

## **(Re)making post-genocide peace through the emotions of Cambodians**

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### **Abstract**

Drawing on geographical literatures that broach the interface of peace and emotions, this paper demonstrates how emotions feature in Cambodians' negotiations of and pathways towards (re)making peace. Through semi-structured interviews with Cambodians who did not have personal encounters with the Khmer Rouge, we examine how anger and aversion serve as guiding tools for Cambodians to construct an individualised understanding of peace. Moreover, we elucidate how the interplay between anger and aversion causes peace to be interpreted along a conceptual spectrum of positive and negative experiences. This conceptual spectrum argues that peace interpretations may be formed by incorporating violence with active reconciliation. By introducing an emotional lens into peace studies, emotions nuance theorisations of peace by underscoring the often messy and mutable experience of (re)interpreting peace.

### **1. Introduction**

The Cambodian genocide in 1975 reshaped Cambodian society. Under Pol Pot's leadership, the Khmer Rouge utilised violence to 'correct' the values of the New People—Cambodian aristocrats and urbanites who subscribed to capitalist ideologies. Through the Khmer Rouge, *Angkar* attempted to inculcate traditional and socialist beliefs by subjecting the New People to forced labour and indoctrination, insofar as coercing confessions to legitimise persecution. After the genocide concluded in 1979, former Khmer Rouge Battalion Commander Hun Sen assumed the role of Deputy Prime Minister in Cambodia's new political system. Under local and international political pressure, Hun Sen obliged to peacebuilding efforts as part of the Cambodian Government's 'policy of pacification and national reconciliation' (Hun Sen in Johnson and Chantara, 1998: para. 4). Thus, the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) was set up to

prosecute *Angkar* in hopes of achieving justice and reconciliation.

However, Hun Sen directed these 'top-down' measures to focus only on those 'most senior and most responsible' (Un, 2013: 784). This vague and unsatisfactory prosecution was criticised by the Documentation Center of Cambodia's (DC-Cam) Executive Director, Youk Chhang, who argues that '[the Cambodian Government] can try and find an exit, but [they] cannot escape. The victims still ask why' (Ham and Myers, 2002: para. 21). Non-governmental organisations including DC-Cam responded to the inadequate 'top-down' approaches by building peace from the 'bottom-up'. Through ECCC tours and genocide education, DC-Cam hoped to provide participants with an opportunity to see justice at work and reconcile with the atrocities (Sirik, 2009).

The extant literature on peace in Cambodia has analysed the efficacy of peace from the ‘bottom-up’, insofar as noting how emotions in survivor anecdotes contribute to the development of peace (Sirik and Tyner, 2016). However, scholarship has not systematically analysed how emotions inform individual interpretations of peace towards the genocide. In this article, we render explicit how emotions guide Cambodians to conceptualise post-genocide peace along a spectrum of positive and negative experiences. We first conceptualise peace according to Galtung’s (1969) exposition of positive and negative peace experiences, before operationalising emotions in peacebuilding. Next, we elucidate how anger and aversion guide Cambodians in (re-)interpreting their understandings of peace through a positive/negative binary and along a conceptual spectrum. By examining negotiations of and pathways towards (re)making peace through the emotions, this article responds to calls for geographies of peace to critically examine what peace looks like and by whom is it produced (see Williams and McConnell, 2011).

### **Operationalising emotions and peace**

A commonsensical understanding of peace is the absence of violence. This definition is further nuanced by Galtung (1969) who distinguishes physical violence from structural violence—the latter comprises social injustice and concomitant unequitable distribution of power. Galtung connects these definitions with peace by framing the ‘absence of personal violence’ as negative peace, and the ‘absence of structural violence’ as positive peace (Galtung, 1969: 183). His intent is to frame positive peace as the ideal state of society.

Despite Galtung’s binary comprehension of peace, it is critical to acknowledge that peace rarely exists as a binary. Geographers have scrutinised the binary by contextualising peace within sociocultural contexts. For instance, Williams (2013) analysed how a sense of brotherhood and mutual affection between Hindu and Muslim traders were critical in overcoming the fear and mistrust that surfaced during ethnic conflicts. The contrasting emotional bonds exemplify how emotions caused Hindu-Muslim peace to sway between the positive/negative binaries. Similarly, we examine how Cambodians (re-)make geographies of peace through the emotions, and construct peace along a positive/negative conceptual spectrum.

## **2. Methodology**

Onsite fieldwork was conducted in Phnom Penh in May 2019. This project was limited by the short timeframe of one week due to it being conducted as part of a larger fieldwork course. We employed purposive sampling to recruit Cambodians who did not have personal encounters with the genocide yet were actively engaged with peacebuilding discourses. This clean slate would allow us to examine how emotions in peacebuilding discourses affected an individual’s interpretation of peace without the emotional baggage of a lived encounter. We further narrowed the selection process to Cambodians who had visited the Choeung Ek Genocidal Centre—a key memorial site in Phnom Penh—for its physical juxtaposition of positive and negative peace: negative peace discourses emanated from preserved mass graves and torture sites; in contrast, a memorial stupa as a symbol of positive peace. This would allow our study to examine participants who have been exposed to and have

negotiated with negative and positive peacebuilding discourses.

We conducted six semi-structured interviews with Cambodians at Choeung Ek Genocidal Centre and one focus group interview of four pedagogical student researchers from DC-Cam's research programme. Interviews were held in Khmer through a Cambodian interpreter to elicit rich personal anecdotes and elucidate any nuanced emotions subsumed within. As an intergenerational transfer of trauma may affect respondents (see Münyas, 2008), we negotiated the ethics of recalling trauma by requesting that the interpreter warn us if the interview broached potentially sensitive topics that research participants were uncomfortable discussing. The interview was transcribed and analysed according to emotional themes, and how these emotions contributed to an individualised interpretation of peace.

### **3. Results and discussion**

#### Interpreting peace through the emotions

Indeed, many emotions (e.g. compassion) were drawn out from our research. However, due to the limitations of this paper, we focus on 'anger' and 'aversion' as their interaction allowed us to illustrate how peace can be interpreted along a positive/negative spectrum.

#### ***Anger***

By 'dig[ging] a hole and bury[ing] the past in it' (Hun Sen, in Linton, 2004: 12), the Cambodian Government encouraged Cambodians to focus on productivity and economic growth by suppressing their emotions towards the genocide. However, when a tour guide was asked to discuss his feelings towards the ECCC's prosecution of *Angkar*, he developed anger in relation to the unjust punishment:

Because of the Paris Peace Accord, the Pol Pot regime leaders are sentenced to jail for life; they go to prison to enjoy because prison got everything for them. The Paris Peace Accord gives them a good life... *It is not fair that they live*, a lot of people did not get to live. (emphasis added)

In claiming that 'it is not fair that they live', the tour guide reasoned that peace could only be attained by an equal or more severe physical punishment. We posit the tour guide experienced negative peace as his motivation for justice was shaped by *kum nom*, a grudge with a desire to enact revenge towards one's perpetrators (Hinton, 2004). His peace could only be attained when the persecution of *Angkar* is likened to the suffering of Cambodians who 'did not get to live' under the Khmer Rouge. The presence of anger and desire for violence leads us to understand that he experienced negative peace at the time of the research.

#### ***Aversion***

On the other extreme, emotions can be suppressed and rarely revisited. Aversion is characterised by strong feelings of dislike intermingled with a degree of opposition (Ho, 2009). One tour guide believed that non-remembrance and intentionally avoiding discussions pertaining to the genocide would absolve the resurgence of ill-feelings:

Interviewer: What made you interested in being a tour guide at Choeung Ek?

Respondent: Actually, I did not choose this place. *If I had a choice, I don't want to come here.* It is very sad, and I am not happy to share about what happened during the Pol Pot regime.

...

Interviewer: Do you discuss about the Pol Pot regime with any family members?

Respondent: Yes. Everyone is affected by it—even two of my grandparents were affected. *They don't talk about it much at home and they don't want to visit*[Choeung Ek] or Tuol Sleng because it make them very sad. Only foreigner[s] they come here. *Cambodians don't want to come* because they don't want this to happen again. (emphasis added)

The aversion embedded in the tour guide's response conveyed her longing for a so called 'geographical cure'—a physical and psychological distancing from the violence would minimise reviving feelings of pain and grief (Worden, 2008). In doing so, her (un-)intentional avoidance of memorial sites and genocide history would disentangle her from the traumatic past. A clean slate would enable her to focus on economic and career development without harbouring ill-feelings towards the genocide, thereby experiencing positive peace.

Nonetheless, we remained unconvinced if aversion did achieve positive peace. As positive peace required active efforts towards reconciliation (Galtung, 1969), we suspect that the tour guide avoided remembrance due to her inability to fully comprehend her sadness, rather than an intentional attempt to avoid pain and work towards reconciliation. As Ahmed (2004b: 44) posits, 'feelings take us across different levels of signification, not all of which can be admitted in the present'. Oftentimes, emotional experiences are complex and ambiguous. Given the trauma, aversion may have been regarded by the tour guide as a more suitable emotional response until she was ready to deal with the trauma. Avoidance thus illuminated how emotions are always in development, thereby shaping the mutability of peace interpretations.

### ***Interplay between aversion and anger***

Thus far, we have argued that anger and aversion produce negative peace. However, during our interview with pedagogical students, 'feeling rules' revealed how anger and aversion produced a typology of peace that resembles both positive and negative peace. These feeling rules are socially appropriate emotional responses to a given circumstance, which are often followed by individuals adjusting their emotions according to meet these rules (Hochschild, 1979). We analysed how feeling rules affected a pedagogical student's

interpretation of peace:

In Khmer Rouge regime, you have the higher-ranked cadres and the lower-ranked cadres. So, we can know that the higher-ranked cadres can order the lower ranked one to do whatever they want. If we want to [take] revenge [on] the lower one... (pause) no, sometimes they don't have the idea to make up their own minds. So, to me, no, I don't think we should forgive *Angkar*.

Although the student initially exhibited anger and negative peace, he offered some forgiveness to lower-ranked cadres after a momentary pause to reflect on his position. In order to make sense of this, we must first interrogate his background as a DC-Cam student researcher. DC-Cam envisions a Cambodian society characterised by reconciliation and positive peace, and is guided by the principle that 'Cambodians cannot forgive one another until they know who to forgive, and for what' (DC-Cam, 2019: para. 12). By making explicit how lower-ranked cadres were coerced into enacting violence, such peace discourses set up feeling rules whereby lower-ranked cadres should not be viewed with hostility. Therefore, the student's momentary pause signalled his attempt to adjust his anger to be congruent with the feeling rules. Aversion thus allowed him to reconcile with the actions of lower-ranked cadres, but maintained a lower degree of anger through opposition.

Moreover, this change in emotional state blurs the positive/negative peace binary. The student's initial negative peace is problematised by aversion when he was able to offer forgiveness to lower-ranked cadres and build towards positive peace. Yet, he still harboured a sense of opposition as he recognised that lower-ranked cadres should bear some responsibility for carrying out the atrocities. By analysing the nuanced interplay between anger and aversion, we conclude that the student's resultant interpretation of peace exists somewhere on a spectrum of positive and negative experiences.

#### **4. Conclusion**

From this nexus between emotional geographies and geographies of peace, we do not seek to provide an ultimate reading of peace in Cambodia, but to demonstrate how emotions (re)make peace interpretations. Thus, we systematically examined Cambodians' process of (re)interpreting peace through their emotions. We first featured anger and aversion as emotions that enabled and justified (re)interpretations of peace. Next, through feeling rules and emotional management, we argued that anger and aversion can be operationalised as guiding tools for Cambodians to (re)interpret peace along a positive/negative conceptual spectrum. Broadly, our consideration of emotional struggles and negotiations has contributed to extant efforts to develop geographies of peace across spaces and places. We suggest that by introducing emotions into peace studies, scholars may better grasp what peace looks like and how emotions are involved in the (re)production of peace. In doing so, peace research may go beyond reductionist binaries and recognise the often-messy processes of (re)making peace.

#### **5. Notes**

1. *Angkar* is Khmer for 'The Organisation'. Pol Pot would later reveal in 1977 that *Angkar* consisted of members of the Communist Party of Kampuchea. Due to its stature, *Angkar* members are distinct from lower-ranked cadres ('Old People') who were originally from the countryside.

2. We use 'non-remembrance' over 'forgetting' as our interview data suggests that, more often than not, memories and emotions are suppressed rather than forgotten.

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