lalitha	48	Janitor
Mythili	44	Home business
Kelly	46	Clerk

Experiences during Thaipusam

The following themes describe Thaipusam as a source of nostalgia among the participants in this study. There are three themes which are: *ponteng sekolah* (playing truant); remember the time; and ‘pandemic’ Thaipusam.

a. Ponteng sekolah (playing truant)

All participants shared that they skipped schools almost every year during Thaipusam.

Meena explained:

I will ponteng sekolah for every Thaipusam, even if I am not going to the temple on that day. All my Indian friends too. Somehow the act of taking leave was very important to us.

Thaipusam is not a national public holiday in Malaysia. Some states such as Penang, Perak and Selangor have declared it as a state public holiday while in some states it has yet to be declared as a public holiday. Kedah, where the participants live is such a state. Since 2014, people in Kedah were given a day off on Thaipusam termed as ‘occasional holiday’, but it has yet to be declared a state public holiday (“Don’t cancel a public holiday,” 2021). However, there was a controversy when this ‘occasional holiday’ was cancelled in 2021 with the cancellation of Thaipusam celebration. Therefore, all the participants in this study shared how they would miss school if Thaipusam fell on a school day and had mixed feelings about this due to the rules related to attendance in their schools.

Another participant Kala shared:

Once I was scolded by my teacher when I brought a letter from my father about going to Thaipusam. I went home crying wondering why others [a teacher from a different ethnicity] does not understand about the importance of Thaipusam. The following day, my dad came to school to talk to my teacher and Headmistress.

Other participants also shared similar experiences. Their experiences reflect the importance of Thaipusam in their lives as a child/teenager. It was something they shared with other Indian students in school but also the struggle to express the meaning of their practices or rituals, and their identity as there was conflict between what they felt as important, and the rules set in their schools. This experience highlights the minority stress experienced by the participants. Minority stress is a term used to describe additional stressors experienced by people from minority community (Levitt, Puckett, Ippolito, & Horne, 2012). It refers to specific stress experiences by a person’s identification with a group e.g., ethnic and religious minority. When explaining minority stress among ethnic minority college students in the US, Wei et al. (2010) highlighted that other than general stress experienced by college students, ethnic minority students may experience additional stress due to the inter-ethnic difficulty, racism and discrimination. This was expressed by the participants through their struggle in expressing the importance of Thaipusam to the school administration.

During the second phase of data collection, Kelly and Meena, shared how they were both punished for skipping school on a particular year. Their parents were also asked to write a letter to explain their absence to school. This sharing brought much joy to everyone who were part of the conversation. All the participants were laughing and went on to share how they experienced something similar with their siblings or friends. Here, they are drawing from their shared experiences and this contributes to positive emotions.

b. Remember the time

This theme summarizes the nostalgic experiences shared by the participants. Since the researcher also has similar experiences as the participants, they asked the researcher's experiences related to Thaipusam. Lalitha shared:

I am sure you remember, those days very few of us had cars. We would take two buses to get to Butterworth and the ferry and then another bus to get to the temple. We would spend the whole day before coming back in the evening. The buses and the ferries will be very crowded with mostly Indians. That is the only time you see Indians everywhere.

Kelly also shared something similar:

I usually go to Thaipusam with my family. My parents and siblings. All nine of us. I often laugh about this with my siblings, the fact that my parents got us to Thaipusam and back home safely [without losing us in the crowd]. [laughs]. It is the only time you see the presence of Indians... We live here, we are part of this country.

Kelly went on to explain that her friends who are Christians and Sikhs often joined the celebration too. Some of them may not participate in the rituals but loved to participate in the celebration and be present at the temple.

Other participants also shared similar experiences. Their description regarding their travel to Thaipusam shows the yearning for a simpler time, a time when their families were not able to afford a car but there was much joy in their journey. Their enjoyment of simple pleasures such as snacks or food at the temple or in the ferry reemphasizes this point.

We often have lunch at the temple and drinks from the thanneer panthal [stall distributing food and drinks to devotee organized by various communities or organizations in Penang] ...but whatever it is, we will always come home with a few packets of [preserved, sweetened] nutmeg, often bought at the jetty area. They used to taste so good...

Others also shared how buying sweetened nutmeg was a must on important trips to Penang, including on the way back from Thaipusam. Their sharing shows how much they appreciated and to some extent romanticized the experiences of the past. This is identified as an important aspect of nostalgia (Turner, 1987). Turner (1987) describes one of the aspects of the nostalgic paradigm is the idea of loss of 'simplicity, personal authenticity and emotional spontaneity' (Turner, 1987) which was clearly articulated by the participants.

Their description about being a part of Thaipusam highlights the fact that Thaipusam was more than a religious event. It was an expression of their identity as Malaysian Indians. It is also seen as a symbol of their presence, evidence of their life and existence in Malaysia. Their past experiences are expressed a form of personal nostalgia. However, many of these experiences shows similarity and emphasizes their membership in an ethnic group. Their sharing shows an expression of an ethnic identity. Furthermore, they also shared how these memories were shared with family and friends, so these are also part of collective nostalgia. In addition, the similarity in their experiences and sharing of their experiences show collective nostalgia. According to Davis (1979), 'nostalgia, despite its private, sometimes intensely felt personal character, is a deeply social emotion as well.' This was clearly articulated by the participants during the group discussion when they often identified similar experiences with the other participants or asked other participants if they had similar experiences. They were also able to relate to these experiences because they have similar experiences with their family and friends.

c. 'Pandemic' Thaipusam

Thaipusam was celebrated on 28 January 2021, at a time when Covid-19 cases were on the rise hence Malaysian went into a strict lockdown known as the Movement Control Order (MCO 2.0). By then, Malaysians have been living in varying level of lockdown since March 2020. The participants referred to this with the term 'pandemic Thaipusam' because there was no celebration in all the temples in Malaysia.

When asked what they did for Thaipusam in 2021, many shared that they had simple prayers at home. Some expressed that they were unable to fulfil the vows they had made for Thaipusam 2021. They also shared how they spent much time talking about all their Thaipusam memories with their family members and friends. They expressed how much they missed not only the religious festivals but also the gathering of hundreds of thousands of people at the temple and areas surrounding the temple. Sometimes, they felt happy meeting 'long lost friends' during Thaipusam particularly during the time prior to Facebook.

While sharing this experience, Meena asked the researcher if she remembers the time when they met during Thaipusam, perhaps about ten years after leaving school.

Even though we didn't have much time to talk and hardly could hear ourselves [with the loud music around] we had the opportunity to exchange hand [cell] phone number quickly. By then, most people had handphones, so it was easier to keep in touch...and I am not sure if you knew this, Thaipusam is also when I reconnected with Raj [her husband], a few years after school and that is how we started going out and fell in love [laughing].

Mythili also shared a similar experience:

Before we connected through social media, Thaipusam is a place that you might bump into school friends, and you realize how much they have changed, or some don't change at all...[laughing] ...they just look the same.

This again shows that their expressions showcase more than personal nostalgia but also part of the collective nostalgia. Sharing of past experiences offered some comfort to the participants during a very difficult time in their lives because people's sharing of nostalgia often serves as a distraction during difficult period in their lives (Lee & Kao, 2020). All the participants lived with their family and expressed how they missed being part of other social networks, religious festivals, and functions. Participants explained that, going through lockdown has made them feel lonely more than usual and drawing on to various nostalgic events helps them to go through the varying levels of lockdown in Malaysia. This is consistent with past studies which identified that nostalgia happens as a response to loneliness and could help to redress the deficiencies of belongingness (FioRito & Routledge, 2020; Sedikides et al., 2008; Wildschut et al., 2006). In the context of the pandemic, many people experienced loss of belongingness due to their inability to participate in social activities. Therefore, the findings of the current study shows that nostalgia can bring some positive emotions to people who are going through loneliness and reduces loss of belongingness. In addition, the participants also talked about their hope of being able to be part of a 'normal' Thaipusam in near future and looked forward for Thaipusam in 2022. This shows how nostalgia that is associated with the past also serves as inspiration and hope for the future. It is expected to improve people's future lives by being an inspiration and hope (FioRito & Routledge, 2020). This is expected to improve one's well-being particularly in the context of loneliness and isolation (experienced due to the pandemic). This study also shows that the sharing of nostalgic experiences increases social connectedness among family and friends.

Other than having prayers at home, three participants shared how they watched prayers held at the temple live through Facebook or YouTube. During Thaipusam some rituals performed at major temples in Malaysia were telecast live on Facebook or YouTube which enable the devotees to see both the rituals and the Divine. They explained that online *darshan* gave them some comfort and relief during a very difficult time in their lives. They also shared that people often seek the *darshan* of God during a difficult period of their lives, but this pandemic has made that almost impossible.

Darshan is an important concept in most forms of Hinduism. *Darshan* includes ‘both beholding the deity and being seen by the deity. An exchange takes place through the eyes, and devotees may feel that they have been granted a vision of the deity or have experienced the divine...’(Beckerlegge, 2017, p. 62). Online *darshan* is an evolution of this concept where the devotee gazes at an image of God or Goddess through a screen (computer, smartphone etc.) (Scheifinger, 2009). With the development of internet and information technology many temples around the world have been having live telecast of the rituals at temples to enable devotees to experience online *darshan*. Similar telecasts have also been done by some major temples in Malaysia.

Conclusion

This study showed that the participants’ experiences show both personal and collective nostalgia. Their experiences may be expressed as personal, but it is often related to their collective identity as a Malaysian Indian and as a member of a minority community. They also often shared the nostalgic experiences with their family and friends showing how some events becomes part of social emotion. Nostalgia does not only involve the act of remembering past experiences but also serves as a source of comfort during a difficult time in the participants’ lives. Hence, nostalgia here functions as remembering the past but also as an inspiration for the future. This study gives some insights how nostalgia helps during time of loneliness which was identified as an aspect that needs further exploration by Wildschut et al. (2006). Participants relied on sharing of nostalgia and online *darshan* to go through this difficult period in their lives. At the time of writing this paper, the government has announced that the celebration of Thaipusam in 2022 will be done moderately with some strict standard operating procedures (SOPs). Two of the participants of this study shared that they would attend the celebration while three participants were still undecided on what they would do for Thaipusam 2022. This study focused on a small sample of women living in Kedah. This is partly due to the challenges of doing data collection during the pandemic. Future studies should explore a larger sample of Malaysian Indians coming from various socio-economic background.

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