**DASTAVEZI
THE AUDIO-VISUAL
SOUTH ASIA**

Naveena Camera

Vindhya Buthpitiya

Abstract

This visual essay explores the daily life and rhythms of a photography studio in Jaffna in northern Sri Lanka. Here, I reflect on the enduring entanglements of war and everyday image-making practices in the postwar period. The accompanying visuals cast the studio space as one of stillness and movement, where photography exists as an act of communal production and aspiration in a setting marked by political unrest and inequity. Even as advancements in technology and digital photography have further allowed the studio to be integrated into the surveillance, security, and documentation regimes of the state and state-like actors, the work of studio photographers positions them as the determined arbiters of their clients' anticipated futures. The day-to-day routines of studios reflected the lingering effects of war on aspirations for citizenship. When taken together with the possibilities for mobility that are afforded by the Tamil community's displacement and dispersal, as caused by conflict, the role of photography in realizing these hopes becomes apparent.

Keywords: photography, war, studios, Jaffna, Sri Lanka, migration

Figure 1: Rajaratnam at his desk (L), Baby Photo's apprentices at work (R), Jaffna 2018. Photographs by the author.

Introduction

N. Rajaratnam had been taking pictures for over half a century when the *naveena camera* (modern camera) arrived in the Jaffna peninsula of northern Sri Lanka.[1]

By 2014, analogue film photography was rapidly ousted by the powers and possibilities of its digital alternative. The life-long studio photographer had been first mesmerized by the magic of the camera as a young teenager when he witnessed pictures appearing on paper in the darkroom "as if by *current* (electricity)." He soon committed his life and work to the medium by joining a local photography studio as an apprentice. Anointed by his mentor Nicholas of Sellam's Studio (as revealed in a letter of commendation that still hangs on the studio's wall to this date), Rajaratnam *mama* established his own photography studio, Baby Photo, in 1972.

"I named this Baby Studio because photographing babies is what brings me the most joy. The smile of a baby is like the smile of God. The smile of a baby is a true smile, it can move you", Rajaratnam *mama* explained.

The studio's logo, an illustration of a joyful infant, is based on a picture of one of the photographer's three children. Two of them are now grown-up migrants building their own lives and futures in Europe. Snapshots of grandchildren celebrating birthdays in cozy cold-weather living rooms were displayed in a tall glass cabinet housing what remained of a collection of film cameras. The old Mamiyas, Rolleiflexes, and newer Canon film models were now all obsolete as the last of the color labs processing film had closed down some years ago.

By the time I was carrying out fieldwork in 2018, Rajaratnam *mama* had already stopped taking photographs some years earlier. Instead, he rode his scooter to the studio early each morning to greet his patrons and oversee the daily business. Under the elder photographer's watchful eye, Baby's work continued in the hands of a group of young apprentices; two young women who tended to the in-house photography and two young men who undertook more complex outdoor shoots. They deftly wielded Canon DSLR cameras and editing software loaded onto clunky desktop computers to meet the photography needs of a steady stream of clients who passed through the studio each day. Output ranged from speedy identity portraits to elaborate wedding shoots. *Mama* continued to inspect each photograph generated from a small Epson printer placed at his side, before the photos were efficiently sorted into envelopes by

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1 Modern or new camera referring to a digital camera.

his assistants. During quieter times, friends, usually older men from the neighborhood, stopped by for a cup of tea and a chat.

Photography might be understood in terms of its contingency and exorbitance (Pinney 2012, 148, following Benjamin [1931]). For the multiplicity of possibilities and interpretations that it evokes enables an "event of photography" (Azoulay 2012, 23). Azoulay frames photography through the lens of an event that comprises an "infinite series of encounters" (2012, 26). These are concerned not merely with the photographer and the photographed, but with spectators, allowing for an array of social and political uses, appropriations, and re-inscriptions (Azoulay 2012, 26). However, when considering photography as being made up of a communal space, interaction, and an act of producing, especially in times of crisis or instability, what does the medium's capacity to "fix" have to offer its eager patrons? Whether in anchoring desires for things to "come out better" (Pinney 1997, 180) or in giving visual form to aspirations for imagined futures, photography, despite the "noise" of the image (Pinney 2012, 150) in the social "events" and the interface of its creation, offered stillness and resolve amidst uncertainty. Where "noise" is understood through the lens of Benjamin's theorization of photography's "spark of contingency" (2004 [1931], 510), the photographic image might be read as ingrained with unfolding possibility and unruliness (Pinney 2012). These framed visions as suspension or "quotation," as suggested by Sontag (2003, 17), do not imprison the photographic image, but instead serve as a focal point for its contained potentials for mediating between past, present, and future. It gives shape to the simultaneous visualization of memory and prophecy (Pinney 2012).[2]

The images that make up this essay are centered on the quotidian routines and rhythms of this Jaffna photography studio. The image frames project a sense of contained, film reel-like movement and recurrence to evoke sensory details that words and text-based ethnographic descriptions cannot encapsulate beyond repetitive description. I explore the perseverance of these studio spaces and the minutiae of their own everyday "events" in the course of their producing of photography, despite the advent of the digital and the proliferation of personal cameras. The sequencing of still vignettes evokes a cadence of the life and activity of the studio in postwar Jaffna. As a site of community and improvisation, the studio catalyzes desires for mobility and

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2 Following Sontag's claim of the photograph as a "quotation, maxim or proverb" (2003, 17).
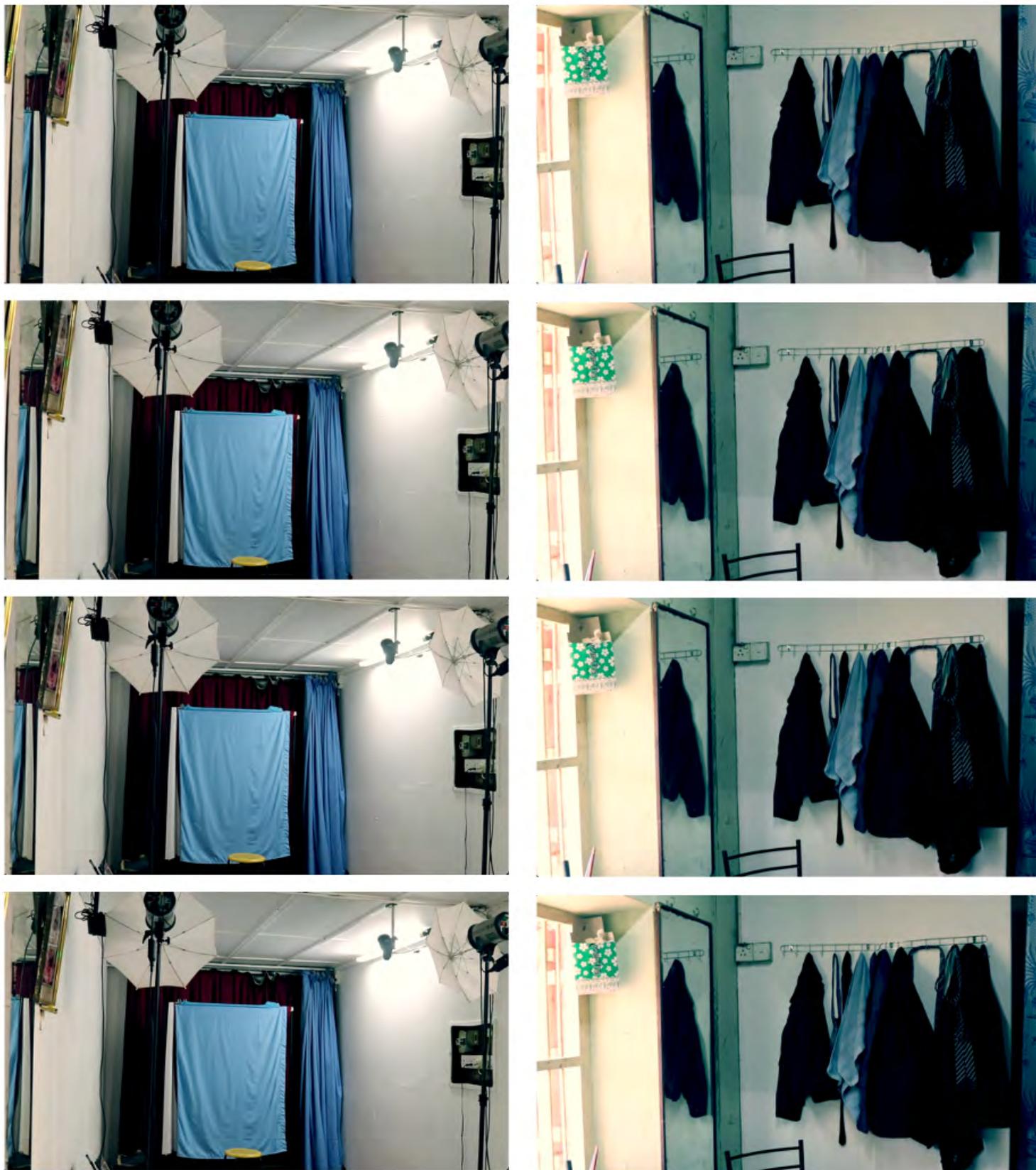
Figure 2: Backdrops for identity photography (L), jacket and tie rack (R), Jaffna 2018. Photographs by the author.

movement (Buthpitiya 2022a). These "events" also disclose the lasting entanglements of war and everyday photography in northern Sri Lanka.

The Studio at War

Sri Lanka's descent into armed conflict would occur shortly after Baby's first beginnings in Thirunalvely. Deepening ethnic tensions and state violence against Sri Lanka's Tamil minority escalated to civil war (1983-2009) (Thiranagama 2013). The armed conflict between the Tamil militancy, dominated by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and the Sri Lankan government forces wholly re-oriented Jaffna's studios and the character of their photographic production. Through those years, studios remained sites of vibrant activity often despite being regular casualties of war, with their archives and contents being destroyed by shelling or their owners and patrons being forcefully expelled. Many studios failed to survive. Their opulent names, *Sabhas, Gnanams, Colombo, Prabha, Sithralaya, Ruby,* and *Vasana,* lingered only in tantalizing purple ink stamps marking the backs of scant photographs or printed onto receipts and envelopes sometimes containing strips of negatives. The war years had also been notably cruel to the survival of photographs already susceptible to an inhospitable tropical climate (Karinkurayil 2021).

Recurring devastation and frequent displacements had stripped down personal archives to a matter of luck and necessity. While family photographs, both framed for display and preserved in albums, were lost to those compelled to flee their homes urgently or to relocate repeatedly, headshots encased in the laminate of National Identity Cards (NICs) became precious talismans for protection against the interrogations by state security officials (Buthpitiya 2019). The image world of northern Sri Lanka would also become saturated with visuals of death.[3] Where militarism had become entwined with the lives of communities through expansive recruitment practices (Brun 2008; Thiranagama 2013), funerary and memorial practices were politicized in the service of the Tamil militancy's nation- and state-building pursuits (Roberts 1996, 2005; Natali 2008). The mobilization of images of death served an important function in socializing the citizens of the aspirant nation-state, inculcating them with the values and duties of sacrificing oneself for the future of *Tamil Eelam*. The cultural production efforts toward state-building by the LTTE encompassed public

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3 Deborah Poole uses the term "image world" to capture the complexity of the material and social exchange of images, where "seeing" is not merely a matter of the image, but how it is presented (1997, 7).

displays of trophy snaps and atrocity images generated by its broadcast media unit, *Nitharsanam* (Truth/Reality), as well as stylized photographic and painted portraits of "martyrs" who had sacrificed themselves to the cause for a Tamil homeland. Expansive *thuyilam illams*[4] and shrines to martyrs adorned with photographic "honor rolls" and cinematic cut-outs reimag(in)ed the landscape of northern Sri Lanka in a singular vision of and aspiration for *Tamil Eelam.* Such visual practices in the service of state-making enlisted the work of studio photographers; they created portraits and documented martyrs' funerals as a part of their service to the nation and in exchange for the patronage of the aspirant state.

Preparation of memorial portraits by Jaffna's photography studios constitutes an essential part of their business to date. Studios work with many subsidiary practitioners, including digital over-painters and frame-makers who adapt and re-imagine photographs. Even the grainiest identity headshots were transformed into regal representations garlanded in plastic flowers and battery-operated twinkling light bulbs. Where Tamil war casualties continued to be denied by the state, memorial photography practices became more ostentatious with the possibilities afforded by the digital. Photographs were scanned directly and edited swiftly on computers. Offset printed black and white funeral notices were transformed into color or morphed into digitally printed decorative flex banners for public display. Framing shops took orders for ornate frames housing digitally enhanced portraits. This economy was also transnational, with diasporic Tamils enlisting the comparably cost-effective services of local practitioners through personal and social media networks. Clients in Europe and North America would dispatch images by way of messaging applications such as WhatsApp or Viber to be transformed on Photoshop into digital memorial portraits or death notices and banners. These in turn were circulated on the same services or shared on social media platforms such as Facebook to announce the death of a loved one to their dispersed family and friends.

Demands for the production of identity photographs as confirmation of citizenship were central for sustaining Jaffna's studios through the war and postwar periods. The social use of NIC photographs can be analyzed by way of Strassler's examination of Indonesian *pasfotos.* These embodied "the expanding reach of the modern bureaucratic states and the global currency of a semiotic ideology in which the photograph serves as truthful and scientific 'evidence'" (2010, 130). Where ethnic

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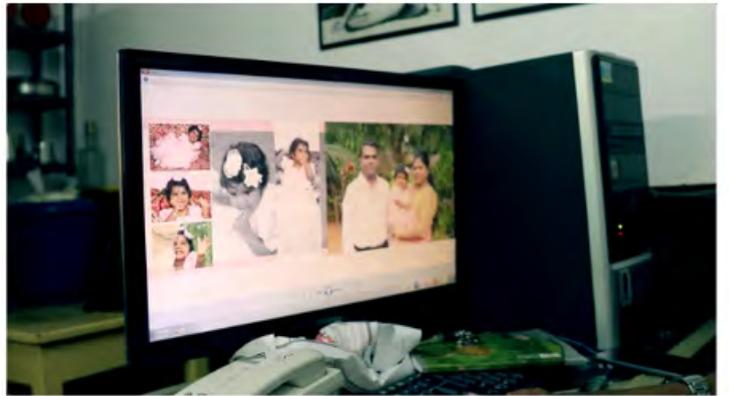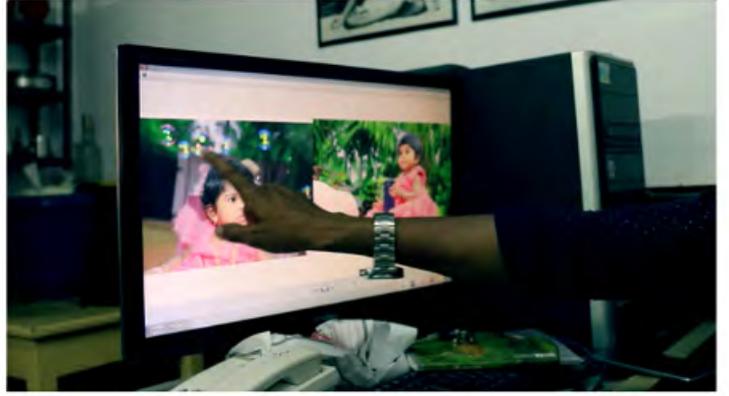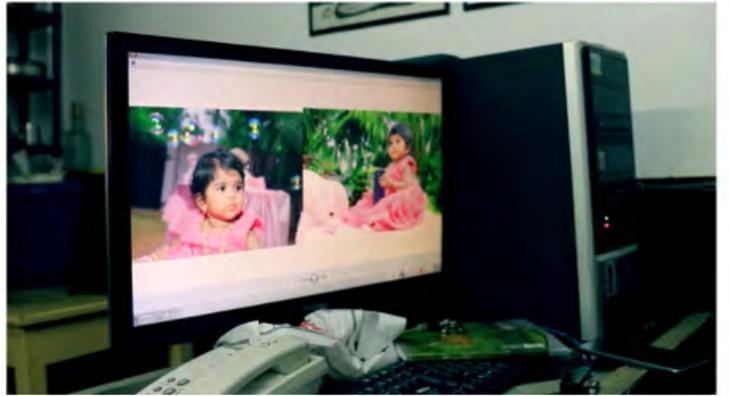4 Tamil for heroes' resting places or LTTE war cemeteries.

Figure 3: Editing suite (L), Apprentices at work (R), Jaffna 2018. Photographs by the author.

conflict persists even after the war ended, the NIC served as confirmation of one's identity and ethnicity. Such an assurance was necessary for enjoying access to state services as well as less restricted freedom of movement given the continued proliferation of checkpoints in the highly militarized northern Sri Lanka. Strassler describes Indonesian *pasfotos* as "a widespread visual idiom for legitimate belonging within the state-authorized national community" that was also readily appropriated for social use (2010, 21). Indeed, the NIC played a significant role in the state's imagining of Sri Lanka as a sovereign republic and identity. Within a highly securitized context of civil war where Tamilness was conflated by the state with that of an "enemy other," the NIC became an extension of one's personhood (legal, ethnic, and otherwise), from which a citizen could not physically separate themselves for fear of the potentially fatal consequences (Jeganathan 2004). Citizens were expected to have their NIC on their person at all times, lest they fall subject to arbitrary arrest or detention by the state security forces on suspicion of their being involved with the Tamil militants. Ironically, it is this necessity to retain one's NIC at all times that resulted in identity photographs and sometimes in the NIC itself being utilized by citizens as a photographic object of protest in response to unresolved cases of the war dead and disappeared (Buthpitiya 2022b).

NICs marked an important shift in the social life of photography in Sri Lanka. Rajaratnam *mama* recalled the government's distribution of cameras to studios to facilitate the issuance of identity cards. After their introduction in 1972, the year Baby was founded, citizens who were otherwise excluded from photography came into possession of a photograph of themselves. These, in turn, would be endlessly transformed by the studios and by their everyday uses and conjugations.

NIC photos were thus variously appropriated: pasted on NICs, exchanged between friends, included in family albums, embellished and reframed as memorial images, and held up in protests evidencing the lives of victims of state terror and violence. These uses highlight the complex ways in which "ideologies and practices of documentation tied to bureaucratic knowledge production also reverberate within the intimate realm of personal and familial memory in the photographic documentation of family rituals," as has been observed by Strassler in the context of Indonesia (2010, 21). Thus, the production of NICs remained an integral part of the photography studios' services. Registered studios are now integrated into the state's biometric identification project

that permitted digital files to be transmitted directly to the Department for Registration of Persons, rendering their material photographic incarnations increasingly obsolete.

Similarly, where life was perpetually at risk of being abruptly extinguished, its celebrations in the form of birthdays, puberty ceremonies,[5] weddings, and family outings were also enthusiastically documented by enlisting the services of studio photographers, given the scarcity of personal cameras. Images were keenly dispatched to family members dispersed both across and beyond the island as the persecuted Tamil community began to flee to perceived safety in Europe, North America, and Australia. These migrations also required a diversity of photographic machinations ranging from passport and visa photographs to the contrived evidence of marital and familial relationships to satiate the skepticism and scrutiny of border regimes. Such social photographic registers of war persist in the fraught "peace" brought about by the state's military victory over the Tamil militancy. It is a peace entangled with transitional justice grievances that are bound to credible allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity, enforced disappearances, and ongoing state violence against Sri Lanka's political minorities.

Postwar in Cinestyle

During the course of my fieldwork, the studio's clients were mainly seeking out the photographer's intervention for producing identity photographs or documenting significant life events. *Angalum/pengalum paakara padam*[6] or photos circulated as part of arranged marriage proposals were also popular. Young men and women dressed in their finest arrived at the studio to be photographed; the young men occasionally borrowed ties or jackets from the studio's offerings. These photos were passed on to marriage brokers and were circulated locally and internationally, with the most sought-after spouses having "status" (meaning legal residence or citizenship) elsewhere.

Rajaratnam *mama's* reverence for photography was centered on the act of passing on knowledge, as evident in his training of several novices over the years who had gone on to establish their own studios in Jaffna and beyond. This practice held true with the older photographers in Jaffna, who had either inherited their studios or studied in an

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5 Ritual and celebration that follows a girl's first menstruation.

6 Translation from Tamil by the author: Portraits of prospective brides and grooms circulated by marriage brokers.
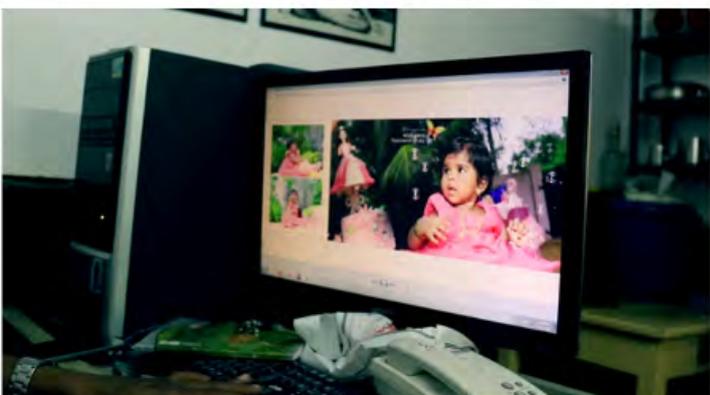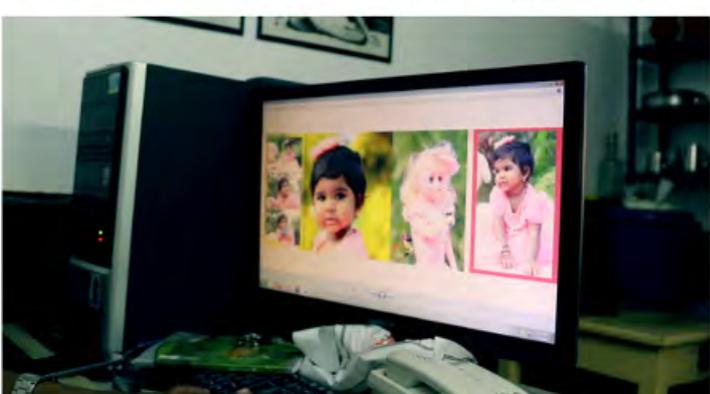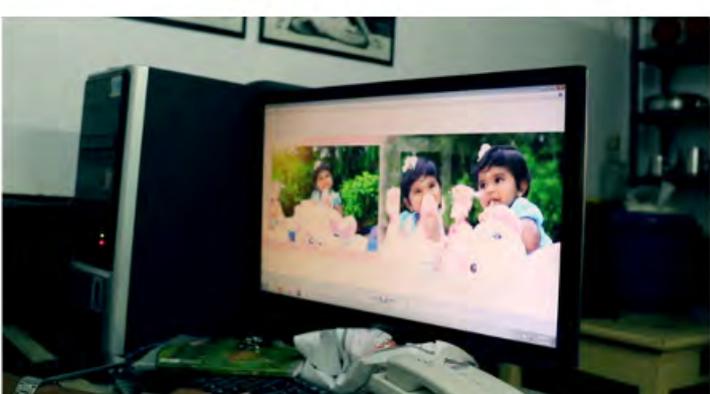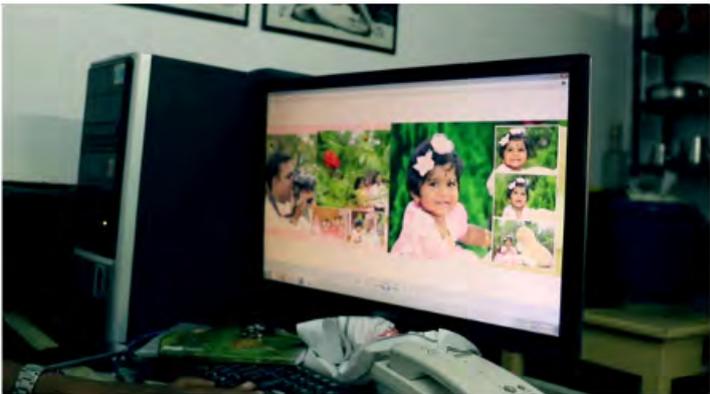
Figure 4: Rajaratnam and friend (L), the editing suite (R), Jaffna 2018. Photographs by the author.

established studio. This system of apprenticeship has waned with the advent of sophisticated digital cameras. Younger photographers in town insisted that clients were prioritizing what camera was used. Clients often inquired into the number of megapixels (the higher, the better) while offering opinions on the brand of the camera (Canon was the preferred choice). These studios were consequently networked into a global vocabulary and market of photographic practice, where tacit brand recognition translated to the possibility of identifying a "good" photograph (see Strassler 2010, 57).

Sopi, the chief among Baby's acolytes, was in charge of the studio's transition into the digital. As a part of this, he undertook lavish pre-wedding, wedding, birthday, and girls' puberty ceremony shoots, as well as Photoshop and related album-making tasks, and managed a Facebook page for the studio, so that prospective clients could view the studio's portfolio online. He also maintained a Facebook page for his own photography services. Sopi was assisted by another young man and two young women who tended to the in-studio photography as well as to various bookkeeping and administrative tasks. Curiously, the women apprentices did not view themselves as "proper photographers" because they did not go out with their cameras to shoot. Photography in this sense appeared to be inseparable from mobility. While this was changing in the case of young women who were sharing their photography on Instagram and self-identifying as photographers, women employed as studio photographers were more reticent about their role as "real" photographers; their work remained confined to studio portraits.

Sopi and his cohort belonged to a new generation of Jaffna photographers. Their interests lay in a kind of photography that dazzled and drew explicitly from South Indian Tamil cinema in what was described and advertised as "cinestyle" photography, informing the aesthetics of wedding photography in particular. Photographers invested in the most expensive and "modern" cameras they could acquire. Prices for their services were advertised in line with the make and model of their cameras. This practice was met with scorn by some older photographers who had been unable to keep up with the rapid succession of technological advances, as well as with the increasingly demanding expectations for "cinestyle" photoshoots.

Young girls who came of age were photographed with the same attention as one would pay to a wedding. This was an important occasion to dress up in grand traditional clothing (sometimes both Western and customary shoots were undertaken) and be pictured either at home or, increasingly, at an external location. In the past, these photographs would be circulated as a part of marriage proposals where girls were

Figure 5: Apprentices at work (L), Rajaratnam and friends (R), Jaffna 2018. Photographs by the author.

married at younger ages. This has now fallen out of fashion since more recent portraits are being commissioned and used. A popular trope in these albums was photographing the girl holding a camera, where she herself posed as a photographer brandishing the potentials and also the required talents for picturing. Girls looking into the camera lens or screen suggested the glamour and "modernity" of the photographic apparatus but also seemed to hint at the possibility of "self-picturing" where these young women were taking control of their own images and futures.

Wedding photography was the most lucrative aspect of studio photography, but it was often the most "complex" given clients' demands and standards. Increasingly, Tamil couples from overseas were also choosing to get married locally. Cost played some part in that, but this was also on account of their being able to celebrate their wedding with their extended family in the "homeland" and with Sri Lanka's scenery as the backdrop. Brides sought out various material markers of Jaffna and "traditional" Tamil culture, including, for example, the inclusion of the symbolic palmyra leaves in their bouquets. Photographers frequently traveled with their clients to scenic locations for shoots, even if it meant that the state's postwar recasting of the visual-material landscape leached into the backdrops of personal photographs. The militarized landscape of northern Sri Lanka had also been transformed into sites for leisure. And concrete proclamations of the state's military victory were aimed predominantly at Sinhalese tourists from the south of the island for whom the northern peninsula had remained out-of-bounds due to war. Sites of wartime violence and devastation along with material remnants of the LTTE's *de facto* state apparatus, including the vast *thuyilam illams*, were razed and built over with grand monuments, army camps and military-run resorts. These spaces would rapidly become the backdrop for diverse everyday photographs, not only in the casual snapping of photos of friends, family, and lovers on increasingly ubiquitous mobile phone cameras for instant dissemination on platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, but for professional photographers documenting life events.

For others, as has been explored in detail by Maunaguru (2019), marriage had become a vital migration strategy. A marriage made possible new citizenship; that, in turn, afforded futures that were more stable or secure elsewhere. Proposal portraits as well as wedding albums that satisfied the demands of immigration regimes were central to this endeavor. Here, the photographer presided over weddings as a second master of ceremonies, directing and producing the kinds of photographic images able to convince immigration officials of the legitimacy of a marriage. With their cameras,

photographers shepherd couples, their family members and priests into persuasive poses and performances to better "authenticate" their participation in tradition as well as in displays of "genuine" intimacy. If identity documents confirming citizenship were a means of navigating precarity while physically moving through the postwar landscape, these supplemented a means of escape through aspirational citizenship. Photographers played a crucial role in mediating these possibilities. The realization of personal ambitions cannot be disentangled here from the impairment of one's present citizenship, which motivated the desire for "status" elsewhere. The wedding photographer's business, as I came to learn, did not end with photography, but also with his "*kai rasi*" (lucky or auspicious hand) and capacity to assemble a wedding album that might convince the strictest of visa regimes that the relationship was legitimate.

Conclusion

"There is a simple way to measure the skill of a photographer," Rajaratnam *mama* mused. "No one should be able to tell what time of day a photograph was taken, whether it was in studio light or sunlight. There is a kind of *moola* (brain implying skill) for that, now it is a *computer moola* (computer brain)! That is also very good. I have seen some very good pictures."

Contemporary studio photographers in Jaffna were mediators of fantasies and futures, whether in helping to make a client resemble their favorite Tamil actor or in capturing a portrait that would make a prospective spouse take note. They also took photos of another kind; exact, biometric, machine-readable, as necessitated by the state. Yet these were also composed with a bit of the photographer's "*kai rasi,*" offering clients the promise and opportunity of passage to a new state and citizenship. In some ways, such "official" requirements have sustained the continued need for photography studios in an age of widely accessible mobile phones and compact digital cameras. However, as this essay has illustrated, studios play a far more significant role in shaping the visual economy of Jaffna's social world as the fixers of not merely pictured life histories, but imagined futures, and aspirations.
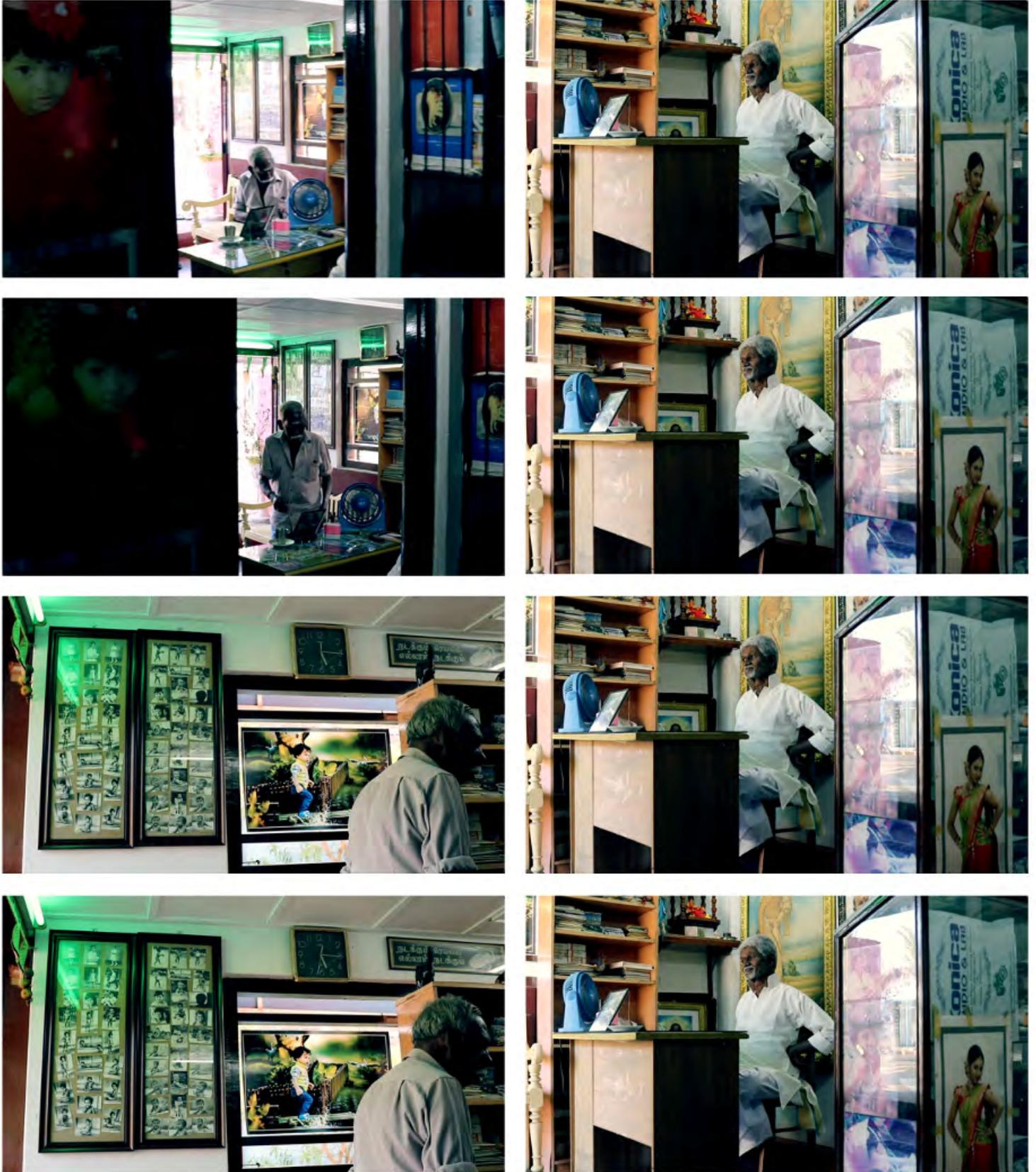
Figure 6: Arumugam takes his leave (L), Rajaratnam listens to music (R), Jaffna 2018. Photographs by the author.

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