Talking about Violence

Fieldwork on the Cambodian Revolution

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The many wars around the globe in the 20th century led to the development of a new branch: the anthropology of war. Research of the many causes of war was linked to topics of gender, (especially sexual violence), ethnicity and remembrance. In the so-called modern wars (see RICHARDS 1996) markets of violence and their special dynamics played important roles. Connected to these problems were the embodiment of pain, suffering, and sorrow which again had many linkages to the politics of memory. In these texts, practices of violence play a significant role as do the social and psychological consequences for the victims (NORDSTRÖM & ROBBEN 1995, SCHEPER-HUGHES 1992).

The project which I will introduce here fits in these contexts. It was part of the cluster of excellence "Languages of Emotions" at the Freie Universität Berlin and had the first aim to analyse politics of remembrance in their relationship to emotions in two post-conflict societies, Timor Leste and Cambodia. The societies were chosen due to their different religions—Catholicism and Buddhism—because the second aim of this project was to find out in which way religious beliefs are instrumental in coping with social suffering. Together with Sina Emde, I was responsible for the Cambodian analysis. What I want to discuss in this paper are 1) the different dimensions of talking or not talking about violence (violence is here understood primarily as physical violence, although structural violence[1] was eminent during the Khmer Rouge revolution) and 2) I am interested in the connection between violence, emotion and language in the processes of social remembering.

Before I describe these issues, I will give a short introduction to the Khmer Rouge revolution.

Transforming the country

The regime of the Khmer Rouge from 1975 to 1979 undertook the most radical revolution in the 20th century. To build a new society, the destruction of the old in all its dimensions was undertaken by the new government. This included all domains of society: economy; culture; religion; health; and even families who are the very essence of Khmer values and culture. After their victory in a bloody civil war, the Khmer Rouge closed banks, markets, schools and universities; money as medium of exchange was abolished as was the independent judiciary and the modern health system. The onslaught on the national religion was equally destructive. Buddhist religious practices were no longer allowed; *wats* (Buddhist temple) were transformed into pigsties, depots and, even, torture rooms. The monks had to choose between being defrocked and working on the fields or being killed if they refused.

The aim of the revolution was class struggle as a precondition for social equality. Its economic base was rice production and the development of water canals as in imperial Angkor. Due to Khmer Rouge ideology, the peasants should become the basis of the revolution because the cities, with all their luxuries, harbored its enemies, corruption, and seeming immorality. For this reason, Phnom Penh and all other cities was evacuated immediately after the Khmer Rouge take-over of power. From the beginning, the new society was divided into groups: the citizens embodied the "new" or "17th April" people while peasants and those persons who lived in the liberated areas were labelled "old" or "base people". This rigorous transformation and re-hierarchization of society were accompanied from the very beginning by purges which especially affected the collaborators of the former Lon Nol regime, intellectuals and ethnic minorities, like the Cham and Khmer Krom.

In less than four years, between 1.6 to 2 million people had lost their lives, either through violence or through hunger, overwork and exhaustion. The often evoked "gentle land" of the Khmer had changed into a *landscape of terror*. Its consequences are still felt today.

Thinking about memory and its limitation

My responsibility in the project was to find out how people remember this time of horror after more than thirty years and in which way Buddhism helps them to overcome their suffering. It soon turned out that this undertaking was a rather complex challenge. There are not only methodological and ethical questions concerned, like the possible reactivation of "traumatic"[2] experiences, but also epistemological ones. How can we fathom the different dimensions of meaning, individual, social, and national? How do they interact and what role do emotions play in this process? Which cultural rules determine which emotions can be expressed in public and under which circumstances are they allowed, hindered or suppressed?

Cambodian memories are insofar complex as various strands of memories exist, which have a dynamic and logic of their own. It is the memory of the elite and the common people, of the victors and the losers, the old and the young, western trained NGO workers and Buddhist monks to name but a few. From a theoretical point of view, social memory is always subjective, controversial and rather partial, since individual emotional experiences structure what is socially memorized and what is forgotten. Last but not least, memory of the Khmer Rouge is embedded in different kind of power structures which are woven among and between local, national and international networks. BASU's (2007) definition of memory as a palimpsest process in which different temporalities, meanings and emotions intersect with one another and create something new, is a good starting point. In contrast to other post-conflict societies like e.g. Indonesia[3], the perpetrators have hardly had any public voice[4]. This changed slightly with "The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC)", the international tribunal, which offered perpetrators their chance to present their point of view. However, as in the Nuremburg Trials, strategies to avoid confessions of guilt hindered significant insights into their motivations.

The very discourse on memory in Cambodia is therefore still dominated by the Khmer diaspora (see Haing Ngor & Warner 2003, Rithy Pan 2013 among many others) predominantly in the US and in France. They were the first to talk about their sufferings as refugees on the Thai border in 1979 and revealed the terror of the Khmer Rouge to the international public. This discourse on victimhood, which was taken up early on by social scientists (see Ponchaud 1977, Vickery 1984), was supplemented by the successor state of the Khmer Rouge, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK, 1979–1989) which presented itself as the liberator of a repressive regime. The transformation of Tuol Sleng, the former state prison into a museum and the killing fields of Cheoung EK were channelled into the perfect proof for Khmer Rouge terror. In this discourse the emotions of the conquerors unite with the tactics of the present politicians who need political legitimization. During the longtime span after the downfall of the Khmer Rouge, a standardization of the refugee discourse has taken place which according to Vickery (1984: 39f) tended towards over-generalizations and disregarded all sorts of counter-evidence. To transcend this narrative, which Vickery called the total standard view, was one of the most demanding challenges among the many others I had to solve. Why this was so, is the topic of this paper which I offer to Ekkehard in the hope of fruitful discussions.

Shortly before I left for Battambang, a renowned expert on Cambodia, who had lived there for twenty years, was rather sceptical that my project could be successful. He told me that it was still impossible to talk to people about their memory of the Khmer Rouge and he stressed that, as an owner of a rubber plantation, he knew his workers very well. Others hinted at the pain involved and the traumatic situation in which many people still remained. These statements were bolstered by some publications which spoke of a high percentage of traumatised people (Burchert, Stammel & Knaevelsrud 2017).

Being ready to change my research design, I envisaged to focus more on cultural memory and on Buddhist belief on how to overcome loss and pain. Therefore, I chose to do research in Battambang and its surroundings which were littered with kill-

ing fields. The Khmer Rouge attacked the city up until 1987 that is eight years after they had been expelled by the Vietnamese/Khmer army. The nearness to the Thai border, where thousands of refugees looked for security against the Khmer Rouge, was another attraction because it signalled that the area was heavily contested by various forces. And last but not least, the many Buddhist institutions, like the Buddhist University, a plurality of different *wats* and the only Buddhist development agency in Cambodia made the town a good choice. Theoretically, Battambang appeared as the ideal field in the double perspective GUPTA & FERGUSON (1997: 27) have analysed: as a distinct territorial category and as a methodological construct of social anthropology. However, in practice, the constructs of fields do change, either because of social or political questions or because of the necessity to gain a greater variety of data. In my case two key incidents made me understand that I should diversify my field and concentrate my research in the rural areas.

Silence, cultural traditions and social changes

Against my expectation the beginning of my research in Battambang was rather promising. My first acquaintance in Battambang was an elderly motodupe-driver[5] who lived from tourism and the occasional repair of watches or radios which gave him a small extra income. He liked to show me the countryside and explained the various signs of Khmer culture to me. His interest was pagodas and he easily befriended monks of his age. Although his English was not well developed, but was better than that of many other Cambodians, we had some interesting interviews about the functions of the *wat* and ended quite often with their history during the Khmer Rouge. After several weeks on his motodupe, I developed quite a good overview about the monastic situation in Battambang and its rural hinterland. And slowly, I had learned more from the former life of my driver, who was an eye-witness of the Khmer Rouge time. Like most other people he had told the story of his personal loss of his family in a sober and rather unconcerned manner but then skilfully evaded more detailed questions. I sometimes thought that he had been a Khmer Rouge himself when he made comments in this regard but I never dared to ask him directly, always remembering the fieldwork slogan *don´t do harm* as a moral guidance.

It was by chance when we had a beer in a sun-drenched place one late afternoon, that he told me about his injury of the head during the revolution and how he had to hide his real personality. To my great surprise because of his apparent poor situation, his father had been a professor of Khmer literature at the University of Phnom Penh and was the author of a famous Khmer fable. I now immediately understood why he had been so discreet about his past—a habit he had internalized during the revolution because belonging to an academic family could lead to prosecution or even death. It was now also obvious why we never could work around midday because his brain suffered from the heat. He had never mentioned this fact before, mostly likely not to lose his dignity by showing weakness. His revelation struck a deep chord in me. It demonstrated so unexpectedly how present or even dominant the past still was in the presence and how fundamental the revolution had altered the lives of one's well-to-do citizens. It also gave me a clue of how explanations of suffering were circumvented by images of the body[6] instead of words.

However, the hoped-for breakthrough in our relationship did not materialize. I hoped in vain that he might invite me to his home as others had done but he stuck to our hierarchical role model—tourist and tourist guide—which he celebrated in bureaucratic working hours: from 7 to 1 am and from 4 to 6 pm. After some weeks I felt I had landed at an impasse.

I was therefore extremely happy when I got the chance to meet the president of the NGO "Buddhism for Development" which the "Konrad Adenauer Foundation" sponsored at the time. His acquaintance made me feel exhilarated since he had participated in the round table of the Paris Negotiation of 1951 which set the context for Cambodian independence and furthermore had been one of the organizers of Camp 2 on the Thai border responsible for the education of the refugees. When he invited me to join him on an inspection tour of one of the projects of the NGO I hoped for a lucky turn of my research. Yet things evolved differently. Being well prepared to ask about the history of Khmer Rouge and the events at the Thai border which were not well-known at the time, he

rigorously refused to talk about times past. He reasoned that Buddhism has to leave the past behind in order to become free for the present and the future. The challenges to be taken up were to better the lives of the people and not delve into past tragedies. That was the reason why he had engaged in development work and reconciliation.

It is one thing to know that silence is the other side of remembering, but another to be confronted with it in practice. His refusal to re-think the past with me came as a shock because of my high expectations. But after re-working our encounter, it made me understand that Buddhism has a different conception of history and the past. How naïve was it to assume that our German understanding of coping with the past, which some people had referred to admiringly in Cambodia, is relevant in other societies as well. Buddhist believers have to rid themselves of the past since the evil they experienced will remain as a grudge (*kum*) or anger (*tosah*) on their mind. Anger is directly correlated with metaphors of heat: an angry person is hot (*kdav*), having a hot heart (*kdav chett*)[7], or being hot and irritated (*kdav krahay*, Hinton 2005: 62). These conditions violate the equilibrium of the self which when in disarray threatens social harmony. Whereas most Germans will agree that past suffering or traumatic experiences have to be remembered and talked about in order to be overcome, Buddhism teaches to free oneself from *kum* by suppressing it by meditation or reading the *dhamma,* the true teachings of the Buddha. Only by reading the *dhamma* can one purify oneself which is the necessary condition for re-establishing social harmony (see Hansen 2007: 151).

The attitude of the president of *Buddhism for Development* was not at all unusual and he seemed to underline the warning of my German friend. Discussing the past, especially to speak about the suffering from violence was unacceptable to some people.[8] The problem was to understand the conditions, under which this discussion was allowed or not.

My worries about failure of my project made me search the anthropological literature for answers. Back in Germany I read Carol Kidron's (2012) paper in which she compares talking about the past in Israeli and Cambodian families who had been victims of violence. Whereas in Israeli families' discussions about the Holocaust played an important part in family life, Khmer refugees in Canada[9] hardly talked about their experience to their children who told Kidron that it was part of their culture. "My people don't talk about suffering, cry or show emotions," said a young woman (Kidron 2012: 210) and another informant added "Cambodian's don't like to speak about the past. Especially if you experience bad things you keep it inside." The reason for these cultural rules of expressing emotions was advanced by another informant who told her that "speaking of suffering implies weakness whereas remaining silent reflects strength" (Kidron 2012: 211).

Kidron's findings were partly corroborated by my own interviews. In the second year of my research in Battambang which I mainly spent in the village of Samroung Knong, I had close contacts with younger people. Most of the younger Buddhist monks or apprentices in my sample population had hardly any knowledge and showed no interest in discussions about Cambodia's violent past. They had neither discussed these problems in their families nor had they been taught about them in the *wats*. The reason they put forward was that they were customarily not allowed to ask their parents or older monks displeasing questions. Others said they did not want to shame their parents because their suffering might be interpreted as personal failure. These interviews conveyed the insight that in addition to age, relations of authority[10] and respect play a determinant role in the decision about with whom the past could be discussed. Kidron also added religious consideration, that the Buddhist beliefs in "karma favour forward-looking modes of being" (2012: 221) instead of worrying about the past[11]. She concludes that Buddhist beliefs contradict the widespread discourse on trauma which she calls a "reductionist epistemology" (*ibid.*) but favour "a closer reading of culture- specific conceptualisation of selfhood, personal and collective suffering, and memory/history and the way in which these conceptualizations enable or curtail memory work" (*ibid.* 222).

Schwarcz (1997), on talking about grief and pain in China, also argues for a closer reading of cultural traditions by the restrictive moral rules during the Southern Tang dynasty. She describes that talking about suffering in public was taboo in this period. "Confucian culture itself sought to mute or, at least, to moderate, the public expres-

sion of personal sorrow" (SCHWARCZ *ibid*. 122). Sorrow *(ku)* can relate to suffering as in *kuhai*, the "sea of suffering," and bitter, as in *kugua*, the "bitter melon." She reports of the courageous intervention by scholars and literates to cancel the restraint which was finally successful when Mao Tsedong took power. Similar processes can be analysed in Cambodia as well. During the Khmer Rouge revolution, the dictum "plant a kapok tree" (*daem daem dor*) was widespread reminding people to be mute out of self-protection against the ever-present spies and the distrust among neighbours. Apparently, this attitude is weakening, although distrust in the villages still remains. But the constant publicity of the ECCC Tribunal and of urban institutions (like the Meta House, Institut **Français or the Bophana Audiovidual Re**source Centre in Phnom Penh) which offer conferences, films and exhibitions keep the Khmer Rouge terror alive. The unequal living conditions in the country and the authoritarian rule of Hun Sen are further reasons for the increase of critical consciousness among younger students and socially engaged monks. They participate in the peace marches[12] and are ardent followers of the Buddhist priest Maha Ghosananda who preached national reconciliation. However, the main influence probably originates from western NGOs, like the German sponsored "Youth for Peace," who introduced a new paradigm. To reveal the crimes of the past in order that they never happen again was, and is, their credo. They organized tours in the villages, always accompanied by one or several monks to bless the event; a traditional measure in an otherwise very untraditional performance. Khmer Rouge victims are invited to talk publicly about what happened to them and how they felt at the time. During these events trauma or traumatization are used as the cutting-edge words to describe the social reality to cope with.

Talking with and without emotions

The influence of the NGO-world in Cambodia is considerable. One of the consequences are changing attitudes to the past and to one's culture. As in most societies, the young want to be modern and to be on par with the Western world. This attitude has also changed habits of talking about violence to a certain extent. It soon became clear that the refusal to speak about the past was only one among several options. But although many peoples talked openly about what happened to their families, it always ended in the same stereotypes: hunger; overwork; violence. The language they used to describe the death or the killings of their relatives was always cool, unemotional, nearly statistical and rather uniform. Some of them even laughed as they were describing the terror and anguish they had encountered. In the beginning, I was very irritated about this way of expressing loss and grief until I understood that it represented the kind of narration Vickery had named the total standard view. The social process of remembering the Khmer Rouge revolution had led to a discourse on common victimhood. The way it was communicated corresponded to Khmer idea of decency and dignity that is hiding true emotions in public. This cultural rule explained the absence of any emotions but said nothing about the practice of laughing. What reason could it have to laugh about one's own calamities?

Such intricate problems in the field sensitized me to look for comparative examples. I therefore scanned the literature to find an answer in other studies. However, HINTON's book "Why did they kill?" (2005) which is a rich source for anthropological questions about the Khmer Rouge, worsened my problem. He writes "Many Cambodians spoke of this period with tears in their eyes; a few broke down in sobs, unable to continue" (HINTON 2005: 15). It was just the opposite of what I had myself encountered until I undertook a walking tour with a friend of mine who worked for a Cambodian NGO with connections to Germany. He had told me some time ago about the death of his family in the distanced manner to which I had become accustomed. One Sunday he offered to accompany me to a killing cave on a mountain of which the Khmer Rouge had pushed forty monks to death. We started off in a joyful mood until we reached the first cave where human beings had died of hunger. All of a sudden, my friend started crying being overpowered by his emotions which he could no longer control. When he calmed down he confessed that he had never gone back to where his family had died of hunger and that he still felt unable to do so.

His sudden emotional outbreak and loss of control made me understand what I had long looked for: the kind of situation which trigger emotions.

In our case it was a certain familiarity because I had visited his family, and Germany, the country which he so much wanted to visit, was also a common link and our similar ages created a bond of friendship and trust. While these characteristics were the necessary conditions, it was the aura of the place, the deadly cave of hunger, which created the appropriate conditions for his loss of control.

How to overcome stereotype memories

The insight that authority and social distance hinder the ability to share emotions whereas familiarity and the embodiment of place facilitate it, made me change the place of my research. In the village of Samroun Knong, I hoped to get to know people much better and built up trust more easily than in town. Participant observation, still the key method in anthropology, always had a territorial appeal for me. In Africa, I had the best findings or intuition when I had accompanied people to the fields and worked together with them. In Cambodia I replaced the fields with the killing fields and asked some of my engaged informants to show me around and explain what happened in the area around their village. It was a means to overcome the stereotyped narration and come closer to more detailed accounts.

This method has a nearness to constructing mental maps which depict paths, borders, hot spots etc. Besides this locational information, they contain qualitative features. "Cognitive Maps are not just a set of spatial mental structures denoting relative position, they contain attributive values and meanings" (Kitchin 1994: 2) and they generate emotions in the process of remembrance. In the social sciences mental maps were constructed as imagined world views or in case of anthropology as representants of specific memory-scapes. Especially places or landscapes that have a high symbolic value in collective memories: "Physical landscapes are repositories of collective memories, forming a kind of vast archive that bears witness to the past" (Murray 2013: 17).

In those villages with mass killing graves[13], discussions on violence and torture were easy to initiate. Eye witnesses, among them former prisoners, described the violence they saw or remembered. They reported how prisoners had to dig their own graves in which they were pushed after receiving blows in the neck either with knives, axes or bamboo sticks. Others reported that the Khmer Rouge forced them to stand by and applaud after a successful "performance" in order to imbue them with a feeling of terror, while an old lady saw that those who were not really dead were buried alive. I got an endless list of cruel and barbaric actions, which was topped by the account of three witnesses who described how the Khmer Rouge slit open the chest of their victims in order to cut out their liver and eat it with their friends[14]. While an old lady who apparently was a sympathizer of the Khmer Rouge ideology, ascribed these excesses to the great differences between the rich and the poor, all others commented them with horror and with disdain for the primitivity of the Khmer Rouge[15]. Emotions of grief or anger accompanied these narratives, also curses and wishes for revenge. In a subtle analysis, Hinton has described the way how this anger (*kum*) is translated into an action of disproportionate revenge. He mentions the term (*chett thom* = big heart) which he translates as "great insolence or rudeness" (*ibid*. 289), and points to the necessary psychological condition *chett dach* translated as *to cut off one's feeling*, or *chett mut, to become daredevil* (*ibid*.) for such an act. In such situations the standard total view was forgotten. My village friends expressed their real feelings—unprotected and full of contrary emotions which neglected Buddhist moralities.

However, talking about violence was not limited to physical actions but was also related to the sounds, lights or smells that accompany death. One teacher described the terror of the Khmer Rouge in images of a death-stricken landscape, referring to the site where he had heard the rubbing of the corpses when they fell into the pit, the terrible smell of bloodstained palm trees along the pond which could not be used for ten years or the lights of the spirits of the dead who had not received a proper burial wandering through the bushes. Darkness was another powerful metaphor, since people were taken away at night and many of them were killed in the forest. The danger of darkness was also expressed by a lady prisoner who described the darkness of the prison room where she was incarcerated. Unable to recognize her fellow prisoners she felt tormented by their cries "help me, help me" and their curses against the Khmer Rouge. One informant said that he was

still haunted by the death cries from the lake shore where the Khmer Rouge had put up another torture centre. These examples prove that memories of violence are deeply embedded in the features of the landscapes (see also Steward & Strathern 2003), its colours, sounds and lights. Since villagers have to pass these sites when visiting the pagodas or their own fields in which some of them found the bones of their relatives. The past is still part of their everyday life. Violence in its many forms is intimately linked with this memory and cannot easily be displaced since it is the aura of the place which has a strong determination of what and especially on *how* to remember.

Modes of remembering: Holocaust texts and the search for universals

My findings suggest that the great variety of reactions supported Kidron's analysis that a medicalized discourse leads to a reductionist epistemology. Kleinman, Das & Lock have already pleaded to understand "how the forms of human suffering can be at the same time collective and individual, how the modes of experiencing pain and trauma can be both local and global" (1997: X). I hope that my text has given some illustrative material for this position, at least from a local perspective. A comparison—although unrepresentative as it is as I have to admit—with the texts of Holocaust survivors allows to search for universals. The question of language is again prominent: the distancing language most Cambodians used is also discussed in the Holocaust literature. Imre Kertészc book *Roman eines Schicksallosen* is renowned for its language which describes atrocious forms of suffering in a clinical, absolutely objectified manner. The text which recounts the perception of Auschwitz by a 15-year-old boy abstains from any moral outrage, but analyses instead the emptiness and dullness of his live in the camp. Discovering meaning in the meaningless, rationality in the absurd and logic inside terror, Kertész described the role of Auschwitz in his life as a "strange, unapproachable transcendence."[16] In one of his many interviews, he said that he was only able to write about these experiences in this distanced manner in order to protect himself. He distinguished his kind of writing (see Kertész 2003) from Jean Améry *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne—Bewältigungsversuche eines Überwältigten* and Jorge Semprun *Die große Reise*. Améry's attempt to write cautiously and aloof confronting the reader with his distinct objectivity failed. He realized that this language did not express what he wanted to convey and changed his style to a more personal manner. Jorge Semprun's reflections on his sojourn in Buchenwald also combined emotional description with analytical reflection. These two examples contrast Kertész style. As such they give insight into how different subjectivities construct and cope with the violence they had gone through.

The Semprun text was particular interesting to me because it refers to the kind of laughter which irritated me so much in Cambodia. Anna-Maria Brandstetter (2010), who encountered the same problem in Ruanda when she talked to victims of the genocide, compares their laughing about situations of deadly fear and danger with the laughing Semprun describes after his return from Buchenwald. He meets a "comrade in suffering" and they report to each other the doctor's diagnosis. Although this is rather bleak for Semprun's friend, it is the friend who starts laughing wildly and Semprun joins in. They laugh about their escape from the gas and that they are alive. Reflecting why they laugh, Semprun concludes[17] that both of them shared this situation and that they have the right to laugh if they enjoy to do so.

My first reaction to Semprun's text was that they celebrated their survival through laughter, that is creating a distance to past horrors. It reminded me of an early text by Laura Bohannan *Return to Laughter* in which she describes the various functions of laughter after a smallpox epidemic in a Nigerian village (see Bowen 1984). After her return to the village which she had fled during the epidemic, the villagers organized a round of storytelling to welcome her back. The actors surpassed each other in being funny to make the audience—including the anthropologist—roar with laughter. They thus created an atmosphere of normality which made them lose sight of the suffering, hatred and anger during the epidemic. Brandstetter refers to the philosopher Klaus Heinrich who analyses the connection between laughing and catastrophe: "Lachen ist Symptom der Katastrophen, denen der Lachende ausgeliefert ist, die er ausagiert, gegen die er sich mit deren eigenen Erscheinungsformen zur Wehr setzt" (Heinrich

1986: 29). Brandstetter suggests that because laughing in such contexts reminds of the catastrophe and its possibly lethal outcome, it allows at the same time to distance oneself from it which represents a form of liberation.

Bohannan's portrayal of the story-telling session refers to an additional function of laughing: to create communion among the onlookers. It was this idea which helped me in a very tense situation during my fieldwork in a village near an official killing field. Some men had told me about fights with the Khmer Rouge some days ago. Due to some ambiguities in the information I went back to clarify my questions. On my return the discussion started quite peacefully at first, but then two men started quarrelling over the events. A third man now joined in and he accused me bitterly "You ruin my day by asking all these questions again. It makes me so sad and I have to suffer again." Although I had several times acted out such a situation in my thinking about research methodology, it left me dumbfounded. But then Bohannan's text sprang to my mind and I started laughing. First hesitantly but when someone joined in, with more confidence. I explained the group again why such questions were necessary and they nodded acceptance. The monk in the group then invited all of us into his room and we changed roles. It was now the group who questioned me, not on wars but on climate, cars and German enterprises. What was important, however, was the feeling of a certain coevalness that we suddenly shared.

Conclusion

It was extremely difficult to transcend the total standard view, which allows Cambodians to talk about but at the same time distance themselves from past misfortunes. The narration of common victimhood gives emotional protection and integrates the past into the present. However, talking about the past is challenged by two views; the Buddhists who favour disengagement in order to find personal peace; and the NGOs who stand for the opposite solution to re-think and emotionally re-work the past for a peaceful present and future. They use a Western medicalized discourse on trauma and traumatization which neglects the subtle cultural arrangements of the Khmer. Situations of authority and of age are cultural restraints, which favour silence instead of discussions, but emotions cannot always be controlled. Specific places, social relations of trust and intimacy as well as embeddedness in the countryside are effective triggers to transcend cultural norms. In such situations survivors of atrocities worldwide share common means of liberations from the past: talking in their own mood and laughing the catastrophe away.

Notes

1 For a differentiated classification of violence see Reemtsma. J. P. 2008.
2 Because the term trauma or traumatic is culturally biased I write it here in brackets. Cambodians did not use it before international NGO's intervened. In 2009 there was not one registered psychotherapist in Battambang, the second largest city of the country.
3 The Act of Killing is a disconcerting film document about the brutality of mass murderers.
4 Exceptions are Hinton A. L. 2005, 2008 and Maguire P. 2005
5 A motodupe driver uses a motorcycle to drive his clients around town
6 For such metaphors see the interesting article by Coker E. 2004
7 Having a hot heart is often related to the wish for revenge. That Buddhists are not immune to such negative feelings was obvious in debates which concentrated on the guilt of Duch, the director of Tuol Sleng prison. Discussing the length of his prison sentences several discussants uttered their wish for revenge. See Luig U. 2015.
8 There were however only few persons who refused an interview. Interestingly, some of them were related to my assistant who had been ignorant of her stepfather having been a Khmer Rouge soldier before our research began. It was clear of the refusals of her grandfather and her uncle that they were not willing to reveal more about their own involvement. Other persons justified their refusal that they did not want to think about this time anymore.
9 I found a similar story in the internet under http://muse.jhu.edu. I grew up protected from stories of the war. For the most part, my parents never spoke of our past. There seemed to be a door shut tight and locked. No trespassing. Only recently, as more relatives who survived the war have immigrated and settled in Oregon near my parents, have the stories started to emerge.
10 The fact that my German friend was the owner of the plantation was certainly a barrier to talk openly with his workers.
11 An old monk who had specialised in meditation told me, too much thinking about past events impedes healing your mind.
12 The annual peace marches had a different topic each year and attracted thousands of participants.
13 Due to the jewellery which was found in the mass graves many of the refugees from Phnom Penh who had

been directed to Battambang had belonged to richer families.

14 For a critical discussion of this topic see Luig U. 2011

15 As I discuss in detail in my 2011 article the method to eat someone's liver has a long tradition in South East Asia. Trade with gall bladders to China existed until the 1970s and the Khmer Issarak, nationalist fighters against French colonialism, practiced cutting out the liver with brutal enthusiasm.

16 https://www.ndr.de/kultur/buch/Imre-Kertesz-Roman-eines-Schicksallosen,weltliteratur130.html.

17 The German original quotes Haroux (the friend): "Wir leben, die Sonne scheint, wir könnten ja längst in Rauch aufgegangen sein. Jam sage ich. Eigentlich müssten wir wirklich in Rauch aufgegangen sein. Wir lachen. Haroux kommt aus der gleichen Situation, wir haben das Recht darüber zu lachen, wenn es uns Spaß macht. Und es macht uns eben Spaß" (1981, 109).

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